CBTJ 14 (Fall 1998) 1-15

A Rhetorical Analysis of the Areopagus and its Missiological Implications

Jason Q. vonEhrenkrook

> *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are wtthout law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 9:19-22

Paul provides a window to his missiological passion in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22. It is clear that for Paul, the cross-cultural spread of the gospel is of supreme importance. While the initial spread of Christianity was clearly Jewish, the Apostle Paul soon emerged as the maverick messenger to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16). Although questioned by many for his bold and somewhat controversial approaches, Paul continually sought ways to bridge cultural gaps in the presentation of the gospel of Christ, a process now referred to by missiologists as contextualization. In essence, Paul was seeking to convey the truth about Christ and the gospel in culturally relevant forms.

There are many examples to illustrate this point, however, none are more pertinent and descriptive as Paul's speech before the Areopagus Council as recorded in Acts 17:22-31. While an exhaustive examination of this passage is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief rhetorical analysis of Paul's speech as recorded by Luke should provide several missiological insights for the evangelical minister. More specifically, this paper will seek to develop the background and rhetorical structure of Paul's speech, gleaning missiological principles of contextualization from this Pauline paradigm of cross-cultural missions.

Contextual Background of the Areopagus Speech

Luke's narrative finds the Apostle Paul waiting for his companions in the city of Athens (17:16). On his survey of the city, Paul is provoked within by what he sees; namely, the rampant idolatry of the Athenians. A city so full of corruption was in need of the truth of the gospel, so Paul journeys to the synagogue and the market place in an attempt to spread the news of Jesus and the resurrection. Within this context, Paul is confronted by two significant groups of philosophers, the Stoics and the Epicureans. After some discussion, they bring Paul before the Areopagus Council where the speech under examination takes place. Before looking specifically at Paul's speech in 17:22-31, certain background considerations need to be addressed.

The city of Athens has been rightly called "the museum of classical culture for the Hellenistic world."[1] Although not as politically preeminent as earlier centuries, by Paul's day Athens still continued to flourish "culturally as a center of

---

[1] Hans Conzelmann, "The Address of Paul on the Areopagus," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, eds. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 218.

Greek rhetoric, and it remained a bastion of philosophy."[2] Educationally, Athens was the most famous of the three great university cities, Tarsus and Alexandria being the other two. It was to one of these three cities that people came to study philosophy, rhetoric, and religion. It was of course at Athens that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had lived and taught. Certainly Athens' philosophic reputation was unprecedented.

Two prevalent schools of philosophic thought in the city of Athens were the Epicureans and the Stoics. Commenting on the philosophic acumen of Athens, Lloyd notes that the city "remained the chief center of philosophical activity, not just for those such as Epicures, who was an Athenian citizen, but also for . . . Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism."[3] A foundational teaching of Epicurean ethics is that good is associated with pleasure and bad with pain. Life is about freedom from pain, for therein is true pleasure found. Consequently, the Epicurean saw no need to focus the after-life. As to the gods, Epicureans may have believed in their existence, but they had relegated them to a blissful other-world, having no contact with this world. Epicureans were particularly known for their denial of both providence and theodicy.[4]

---

[2] *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, s.v. "Athens."

[3] G.E.R. Lloyd, "Greek Philosophy," *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome*, vol. 3, eds. Michael Grant and Rachel Kitzinger (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 1614.

[4] Jerome H. Neyrey, "Acts 17, Epicureans, and Theodicy," *Greeks, Romans, and Christians*, eds. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 124. By theodicy, Neyrey means "the argument that God's providential relationship to the world entails a just judgment of mortals, especially a judgment that takes place after death, where rewards and punishments are allotted" (119).

In opposition to the Epicureans were the Stoics, founded by Zeno of Citium in the early third century B.C. Like the Epicureans, they sought freedom from pain in their pursuit of the good; however, ultimate good was found only in *excellence*, not pleasure. In contrast to the Epicureans, the cosmological foundation of Stoicism was an active, causative divine force. This divine force is variously identified as "the cause, God, reason, breath or vital spirit (*pneuma*), and fate."[5] However identified, Stoic thought recognizes divine providence in the cause-effect relationships of the cosmos. Commenting on Zeus, the ancient Greek Stoic Aratus remarks that it was he "who set the signs in heaven, and marked out the constellations, and the year devised what stars chiefly should give to men right signs of the seasons, to the end that all things might grow unfailingly."[6] An understanding of these religious perspectives will be helpful in the interpretation of Paul's Areopagus speech.

Confronted by these two philosophic schools of thought, the Apostle Paul engages in open dialogue in the market-place. It is commonly recognized that the setting described in Acts 17:17 parallels closely the Socratic model of philosophic dialogue. Sandnes notes three significant parallels:[7] (1) The scene for Paul's Athenian confrontation takes place in the market-place, the *agora*. According to Plato, Socrates as well spent much time conversing in the *agora*. (2) The language describes Paul engaging in what is called διαλεγομαι. Again, identical language is also used of the activity of Socrates in the market-place. (3) Paul and Socrates were both accused of introducing foreign gods to the

[5] Lloyd, "Greek Philosophy," 1618.

