COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL TO A MULTI-CULTURAL WORLD. READING ST. PAUL'S SPEECH IN ATHENS IN A MISSIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Assoc. Prof. Ciprian-Flavius TERINTE, Ph.D.
Pentecostal Theological Institute of Bucharest, Romania
ciprian.terinte@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Communicating The Gospel to a Multi-Cultural World. Reading St. Paul's Speech in Athens in a Missiological Framework.
The evangelization of the world started, as Jesus commanded, "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria", but its final scope was "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8). Carrying on this worldwide and centuries-old mission, local churches, missionary organizations and seminars from all over the world still tackle the issue of communicating the gospel in a manner that would be faithful to the biblical truth and accessible to people of their generation in the same time. In this article I will examine the discourse that the Apostle Paul delivered before the Areopagus of Athens (Acts 17.16-34) in order to emphasize some major missional truths that proved to be of paramount importance for an effective communication of the gospel. Subsidiarily, I will show that despite the unyielding and scoffing rejection of some of the Christian ideas by the Greek philosophers, the apostle successfully established a link with them without compromising the gospel.
Keywords: *Acts of the Apostles, gospel, Christian mission, Apostle Paul, preaching.*

Since the dawn of its existence the Church has been aware of its great commission – spreading the Gospel among nations. The evangelization of the world started, as Jesus commanded, "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria", but its final scope was "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8 ESV). According to the book of Acts, Jews were the first who heard the gospel (see Acts chpts. 1-7), followed by God-fearing non-Jewish individuals (Acts chpts. 8, 10). But soon after that the good news of salvation reached the multi-cultural population of the big cities of the Mediterranean world

(Acts chpts. 13-28). Apostle Paul, the man that God dramatically transformed and empowered for this mandate, began his missionary activity in the Jewish synagogues of those cities being always aware of his commission to the Gentile population. But testifying to the scripturally informed Jews that the Christ was Jesus was one thing and preaching the same truth to pagans was another. After recording what Paul spoke to Jews in a synagogue (Pisidian Antioch – Acts 13:13, 6-47) or to an uneducated group of Gentiles (Lystra – 14:15-17), Luke recounts what the apostle preached to an educated Gentile group in Athens (17.22-31).

Carrying on this worldwide and centuries-old mission, local churches, missionary organizations and seminars from all over the world still strive to find the best ways to express the gospel in terms that would be intelligible to the hearers without thereby altering the essence of the message. In this article I will examine the discourse that Apostle Paul delivered before the Areopagus of Athens (Acts 17.16-34) in order to emphasize some major missional truths that proved to be of paramount importance for an effective communication of the gospel. Sporadically, applications for post-Communist Eastern-European context will be inserted in order to highlight the relevance of the text for the contemporary reader.

Paul in Athens. The context of Areopagus speech (Acts 17.16-21)

Luke recounts here the most important episode in the second Pauline mission trip, the evangelization of what had been the most renowned city in ancient Greece. The glory of Greece as it had been in the fifth and fourth centuries bC was fading in Paul's day. Nevertheless, Athens remained a center of education and art, though learning had not eliminated idolatry. This is Luke's presentation of Paul's encounter with cultured paganism. He gives us an illustration of the kind of approach which Paul made to the educated pagan, but at the same time he illustrates the Pauline idea that the gospel was "foolishness to the Greeks" or at least to most of them (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22–24).[1]

The condition of the city *greatly distressed* Paul because Athens was *full of idols* (Acts 17:16). He probably saw a vast numbers of images of

1 Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), Downers Grove, IVP, 1980, p. 298.

Hermes all over the city and especially at the entrance to the *agora* (*market place*) through which he probably walked.[2] So he added to his usual missionary pattern of going first to the synagogue (13:5,14,46; 14:1; 17:1–2,10; 18:4,19; 19:8). This time, he pursued a parallel course: *arguing in the synagogue* and *in the market-place* (17:17), the place where people gathered to discuss philosophy or listen to debates.

