

Final Sign of Life: When did I invite/invest in someone into a life with Christ?  
Youth leaving for Daytona; Amy Odom mish moment; greeter event at halftime  
Jason Byassee; Boone UMC; July 20, 2014

## **Invite/Invest**

A friend of mine grew up Jewish. She heard this story so often she was sure it was in the bible. It's not, it comes from the rabbis. It's a story about Abraham's father—the one whom scripture says Abraham left behind in his old country to go and become a great nation--Israel. Abram's father Terah was an idol maker. One day he left the shop with his son Abram in charge and Abram smashed all the idols except the largest. Then he put the club in the hand of the largest. When his father returned he was furious—why have you destroyed our livelihood? Abram said "It wasn't me—it was that idol there." Abram's father said "Idols can't move or think!" Abram replied, well, why then do you worship them?

This is the last in a series of sermons on our measures as a church. Our measure for today is this, "When did I invite/invest in someone into a life in Christ?" Think of the people in your life who first made life with Jesus interesting. I think of my grandmother, who read Thomas Merton's book *Seven Storey Mountain* and went looking for the nearest Catholic priest. Or my Baptist grandmother who wrote me letters asking if I'd accepted Jesus as Lord and savior yet. Or of camp counselors who made me feel special and then told me it was because I matter to God. What about you? Who invested in your life to bring you to Jesus?

Now here's the question for today: who are we doing that for? Who are we praying for? Talking to? The goal isn't to beat people up. It's not to yell at people like the preacher on campus who makes everyone mad, like the overbearing relative who won't quit badgering, no. It's to be as kind as Jesus is. To want life with Jesus for others because our lives don't make sense without him.

Our story from Acts is about Paul's time in Athens. As a Jew he is horrified to find what scripture calls a "forest" of idols. The philosophers of the great academic city look down on him at first. So Paul gives his best academic speech. Only two of them convert. That is, Paul fails. This passage is perfect for us in an academic town as we are to learn about how to invite and invest in others toward life in Christ. With the overachievers in here we need to hear that God is not afraid of failure. Hear this word.

Acts 17:16-34

*16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling man want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities (this was because he was telling them the good news about Jesus and the resurrection). 19 So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. 22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.*

28 For 'in him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' 29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 At that point Paul left them. 34 But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the Pentecost people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Eugene Peterson is one of the greatest spiritual writers of our time. He tells the story of a boy who was bullying him when he was little. The bully didn't know he was strong, so soon Peterson knocked him down. Then suddenly Peterson remembered he was a Christian. So looming over him Peterson said "Confess Jesus as your personal Lord and savior!" Then he hit him. The boy said "What?" Peterson repeated the demand. Confess Jesus as Lord! Boom. The boy did. Peterson says, "That was my first convert."

Don't try this at home.

Three points for today on our measure of inviting others to life in Christ. One, Paul speaks the language of the Athenians. Two, he offers up judgment. Three, he fails.

<sup>1</sup>Point one, Paul speaks their language. Paul was a rabbi and so was a scholar. But he was a Jew from Syria, now he's in Greece, and Jews in that world didn't evangelize, so the Athenians aren't used to hearing from Jews.<sup>2</sup> They say he's a "babbling." In my field we would call him an amateur.<sup>3</sup> Athens is the town of Socrates, Plato, birthplace of democracy, heart of the world's greatest empire for many years. And Paul is taken to the Areopagus to explain himself. That's a place where ideas are bantered around. Colleges and universities and churches call themselves Mars Hill (the Latin form of Areopagus) as a way of saying the church has to compete in the marketplace of ideas.<sup>4</sup> There it is today full of tourists. Imagine all the dread of having to defend Christianity in the most learned place in the world (I confess a dream I have sometimes that I'm lecturing at the University of Paris and Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, post-modernism's greatest philosophers, are snickering in the front row).

And Paul does. He flatters them first (academics love to be flattered. So do all other people). Even though as a Jew he is horrified at their idols, he compliments their religious search, <sup>5</sup>"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Then he speaks their language. Epicureans are people who say they don't need religion to be happy.<sup>6</sup> So Paul says this, "the Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything."<sup>7</sup> He quotes their poets, "For 'in him we live and move and have our being,' as some of your poets have said, 'For we too are his

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<sup>1</sup> I. Paul speaks their language

<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:18 on screen plz: "What does this babbling want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities (this was because he was telling them the good news about Jesus and the resurrection).