[6] Aratus *Phaenomena*, Loeb Classical Library, 381.

[7] Karl Olav Sandnes, "Paul and Socrates: The Aim of Paul's Areopagus Speech," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (June 1993), 21.

Athenians. Paul, familiar with the Socratic tradition, wisely speaks with the Greek philosophers on their turf and in a manner strikingly familiar to them. This leads the Epicureans and the Stoics to pursue further discussion before the Areopagus Council.

Rhetorical Analysis of the Areopagus Speech

An analysis of the structure of Paul's speech in Acts 17:22-31 reveals a rhetorical strategy much akin to that of classical and Greco-Roman literature. For the purpose of this paper, Paul's speech will be considered within the three parts of a classical oration: *exordium*, *probatio*, and *peroratio*.[8] The development of this rhetorical structure is borrowed from Zweck in his study of the Areopagus exordium.[9]

Paul begins his speech before this hostile audience using the rhetorical technique known as the *exordium*. In the *exordium*, the speaker or writer makes an attempt to gain rapport with the audience, seeking ultimately to capture their favor and win a hearing. As is recorded in *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (the earliest Greek textbook of ancient rhetoric) the function of the *exordium*, it is to "inform them [the audience] what the speech is about and to enable them to

---

[8] *Exordium* refers to the commencement of an address. Here the speaker seeks to gain the attention or win the sympathy of the hearers. *Probatio* refers to that which the orator is attempting to convince the hearers of. Then in the *peroratio*, the speaker, "summarizes the argument and seeks to arouse the emotions of the audience to take action or to make judgment;" George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretion through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1984), 23-24.

[9] Dean Zweck, "The *Exordium* of the Areopagus Speech, Acts 17.22, 23," *New Testament Studies* 35 (January 1989), 97. See Appendix 1 for Zweck's complete rhetorical outline.

follow the line of argument, and to exhort them to attend, *and to make them well-disposed towards us* [italics mine]."[10] The orator would typically accomplish this by means of a *captatio benevolentiae.*[11]

Paul begins the *captatio benevolentiae* by addressing his audience as the "men of Athens." As Zweck notes, this address is "rhetorically conventional" and is found in numerous speeches of the day.[12] Following this, Paul makes an interesting and somewhat surprising compliment. He describes the Athenians as a "very religious" people (δεισιδαιμονεστέρους). While the adjective δεισιδαίμων can carry the negative meaning of "superstitious" (thus the K.J.V. translation), it is best within this context to translate it in its more positive "pietistic" sense.[13] As Foerster notes, this adjective was generally used in the non-Christian Greek world to be a "supremely neutral expression for religion or piety."[14] The Apostle Paul's audience would have accepted this remark as a compliment on their own religious zeal.

What is especially interesting is to compare this remark with Paul's earlier response of anger at the religious idolatry of the Athenians (v. 16). While internally Paul was deeply troubled by their religious deception, he did not allow his emotions to surface in an abrupt condemnation of their

---

[10] Aristotle *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, 377.

[11] For the threefold function of a *captatio benevolentiae,* see Zweck, "The *Exordium,*" 100.

[12] Zweck, "The *Exordium,*" 101.

[13] Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and augmented by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., eds. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. δεισιδαίμων.

[14] Foerster, "δεισιδαίμων," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 2:20.

practices. Rather, he was able to suppress his anger and compliment the Athenians in general terms on their religious pursuits, though not accepting the gods they pursued. In other words, Paul commends *that* they are religious but not *what* their religion is. In so doing, Paul is able to capture the audience's attention without compromising his own theological persuasion.

Paul further elaborates on the religious nature of the Athenians by introducing what becomes the central motif of this discourse, the "unknown God." Pieter W. van der Horst argues convincingly from extra-biblical sources, archeological finds and patristic writings that altars with the inscription *To An Unknown God* were to be found in the city of Athens.[15] Evidently, for fear of failing to pay homage to a god, the Athenians erected an altar to an "Unknown God" and thus made certain that no god would be missed.[16] Paul begins his speech with this inscription to the "Unknown God" and proposes to make known to the Athenians the One whom they worship in ignorance. Consequently, Paul is able to not only compliment the Athenians on their religious zeal but also to clear "himself of the suspicion of attempting to introduce new deities to Athens: the God of whom he speaks is known—and yet unknown—in Athens."[17]

---

[15] Pieter W. van der Horst, "The Altar of the 'Unknown God' in Athens (Acts 17:23) and the Cults of 'Unknown Gods' in the Graeco-Roman World," chap. in *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity: Essays on Their Interaction* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994), 165-202.