One day, Paul found himself in a dispute with *some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers* (Acts 17:18a). The Epicureans, named after Epicurus (340-270 bc), believed that the universe and all beings consisted of atoms which were active only temporarily. Thus, they rejected any idea of life beyond the present one. Though they did not deny the existence of gods, they believed that the role of gods in a person's life was marginal, as the gods were uninvolved in this world. For them, the greatest good was finding happiness, pleasure, tranquility, and freedom from pain and fear of death. The Stoics, on the other hand, were followers of Zeno (320-250 bc) and took their name from the portico (*stoa*), where he traditionally taught in Athens. They emphasized the importance of exercising reason to live in harmony with nature. Self-sufficiency and acceptance of what happened in life, including pain and suffering, were essential, since they were part of nature and controlled by an impersonal fate. They were pantheistic, believing that the spark of divinity was in all creation, from the highest to the lowest. This led them to uphold universal brotherhood and a high standard of ethics.

Paul's speech has often been thought to be rather irrelevant to the concerns of Greek intellectuals, since it was directed more against popular idolatry. However, Paul's ideas would have been very relevant to Epicureans, who thought it unnecessary to seek after God and had no fear of his judgment, and to Stoics, whose concept of God was pantheistic. In Howard Marshal's view, 'Paul in fact uses the insights of the philosophers in his attack on the beliefs of the Athenian populace; the Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry, while the Stoics stressed the unity of mankind and its kinship with God, together with the consequent moral duty of man. What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then demonstrate that they did not go far enough.'[3]

2 R. E. Wycherley, "St Paul at Athens", *JTS* 19, 1968, pp. 619–621.

3 Marshall, *Acts*, p. 298.

The philosophers called Paul a *babbler*, a person who had no original ideas but only passed on second-hand scraps of information. Others interpreted his emphasis on *Jesus* and *the resurrection* (Acts 17:18b) as preaching another pair of male and female gods. *So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him* about his teaching (17:19). *Areopagus* means 'hill of Ares', the god of war in the Greek pantheon. In this verse, the Areopagus may have meant the hill or the name of the council which exercised jurisdiction in religious and moral questions. Most scholars assume that the philosophers took Paul to the council, not the place, since one of Paul's converts (Dionysius) was an 'Areopagite' (17:34). It may have been a meeting of the court, no doubt in public session and not necessarily taking the form of a legal trial.

The authorities inquired about the strange new religion and asked Paul to explain it (Acts 17:19-20). The occasion gave Paul an opportunity to spell out his views. Luke comments that the Athenians and visitors to the city spent their time obsessively talking about the latest novelties (17:21). They were not really concerned about the truth of what they heard. They were always ready to be fascinated by exotic teaching rather than anxious to prevent its spread. So, Paul was given the podium before the intellectual elite in the intellectual capital of the Empire.

Paul's missionary preaching before the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 17.22-34)

What follows is a summary in Luke's language of the kind of thing that Paul said to Gentile audiences and, in particular, to his audience in Athens.[4] He began wisely by acknowledging that his listeners were extremely

4 Regarding the authorship of the discourses found in Acts, the general scholarly consensus is that they are not exact recordings of what the speakers said but summaries of their speeches. As for the rhetorical structure and theological content, some scholars say that they both are Luke's contribution, others argue that Luke shaped only the rhetorical structure whereas the theology of each discourse reflects the *kerygma* of the early church. This debate is not really germane for our purpose in this article because whatever the case may be, what we have in these speeches reflects the main points of the apostolic *kerygma*. It's worth mentioning though that we believe that – as Beverly Gaventa put it – "Lucan theology is intricately and irreversibly bound up with the story he tells and cannot be separated from it." (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Toward a Theology of Acts: Reading and Rereading", *Interpretation* 42 (1988), p. 150). For more detailed views on this sub-

religious (Acts 17:22), although the Greek word can mean either 'devout' or 'superstitious'. It is most likely that Paul meant it in a good sense, to provide a way in to his address that would engage the attention of the audience. Evidence that they were indeed extremely religious was everywhere in the city. Paul had even noticed an altar with the dedication '*To an unknown god*' (17:23). He used this inscription as a starting-point to make known to them what they did not know about the supreme deity. Paul hardly meant that his audience were unconscious worshippers of the true God. Rather, he is drawing their attention to the true God who was ultimately responsible for the phenomena which they attributed to an unknown god.[5] The apostle placed his God in the context of their own gods, showing that the God he proclaimed was not merely another god to add to their collection, but the *unique* One. He was then ready to move toward proclaiming Jesus, as he had in his sermon to the Jews at Pisidian Antioch.

