

Generic items look like the product they copy, but cost less, because they don't have all of the costs for research, patents, development, advertising or marketing. Generics are a way to have what you want without the investment needed for "the real thing." Generics look like but aren't the real thing.

Some seek religion in such a generic way. They want to have all bases covered and deal with problems in their lives, but without a major investment or lifestyle change. It is the cheapest, easiest, blandest way of seeking God. The motto of generic religion is "*it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something.*" (sound familiar?) Such an approach seeks benefits without the cost or commitment of faith. (And, as with everything else, you get what you pay for.)

This is what Paul ran into in Athens. Athens was the center of philosophy, commerce, arts, government, civilization AND the home of every god and goddess imaginable. Paul even encountered one altar to the unknown god ... erected "in case" they had missed something. A generic "catch all." It didn't matter what one believed, as there was a god for each taste, schedule, and personality type.

Paul was surrounded by the signs of religion, but an absence of faith in God. Rather than condemn these people he said "I can tell you are searching – let me tell you the truth you are searching for." His response was to narrow their focus with the truth of Easter. What will we say to our world that definitely is in a searching mode? What is our message to those who wear crosses as jewelry but don't believe what that symbol proclaims? To people who join churches, but continue to cheat in their marriages or don't take time to hug their children? Paul witnessed in a culture immersed with self but impatient with commitment. Our world is no different. And the message is the same. "I can tell you are searching, And Easter proclaims that the search need not continue. Jesus is the answer!"

Paul understood, because he grew up in a generic belief system that looked like the real thing, but had lost understanding of its purpose. Judaism of his day looked to be faithful, but had degenerated into a system of rules and regulations that could be memorized but lacked the power to be more than what any human could exert. (That is why in our confirmation ministry, we seek to motivate our young people to learn how to share the gift of faith in their words, from their own hearts, rather than memorizing generic answers as if that was all that is needed!)

Paul reminds us that Easter is the real thing. That the Messiah comes to fill full our ritual and religion with the breath of the Living God. Paul's goal was to lead others to his God of love because he knew how empty and lifeless their religions truly were. He understood, because he grew up with a religion that had become generic; emptied of God's love and filled instead with man's attitude. Paul knew that Jesus came to reveal, renew, restore and redeem. He knew the price that Jesus paid to change his life and restore him to faith – and in loving response to that freedom he sought to help others who either had lost their way, or never even knew they were missing the boat!

The difference between generic religion and genuine faith is like the difference between a *story book wedding* and a true *marriage*. How much planning for weddings are motivated simply by "what is expected or what everyone else does?" How many couples wind up with oodles of showers and gifts, more bridesmaids than you can shake a stick at,

thousands of dollars spent in a single afternoon, family and friends who insist that no tradition is ignored – and in the midst of all of that hoopla forget to spend time on the relationship of marriage.

A wedding is only a ritual for a brief moment in time, while a marriage is a relationship for all time. How do people get confused and invest so much in the wedding with the assumption that it is what makes the marriage???

*Weddings are important – but only if there is truly a marriage in the mix!*

People seeking faith can get similarly confused. It is easy to go through the motions of worship, or build a building that looks a certain way, or sing songs that our grandparents sang – and assume this is “faith!” So many baptize a baby to guarantee eternal life, but then never live the life of faith or embrace the discipleship that Baptism announces. Such a focus on externals, without the priority of faith runs the risk of becoming another generic religion and forgetting the faith that truly is life. The unique nature of faith in Jesus Christ is that we don’t get what we pay for – everything is free! How then can we then hold back what is all “gift?”

Faith in God is not a series of steps or a logical process to follow. It is clinging to the free gift of grace that rescues us from this life and gifts us with an eternal home. Faith is a response that is bold in its assertion, reckless in its willingness to sacrifice for others, and comforting as we know that the One, true God has paid the price!

Paul didn't go into Athens and say, "I am glad that you all are at least trying to find God." Because he felt God's love, he poured out that love to strangers and by faith said, "let me tell you about the God whom you search for but can't find." How can we do any less? We live in a culture that insists faith must not interfere with public life – but if our faith is not the motive for our life it ceases to be faith and becomes only another generic ritual. That would be like saying don't your views about the relationship of marriage get in the way of the needs of the wedding!

Will we remain silent? Will we look for an easy way out? Will we ignore those begging for the truth or will we invite them to listen to the Word of truth? Will we seek a low cost pacifier for our immediate needs, or like Paul, commit ourselves to whatever servant role God has equipped us for? There is nothing generic about faith in Christ!

Remember that nameless Chinese student who stood alone and stared down the barrel of a tank in Tianamen Square? That is similar to the image of Paul, standing in the middle of Athens and simply saying, "Here is what I believe." What will it be for us? Generic religion or genuine faith? Let us seek to respond to the extravagant love that has given us life by daily affirming and confessing in any way that we can, "Here is what I believe!" - tws