

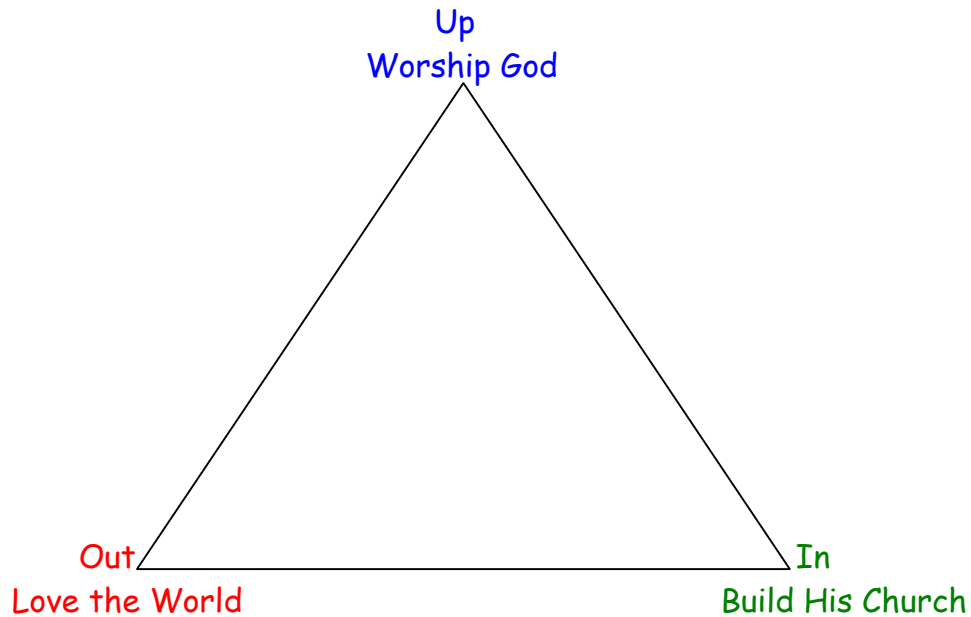
Growing Passionate Disciples who are building a Passionate Church:

Sermon for September 11, 2005

Acts 17:16-18

This morning we are beginning a series of sermons that is *entitled Growing Passionate Disciples who are building a Passionate Church*. I have given this title to the series because I hope to convey to you this year that we have the opportunity to grow in our vision of who God is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As we do this we will become more fully a people who are growing as a community and in turn deepening in our love for the world.

I can represent what I am saying with the following geometric figure.



Passionate Disciples are followers of Jesus, who are deepening in their intimacy with God through worship. As a result of this they are growing in their love for one another as a fellowship of disciples. This then motivates them to want to reach out to others, so that they too can come to know the grace of God made available to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

As we consider what it means to be Passionate Disciples who are building a Passionate Church, everything I will be teaching this year will be able to fit into one of these three angles.

As we begin this series, I want us to consider, the context in which we are called to live as Passionate Disciples. This is the focus for this week. Next week we will think about the heart of the Story that is to shape how we live as Christians.

Today we are faced with incredible opportunities to reach out to the world around us. Yet anyone who has a desire to be used by God in our emerging culture needs to develop three fundamental skills:

1. We need to build a passionate church that will communicate authentic community to a broken society.
2. We need to read the Bible, reminding ourselves of the vision of God's Kingdom on earth and the values of a covenant relationship given by God's grace.
3. We need to study our culture; for it is in seeing what is happening in our culture that we discover the best way to communicate the message of the Gospel.

It is this third area that I want us to think about now.

This is not a new idea. In Acts 17 the apostle Paul was a careful observer of the culture of Athens as he prepared to speak to the Athenian people.

### **Paul in Europe**

As Paul arrives in Athens he saw the obvious articulation of a great culture - artifacts, sculptures and sacred temples that lined the road to the great western gate of Athens. If you have been in Athens, you know what a striking city this is. There are the great temples of the Acropolis, crowned by the Parthenon -- now in a ruined state but nevertheless still one of the most beautiful buildings in all the world. There are many other

theaters, temples, and marketplaces of ancient Athens which can still be seen. All of this beauty, the production of sculptures and great architecture communicated something very important to a careful observer like Paul: He wanted to share the message of Jesus wherever he went, but learned that in order to say something, you first need to begin to see something. Seeing comes before saying.