The apostle's case has several major points. First, the God he preaches is the only God and creator of the whole world (Acts 17:24). The Old Testament does not employ the word *world* (Gk. *kosmos*), since there is no corresponding term in Hebrew; rather it speaks of 'the heaven and the earth' or 'the all' (Jer. 10:16). But the word was used in Greek-speaking Judaism (Wisdom 9:9; 11:17; 2 Macc. 7:23). The concept of God as absolute Creator, however, would not be so easy for them to grasp. For them divinity was to be found *in* the heavens, *in* nature, *in* humanity. The idea of a single supreme being who stood *over* the world, who created all that exists, was totally foreign to them.[6] It may be said that Paul employed the language

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ject, see: Christopher Tucket, "The Christology of Luke-Acts", in Joseph Verheyden (ed.), *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, Leuven, Leuven University, 1999, p. 141; Henry Joel Cadbury, "The Speeches in Acts", in Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity. Part I: The Acts of the Apostles. Volume V. Additional Notes to the Commentary*, London, Macmillan & Company, 1933, pp. 425-427; Constantin Preda, *Propovăduirea apostolică. Structuri retorice în Faptele Apostolilor*, Bucureşti, IBMBOR, 2005, pp. 5-15.

5 The Greek traveller Pausanias (cf. AD 150) tells us that near Athens there were 'altars of gods both named and unknown', and other writers speak of altars to unnamed or unknown gods. Later, however, Tertullian and Jerome bear witness to an altar 'to unknown gods' and the latter asserts that Paul deliberately altered the wording to suit his purpose. This is certainly possible, even though later writers could not find the precise altar which Paul had seen; in any case, it could have disappeared in the following century (Marshall, *Acts*, p. 303.).

6 John B. Polhill, *Acts* (The New American Commentary), Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992, p. 372.

that we would expect a Greek-speaking Jew to use, especially when addressing pagans.

Such a great God does not live in humanly constructed temples, as the Athenians assume their Greek gods do, and he does not need anything that we can supply (Acts 17:25). This time Paul is critical of Athenian religion as expressed in its temples, its views about serving God, and its attempts to represent and honor God through idols. The one true God cannot be confined and controlled by those whom he has created, and he cannot be manipulated by human religion.[7]

Second, God creates human life and shapes the destiny of the nations, whether they acknowledge him or not. Paul moves from the creation of the world and everything in it to the specific creation of human beings within this environment: *From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth* (Acts 17:26a). The Greeks did not have such a view, but largely considered themselves superior to other races, whom they called barbarians. Against such claims to racial superiority Paul asserts the unity of all mankind, a unity derived *ex henos*, i.e., from Adam. Moreover, God *allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live* (17.26b). Paul's argument also has religious implications. Different gods were associated with different races and different lands. 'If God is working to unite all peoples in Christ, crossing national boundaries, then God is also working against polytheism.'[8]

Third, unlike Greco-Roman divinities that were perceived as distant and indifferent to ordinary people, the God that Paul preaches wants people to have a relationship with him. Physical existence and the enjoyment of the earth's bounty was not the final purpose of God in creating human beings. Paul formulates the purpose of human existence or the destiny of humanity: *so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him* (Acts 17:27). Seeking should not be difficult since God *is not far from each one of us*. This was a thought current in Stoic philosophy, but there it was taken in an impersonal, intellectual sense. Compare Seneca, *Ep.* 41.1: 'God is near you, with you, within you.'[9] However, Paul's concern

7 D. G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary), Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009, p. 495.

8 D. G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 497.

9 J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible), New Haven; London, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 610.

is with the living God of the Old Testament (Ps. 145:18) who is near to his worshippers despite his transcendence and greatness (Jer. 23:23f.). God is present with us in the created order, in a spiritual and personal sense, though not being found in created things as pantheists teach. The idea finally conveyed by Paul is that, because of human failure to find God as he really is, he can be truly known only through repentance and faith in the resurrected Jesus (vv. 30–31).