<sup>3</sup> [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c4/Akropolis\\_by\\_Leo\\_von\\_Klenze.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c4/Akropolis_by_Leo_von_Klenze.jpg)

<sup>4</sup> <http://padfield.com/greece/athens/images/mars-hill-02.jpg>

<sup>5</sup> Acts 17:22 on screen plz

<sup>6</sup> Acts 17:24-25

<sup>7</sup> 17:28

offspring.’” His Stoic listeners would have been pleased. He insists that all humanity comes from one source, Adam, and before him, from God. Paul builds bridges, he speaks their language, to teach them about Jesus.

Christians have often done this poorly. I’ve got Native Americans on my mind since some of us go in a mission trip to Cherokee in a week. The first missionaries to the Americas did not learn natives’ stories enough to speak their language or build bridges. They dismissed their idols and made people slaves, tried to stamp out their faith to make them Christian. This is not biblical, this is a sham of biblical religion. Paul eats Greek food, listens to their poets, notices their ideas and tries to make use of them. He even notices that they worship “an unknown God.”<sup>8</sup> And he argues, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” God doesn’t have to be unknown--we can know him in Jesus.

I think about this in an academic context. I’ve worked in several, many of you do. Academia is good at many things. Open minded discussion of ideas it is not. Why? Because it’s not for that. It’s for curating knowledge and passing it on. So every scholar is asked to dig deep in her field to teach others in her field, and to teach beginners to her field. A botanist is not expected to have conversations with a recreation science professor. Every university I know talks about cross-disciplinary work being important and none do it well. Universities are places where identity politics reign. Every school I know has a recreation palace and a dining hall and sports facilities fit for kings while academic departments starve for money. Universities don’t even know why they’re there. Their best argument is to help people become employable. But that’s not really what they’re for. They’re for deepening knowledge, and that’s often not profitable. But it’s worth doing. Thank God monks preserved human learning for 1000 years of the dark ages or we’d not have heard of Plato or Socrates. Here’s the problem. The church invented the university. All knowledge holds together because it all reflects Christ in some way. How? That’s a hard question, we just know it does. That’s us talking like Paul at the Areopagus in our day. And even investing in someone in Christ. I love campus ministry precisely because it’s so intellectually demanding. If you can tell an 18 year old kid who’s played video games his whole life whose parents are remarried multiple times and whose friends are all on drugs that Jesus is Lord and his life has ultimate value you can tell anybody.

I study an ancient intellectual in the church named Augustine. He lived in north Africa in the fourth century and his mom was a Christian. So as he went off to university the first thing he wanted to forget was Christianity. Tough for him the smartest people he met were Christians. So he converts. It’d be like a kid from a trailer park in Arkansas who gets a scholarship to Harvard, and he learns from Intervarsity there that Jesus really is Lord. And now he has to go back to the trailer park and say, uh, right, I’m a Christian now. Awkward. And he became our greatest intellect. Legend says when he spoke 8 stenographers had to write full speed to get his work down on paper. Here’s why it worked: the smartest people he met were Christians. A philosopher named Marius Victorinus. A bishop named Ambrose. Suddenly it wasn’t just his overbearing mother talking about Jesus, it was the smartest people he knew. We have to honor the intellect in the church or we shouldn’t be surprised when our kids reject faith. In my life the smartest people I’ve known are believers—the president of Davidson when I was there, a youth pastor, my minister in college. And I’ve given my life to trying to be both an intellectual and a pastor. God gave us these minds, he wants us to use them, he is not afraid of the toughest intellectual challenge. And a way to invest in folks in Christ is to talk about whether Christianity makes sense. Because it does.

In the 1980s Billy Graham spoke on Carolina’s campus. This was controversial—he’s too conservative, university campuses are liberal, blah blah blah. The woman who introduced him was Doris Betts, Carolina’s greatest novelist and a former chair of the English department. And by the end of the day the audience remembered Betts’ words, not Graham’s. She said she was a member of the tribe of Thomas—that

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 17:23

is, she was a doubter. She spoke of how complex and important faith and doubt both are. She bore witness, gave testimony, invested in others in life in Christ. And I promise this brought her no popularity with her peers on campus. What about us? In our little sphere of influence, how are we encouraging others to inch toward Jesus?

Two,<sup>9</sup> Paul offers judgment. It's often said we're not to judge. By Jesus that is, "Judge not, lest you be judged." He means we aren't to judge people. We're not the Judge of the universe, that's Jesus, he's the one who says whether someone is savable or not. Our job is to love. But! We are to judge ideas. Paul does that a lot, including here.<sup>10</sup> "We ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals." Remember he's seen a forest of idols. And he says these are wrong. God is greater. I worry sometimes that we are so intent on listening, respecting others beliefs, all good things, that we don't ever speak, or say where we differ. Paul says judgment is coming.<sup>11</sup> "God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent." There is a God who will judge us all. Now Paul sounds a bit like a preacher on a street corner.