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.<sup>17</sup> So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-every day with those who happened to be there.<sup>18</sup> Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him.*

### **Seeing and Saying: 1st Century**

Paul looked around the city and through his observation, was able to discern and learn something important. This is a fundamental skill that the Lord wants to teach us - to look deeply, observe correctly in order to see beyond the surface so that we can say something of significance

In Athens, Paul saw a world full of artifacts and shapes and images that told him something

**Sculptures** - The sculptures communicated that the Athenians were totally captivated by the human form, by sexuality and what they saw represented beauty.

**Worship Artifacts** - Much of what was produced was worshipped. Only Rome had more places of worship than Athens. There was a god that covered every hope and aspiration for every season of life. Over 30,000 in total.

Luke tells us that Paul's spirit was moved when he saw this. He was provoked. The Greek word is the word from which we get our word *paroxysm*, which means a convulsion, or an outburst. Paul felt an intense paroxysm of the spirit, a storm within, as he saw the city given over to idolatry. Each idol revealed that these men and women of Athens had a great capacity for God. They knew there was something beyond man, and they were seeking for it.

But each idol also revealed a twisting, a distorting, of that capacity, a sabotaging of it. So, as the apostle went around the city, his spirit was greatly troubled to see men and women blasted by this prostitution of their human powers through the worship of false gods.

First he went into the synagogue, as his custom was, and there spoke to the religious people, the Jews and devout persons who were there. These Jews (and the Greeks who were following Judaism) were opposed to the idolatry of the city, but could do nothing to prevent it. There was nothing they said that could help the city. They themselves were delivered from idolatry, but they were powerless to deliver the city because they were focusing on their own religious experience. To these religious persons, Paul preached the gospel with seemingly little effect.

I would suggest that as a church community we need to be aware of how easy it is to be like these synagogues. We can be people who gather together, having religious experiences but by and large unmotivated to live as communities of transformation. The Gospel has no real influence on us or the world around us. Lip service is paid to Jesus but he is not sincerely followed.

Then there were the common citizens of the city whom he met in the marketplace, the agora of ancient Greece -- tradesmen, people going about their business, commercial people coming in with their wares to the city square. There he met them and talked with them. Here were people who were unthinking victims of the idolatry that held the city in its grip. They were sunken in superstition, gripped by fear, uncertainty, dread of darkness, and inner tensions and turmoil. These are always the results of following false gods.

These people are still present in large numbers are they not? People held captive to astrology and superstitions of all kinds. Living their lives with no sense of the presence of God, caught in a cycle of purposelessness and futility.

Then there was a third group, the philosophers. These were men who were delivered themselves from the crass idolatry of the city, but who were offering, as an alternative, the barren concepts of pagan philosophy. There

are two kinds mentioned here, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Now, do not think that we have left Epicureanism and Stoicism behind, for we have not; they are very much with us today.

The Epicureans were atheists; they denied God's existence. They denied a life after death. They were also materialists, and felt that this life was the only thing that really existed and that, therefore, men should get the most out of it. They felt that pleasure was the highest virtue, and that pain was the opposite. Their motto (and it still persists to this day) was "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." They were what we would call today "existentialists," living for the experience of the moment. This is a widespread philosophy in our day, although it is no longer called Epicureanism.

The Stoics, followers of the philosopher Zeno, were pantheists. That is, they believed that everything is God, and that he does not exist as a separate entity, but is in the rocks and trees and every material thing. Their attitude toward life was one of ultimate resignation, and they prided themselves on their ability to take whatever came. Their motto, in modern terms, was "Grin and bear it." They urged moderation: "Don't get over-emotional, either about tragedy or happiness." Apathy was regarded as the highest virtue of life. You will recognize there are many people today who feel that the best thing they can do is to take whatever comes and handle it the best they can. These Stoics were all proud fatalists, and there are many like them today.

**As** we think about our own culture there are some striking similarities to Paul's experience in Athens. Remember that as Paul enters the city know one there would have heard of Jesus and the Gospel would mean nothing to them.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are facing a similar situation. While we have a 2000 year Christian heritage behind us, we need to recognize that for many 21<sup>st</sup> century people the Gospel story is as foreign to them as it would have been to the Athenians. And the cultural artifacts that help 21<sup>st</sup> century Canadians understand their lives are as pervasive and perhaps even more so than the cultural artifacts that have remained from First Century Athens.