Fourth, if we are born in God's image, he said, then idolatry gets things backward; it makes God into man's image (Acts 17:28-29). Greek philosophers had already popularized a kind of philosophical monotheism among more sophisticated pagan thinkers.[10] At this point Paul illustrated his argument by two quotations from Greek poets. One of these appears to be Epimenides the Cretan (*c.* 600 B.C.) – 'For in thee we live and move and have our being' – and the other is Aratus (born 310 B.C.) – 'for we are truly his offspring'[11]. Although humans are God's offspring, most of them live sadly distanced from their creator, thinking that God is inanimate and yet can be portrayed by human art. Here Paul was at one with Old Testament and Jewish thought (Exod. 20:4; Deut. 5:8; Isa. 44:9–20; Wisdom 13:10-19; 15), and in opposition to Greek thought. Whereas the Greeks thought of the divine *nature* of man, Paul would have thought of the way in which man is the *image* of God. If men are like God, it follows that an inanimate image cannot portray the living God. Paul's idea is not ontological – as if to say something about the essence of humanity as superior to nature. 'Rather it is intended as a criticism, aimed at the restoration of the proper kind of worship of God.'[12]

And fifth, God was prepared to overlook their ignorance, but now he will do so no longer, and calls on all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30-31). God's patience has now ended because ignorance has ended. The proclamation of the Christian message brings this time to an end so far as those who hear the gospel are concerned. He was no longer an 'unknown God'; and should they continue in their false worship and fail to ac-

10 John Barton & John Muddiman, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, Libronix Digital Library System, (Ac 17:22-34).

11 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988, p. 338.

12 Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia. A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible), Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, p. 145.

knowledge his sovereignty over heaven and earth, their sin would no longer be a sin of ignorance but a high-handed sin. All acts of piety were in vain, if people did not know or worship the one true God.

Only one course is open – God now *commands all people everywhere to repent* (Acts 17:30b), because he has appointed a day for the righteous judgment of the world. The concept of repentance must have sounded strange to the Athenians. Repentance for them would have meant abandoning their false conception of God and turning to God from idols to serve the living and true God. Even stranger was Paul's warning of God's coming day of judgment (17:31a). Stoicism and Epicureanism saw no reason for the doctrine of repentance, nor the idea of a judgment day.[13] But once again, Paul's thinking has plenty of Old Testament precedents (see Jer 46:10; Ezek 30:3; Joel 2:31; Amos 5:18; Obad 15).

God's righteous judgement will be conducted by *a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead* (Acts 17.31b). That the judgment would be presided over by 'the man he has appointed' was a theme that is presented in Daniel 7:13. The appointment of the judge has been already made and confirmed by his being raised from the dead by God. Paul does not explicitly name Jesus, but the statement clearly implies him.

When he reached the doctrine of the resurrection, Paul was interrupted by his audience. His mention of Jesus' bodily resurrection certainly laid him open to mockery. Although many ancient Greeks believed in the eternal existence of the human soul in Greek philosophical reasoning there was simply no room for a resurrected body.[14] Some began to scoff, but others said, '*We will hear you again about this*' (Acts 17:32), which was the equivalent of unbelief (see 24:25). *At that point Paul left them* (17:33), but his speech was not a failure. One prestigious convert was made, Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris and others *became believers* (17:34). 'Even the best seed produces various types of growth (see Luke 8:4-15)'.[15] The idea that Paul abandoned all efforts to preach to intellectuals after his experience in Athens is a misreading of both Acts and

13 Dennis Gaertner, *Acts* (The College Press NIV commentary), Joplin, College Press, 1993, Libronix Digital Library System, (Ac 17:32).

14 Philip A. Bence, *Acts. A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Indianapolis, Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998, p. 175.

15 Philip A. Bence, *Acts*, p. 176.

1 Corinthians. Neither Acts 17 nor 1 Corinthians 1-2 are anti-intellectual manifestos. The climax of the Areopagus sermon was the resurrection of Christ and it received the predictable response – to the Greeks, it was folly (1 Cor 1:23). Looking for big, instant results is a modern worldly phenomenon, not God's standard for evaluating His servants.

The speech on the Areopagus is the prime example in Acts of Paul's preaching to Gentiles. Although commentators often said have said that the Paul of the epistles would never have preached this sermon because its thought would have been alien to him, I believe that Paul's speech on the Areopagus is a masterpiece of missionary preaching. The idea of a 'natural revelation' is certainly present in Rom 1.18-32 even though the application differs. In 1 Thess 1.9-10 Paul summarized his preaching to the Gentiles at Thessalonica. There the elements are strikingly the same as in the Areopagus speech: turning from idols to a living God, the return of the Son from heaven, the resurrection, the wrath to come. This is almost a summary of the appeal in Acts 17.29-31. As such, despite their unyielding and scoffing rejection of some of the Christian ideas, the apostle successfully established a link with the Greek philosophers without compromising the gospel.