But he doesn't. Let me give some counter-examples. I asked a Duke undergraduate once what he learned from a course he took on CS Lewis.<sup>i</sup> Remember this is Duke--\$25,000 a year at the time, twice that now, so this course would have cost more than \$6000. "I learned Lewis was deeply homophobic and Eurocentric." Really? He was English! Congratulations, money and time well-spent. This is not education! This is just confirming preconceived notions (I'm sure it never happens on this campus). A friend tells of a man who arrived at Oxford and his new roommate asked him, "What do you think of Jesus?" The man replied, "I've never thought about him." The new roommate said, "And you call yourself an intellectual?" He was right, so the man read the Gospel of John, came to believe in Jesus, and is now one of the Church of England's most important evangelists.<sup>ii</sup> My teacher at Duke, Stanley Hauerwas, imagines a colleague asking him to explain God. The sort of question Paul got in Athens. And Stanley imagines replying (not that he'd have the courage to do this in real life, but he imagines it), oh no I can't, you're far too corrupt. But do this, fold your hands this way, and pray after me, "Our father, who art in heaven." God isn't something that can be explained like a theorem. God has to be experienced as a friend.

Do you see what I'm saying? We listen respectfully to others and then we say how Jesus makes a difference. I've already critiqued academia a little, let's spread the love, shall we? We don't live in a culture that values learning. We used to in the South, in this state, I noticed a gravestone at Mount Lawn with a man's middle name Plato; Leonidas used to be a common name in the south. Now we name kids Mercedes, Porsche, ESPN. Ours is a culture of celebrity. The only place we have debate is in political campaigns and there it's to score points, make the other look ridiculous, put something out on Twitter. Lincoln and Douglas would debate each other for four hours in 1858. Our culture also values the therapeutic. I'm not against this, I do some counseling, I do think Jesus is the best thing for a healthy life. But we take it so far the only thing that matters is whether something makes me feel good. Robert Wuthnow, sociologist from Princeton, described faith these days this way. Everyone says they're spiritual but not religious. One woman he interviewed, Sheila, described her religion as self-made. It's her own little voice. Sheila-ism. And it's devoted to making her happy. Here's the problem. It doesn't work. We don't know what's best for us. Only God does. And God isn't there to meet our needs. God is there to reign, to fill his world with glory, and one day to judge. This is hard isn't it! To speak over against what we find in our culture, but we have to do it, gently, humbly, but clearly.

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<sup>9</sup> II. Paul offers judgment

<sup>10</sup> Acts 17:29.

<sup>11</sup> 17:30.

I remember crying in the hallway in high school over a girl. Don't even remember who. But I remember the teacher who reassured me. I respected her, and she was kind. And she said Jason, the only thing that can fill your heart is Christ. That wouldn't have worked if she hadn't taught a smart lesson on Huckleberry Finn. And she was right. Who invested in us that way? Who can we invest in that way?

<sup>12</sup>Third and finally Paul fails. Epically. Earlier in Acts thousands of people respond to Paul's preaching. Here two do. Dionysius and Damaris. And we don't know a thing about either. Some have questioned whether Paul's missionary strategy worked in Athens. Should he not have gone to the professors' lounge and bantered? Should he not have dropped this bomb on them at the end?<sup>13</sup> "God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness . . . he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Some scoff, others ask for a rain check, two respond.

In ministry we will fail. If we want to invest in others about Jesus we will fail. I remember trying to tell a hallmate about Jesus and I clammed up, had nothing to say, had the most awkward silence in human history. Thing is it's not up to us. We don't convert anybody. Only God can and does. I'm often amazed at people in my life who come back around to God years later when my efforts years before only backfired. Let me quote our own Bobby Sharp on this: there is no waste in God's economy. None. So pray for your friends. Invite them to stuff. Ask them what they believe and tell them what you do. It will bless you and bless them. And failure is nothing to fear. God makes a universe from ash, salvation from a cross, what can God do with your and my failure?

There is a Cherokee story about two friends who decide to see what's over the mountain. So they walk. People could walk farther in those days than they can now. And over the mountain they saw another mountain, bigger and farther away. So they crossed it. Then they saw another, bigger and farther away. They crossed it. They finally stop and say to themselves, each mountain is greater than the next. And they go home. God is like that. God is always greater than we thought. We discover God walking with others. And sharing Jesus with them, having our own faith in Jesus renewed.

Did we do that this week? Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This is Will Willimon's vignette

<sup>ii</sup> J John that is, Leighton Ford's story.

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<sup>12</sup> III. Paul fails

<sup>13</sup> Acts 17:31.