I want to suggest to you this morning that the dominant influences in our culture as portrayed by the most powerful cultural medium, the television and movie industry are Epicurian and Stoic values.

Much of the entertainment world is governed by an Epicurian ideal that what matters most in life is pleasure. This is articulated on the screen, be it TV or in film.

One clear example of this is illustrated in the movie *Moulin Rouge*. For those who will be reading this sermon on line, I have provided a link to the trailer. You can find it at (<http://videodetective.com/home.asp?PublishedID=65945>) If you look at the trailer you will see that the philosophy behind this movie is Epicurean through and through.

Let me give you a sample of the dialogue in part of the movie:

**Girls:** Voulez vous coucher avec moi? Ce soir? Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, flow sister. Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, flow sister.

**Zidler:** When work's an awful bore and living's just a chore (incomprehensible)... death--not much fun. I've got the antidote. And though I mustn't gloat. At the Moulin Rouge... You'll have fun! So scratch that little niggle, Have a little wiggle!

**Gnarly rich men:** Here we are now, entertain us! We feel stupid and contagious.

**Zidler:** Got some dark desire? Love to play with fire? Why not let it rip? Live a little bit!

**Zidler:** Outside it may be raining, but in here it's entertaining!

**Gnarly rich men:** Here we are now, entertain us!

**Zidler:** Outside things may be tragic, But in here we think it's magic!

**Crowd:** Here we are now, entertain us!

What is striking about this movie is that the protagonist's name is Christian and some of the words used in the voice over on the trailer are these:

No Laws.

No Limits.

One Rule. Never Fall In Love.

This Story Is About Truth

This Story Is About Beauty

This Story Is About Freedom

Above All Things This Story Is About Love

Truth - Beauty - Freedom - Love

Club Moulin Rouge - an experience you won't forget!

Remember I said that the Epicureans were people who were living for the experience of the moment. This is the theme not only of Moulin Rouge but many of the shows and films that capture the imagination of 21<sup>st</sup> century screen writers.

There are movies that also articulate the stoicism that Paul was also addressing in Athens. I don't have time to discuss this in detail, but I would suggest for those of you who have watched the Matrix Trilogy that stoicism is the philosophical ideal portrayed by the Keanu Reeves character Neo. (See the trailer at: <http://videodetective.com/home.asp?PublishedID=8451>.)

I would like to suggest this morning that these two films are clear examples of the prevailing values of our culture. Theirs is a dominant voice and these stories are shaping the way many of us are interpreting the world.

Along with these philosophical ideals there are these cultural artifacts that are shaping the way we live.

## The Car

The car communicates that we love independence, our own personal space shaped to meet our needs and express our personality. For some the car communicates style; for others sex appeal, others still family life. For years TV commercials have fueled our desires and kept us looking forward to seeing the latest model on the street. Carmakers pay millions of dollars to produce the commercials that will help shape the way we think about new cars as they come out. Often the ads that come out become news items themselves, and in certain cases make more of an impression on us than the cars themselves.

## The Internet

The Internet communicates four things -

**Networking** - Neighborhoods no longer function as they used to. Community life functions across networks

**Independence** - We are called to interdependence, where we are equally dependent on God.

**Freedom from Control** - Our culture desperately wants freedom from control, yet desperately needs accountability.

**Anonymity** - Anonymity leads to isolation and ultimately death. The greatest single cause of death amongst single young men under 25 is suicide. We need to find a way to build community.

## The need for a "Meta Narrative" - a story

Previous generations shared a common identity, experience and history (e.g. the generation of Canadians who experienced World War II together). The emerging culture does not have the same connecting story and so lacks a sense of identity, and consequently they lack a sense of security.

Music genres that present the story in song (e.g. the ballad, the hip hop scene) have resurfaced and have become the mainstream in popular music. People have adopted these stories as their own.

People need a story - but the greatest story is the story of salvation. And as we will consider this year, it is as we better apprehend the *Gospel* story as we grow in our worship of God, building of his Church and our love for the world that St. Augustine's will become ever more a fellowship where those who are being shaped by epicurean and stoic ideas can find the fullness of life that Jesus and his story bring to them and to us.

The passionate church needs to look carefully at the world we are in - the hopes, fears and longings of the emerging culture. Like the Apostle Paul let us open our eyes and carefully observe the world around you so that you can learn to say more effectively the message of the *Gospel* that lives in your heart.