

Tourist and traveler

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue



Pilgrims walk El Camino de Santiago in Spain. [Some rights reserved](#) by [victor nuno](#).

Early Christians used the Greek word *hodos*, or “the way,” to describe the literal and figurative paths their lives followed. The wise men returned to their home country “by another road.” Jesus’ disciples spoke of what happened to them “along the way” to Emmaus.

*Hodos* could also refer to a way of life. Jesus points to John the Baptist as one who came “in the way (*hodos*) of righteousness.” By the end of the book of Acts, we find Christians referring to their whole communal life in Christ as “the Way.”

According to John’s Gospel, Jesus told his followers, “I am the way.” This expression contrasts sharply with “I am the answer,” something many Christians assume he must have said but didn’t. The difference between the two self-descriptions is huge. The former invites grand adventure and openness to all of the ambiguities and doubts that go with a journey along uncertain paths. The latter suggests a packaged arrangement—a relationship involving little risk.

In his book *Hidden History: Exploring Our Secret Past*, Daniel J. Boorstin explains the historical difference between a traveler and a tourist. In previous centuries, travelers were those interested in unfamiliar settings and wild encounters that enlarged perspective. “The traveler was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience,” writes Boorstin. In contrast, “The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes sightseeing.” Tourism, in this historian’s assessment, is a spectator sport full of contrived, prefabricated

experiences.

The root words for *travel* and *tourist* informed Boorstin's study. *Travel* comes from the same word as *travail*, meaning trouble, work, or even torment. A traveler takes risks, plunges into diverse cultures, and seeks to learn local customs. Unplanned experiences are the traveler's norm, sometimes involving challenging exploits. Travelers eat whatever food is placed before them. They aim to learn as much of the language as possible. Shopping for souvenirs plays no role in their ventures.

A tourist sacrifices less. The word *tour*, from the Latin *tornus*—a tool for making circles—literally means “one who goes in circles.” A tourist is a pleasure seeker who passes through different exotic experiences only to return to a comfortable bed at night. Insulated from the noise, the smells, and the local people, a tourist's circle is complete once back home unpacking mementos and sharing photos.

I wonder if congregations are full of travelers and tourists. Travelers would be those who come to immerse their lives and refocus their values. They want to breathe the language of faith and know the way of Christ, even if travail may be part of the bargain. The tourists show up for a more passive experience, happy to drop in when they are in the mood. They spectate and consume, glad that the donuts taste fresh.

I suppose we all have to choose the spiritual road or path that works for us. Will ours be a journey rich in wild mystery, full of unknowables and incomprehensibles? Or will it be a safer path where we pick up a word here and a phrase there, making a few social connections along the way?