Conclusions

At the end of this study, we can draw at least two sets of conclusions from the examination of Paul's missionary activity in Athens, as recorded by Luke in Acts 17.16-34. One set of ideas regards Paul's missionary praxis, whereas the other regards the content of his missionary preaching.

In terms of his missionary praxis, it can be noticed that Paul had no reservation to debate and preach in the public arena. Luke makes it clear that Paul's response to idolatry and the ignorance of pagan worship was to proclaim Jesus and the resurrection in the marketplace to anyone who happened to be there (Acts 17:16–18). Athens offers a picture of contemporary society. Today's generation would likely see the Christian gospel as one option among many. In their minds, Christianity, like many other philosophies, might be right for a few, but is by no means the *only* truth for all people. That is why the Church is called to be in the marketplace, where the most heated debates take place.

In the marketplace of the city, Paul interacts with Athenian religion and culture. The apostle spoke very much in the line of the Old Testament

critique of idolatry. However, he was also prepared to take over the glimmerings of truth in pagan philosophy about the nature of God. Scripture would have been meaningless to the Athenians, so Paul reached as far as he could to them, quoting great thoughts not from the Old Testament but from their very own libraries. He demonstrated that he was an educated thinker whose ideas were worth considering. He addressed them as much as possible in their own terms, by taking over pagan Greek poems, expressive of Stoic philosophy, and applying them to God. However, the underlying thought of his discourse remained thoroughly biblical. Bridge building is essential in Christian witness, particularly when addressing different cultures, as missionaries must often do. Paul's Areopagus address provides both a precedent and a pattern for this essential task.

Recent sociological studies have shown that Romanian evangelicals tend to isolate themselves, gather in closed groups and avoid the world with its way of thinking, writing, singing, reasoning, and influencing. For more than half a century, many Romanian evangelicals have preached an anti-intellectual gospel or, in the words of Richard Neibuhr, a "Christ against culture". The anti-intellectualism of these evangelical communities has had various consequences. For example, the gospel preached has had a moralizing emphasis, accompanied by a set of rules to follow in order to become a Christian. Converts have been encouraged to isolate themselves as much as possible from the world and to have no concern for its wellbeing. Evangelistic efforts have been directed towards the lower, less educated social strata and rural areas, rather than the cities and universities. A visible symptom of this tendency is the increasingly tense relationship between generations of evangelical Christians, a tension that has been felt more intensely since the fall of Communism. Younger people are acutely conscious of the gap between the standards of the world they live in and the limited perspectives of the Christian communities to which they belong. It is often difficult to prevent younger people from leaving such communities due to accumulated intellectual frustrations.

In terms of theological content of Paul's missionary preaching, his speech is to be regarded as an example of how to witness within a particular cultural setting. Much of contemporary society is, as Athens was, full of idols (Acts 17:16). People continually look for a fresh idol, enjoy it for a while, and then become bored, ready to move on to something new. Life for Athenians or modern Western society appears to have no enduring mean-

ing. In such context, the apostle preached God as being unique and the only source of man's existence and happiness. He described in several other ways God's supremacy and self-sufficiency, and also His approachability. Paul highlighted all these attributes of God in order to demonstrate that the God he is preaching is the only one worthy to be worshiped.

In our survey of the biblical text, we noticed that Paul called people to a personal relationship with God and he did this by preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Paul may have flattered his hearers by praising their religious appearance but his evaluation of the apparent glory of Athens was deep distress (see Acts 17:16). He saw that its inhabitants worshiped gods other than Jesus. Paul offered the true God to them. We, too, must look beyond superficial spirituality and bring people into deep relationship with Jesus Christ the Savior.

Central to his preaching was the call to repentance and faith in the resurrected Son of God. Paul's proclaiming of God's judgment and Jesus' bodily resurrection certainly made him look ridicule in the eyes of his Greek audience. Nevertheless, he never compromised the basic Christian principles of God as Creator and Judge and the resurrection of Christ.

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