[16] Joel Marcus, "Paul at the Areopagus: Window on the Hellenistic World," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 18 (October 1988), 145. " 'To an unknown god' means, 'to whatever god we might have forgotten to honor: sorry about that!' "

[17] Zweck, "The *Exordium*," 101.

Following the *captatio benevolentiae*, Paul transitions from the *exordium* to the *probatio* by means of a *propositio*. Simply put, Paul now articulates the proposition of his address, namely to proclaim to the Athenians the God that they now worship as unknown. What follows is the heart of Paul's message.

In contrast with his normally Christological approach to preaching, Paul here begins the *probatio* by an appeal to the Creator-God. This concept of a Creator-God was universal in the Greek world and would most certainly strike a familiar chord with the Greek philosophers, especially the Stoics. Because Paul's audience was void of any Christological background, Paul adapts his approach to suit the ontological disposition of his audience. In so doing, Paul identifies the unknown god as the Creator of the cosmos and Lord of the universe. However, what is unique in this concept is Paul's monotheistic perspective deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Paul does not quote the Old Testament to make his point to this pagan audience; rather, he reinterprets philosophic language from a biblical perspective.

On the basis of his premise that God is the supreme Creator of the universe, Paul argues two ideas. First, this God, because He is creator, "does not dwell in temples made with hands" (v. 24b). Second, this God is not "served by human hands, as though He needed anything" (v. 25a). He is the source of all life and breath, a God who is completely self-sufficient. Again, this message is certainly familiar to the philosophically-minded Athenians, for they themselves believed in self-sufficient gods, gods who could not be confined to temples made by hands.[18] The only major difference lies in the strictly monotheistic outlook of the Apostle Paul.

---

[18] John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 373.

Continuing with his creator motif, Paul argues that God created one human race for two reasons: first, to inhabit the earth and second, to seek after God. The providence of God dominates this particular sentence, for it is the Creator-God who has "determined *their* appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation" (v. 26b). Of course, this perspective would have been in complete harmony with the Stoics, who as well acknowledged a providential being in the cosmos. The Stoics would have also agreed with the concept of seeking God. However, they believed that "one should strive to grasp it [divinity] as fully as possible through cultivating reason, that part of divinity that dwelt in one's own human nature."[19]

Although God in His providence created man to seek Him, man's ability to find Him is severely limited. Paul's use of the optative ψηλαφήσειαν indicates an extreme doubt that man could find God, even though He is near. As Bruce rightly notes, this verb "expresses the idea of groping for God in the darkness, when the light of special revelation is not available."[20] There is a knowledge of God that comes through nature, and in that sense, God is "not far from each one of us" (v. 27b). Nevertheless, for Paul, natural revelation alone is insufficient.

Using the concept of God's proximity to man, Paul transitions to a condemnation of the worship of idols. Paul begins verse 28 with a traditional Greek triadic formula, "in Him we live and move and exist." Most scholars recognize this as a quote from a poem attributed to Epimenides the

---

[19] Ibid., 375.

[20] F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 383.

Cretan.[21] Paul then uses a second quote from Aratus, *Phaenomena* 5.[22] Aratus, commenting on the supremacy of Zeus, claims that "always we all have need of Zeus. For we are also his offspring."[23] Paul borrows this phrase and reinterprets it in light of the one true God that the Athenians were ignorant of. Whereas Paul normally will quote from the Old Testament to prove his point, here he uses sources that are familiar to the Athenian philosophers.

Paul's argument goes as follows: this God that the Athenians were ignorant of, He is near to them because He is the source of their existence, a thought conceptually parallel to v. 25b. To prove this, Paul quotes Aratus and argues that the Athenians, and all men for that matter, are the offspring of this God. Since all men are the offspring of this God, how foolish it is for them to think that "God" can be fashioned materially by the work of man. In so doing, Paul has just elevated "his" god as the one, true God while subtly denying the existence of the other Athenian gods! Although taking great care so as not to offend his pagan audience, the Apostle Paul in no way compromises his own monotheistic perspective.

Having established this "unknown god" as the only supreme and sovereign God, Paul now transitions to the conclusion of his speech, rhetorically known as the *peroratio*. Here, Paul will bring closure to his address and appeal to his audience for a decision. Within this section, three critical

---

[21] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 338.

[22] Acts 17:28b Τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν
Phaen. 5 τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος εἰμέν

See also M.J. Edwards, "Quoting Aratus: Acts 17,28," *Zeitschrift Fur Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1993), 266-269 for a fuller discussion.

[23] Aratus, *Phaenomena*, Loeb Classical Library, 381.

concepts are introduced: repentance, judgment and resurrection.

Up to this point, the Apostle Paul has been indirect in his address to this pagan audience. This, of course, was necessary in order for him to gain a hearing. Nevertheless, having subtly directed their attention to the "unknown God" who is the *one* and *only* true God, Paul introduces Jesus Christ as the righteous judge dispensing judgment on all who fail to repent.

Sandnes, in his article "Paul and Socrates," argues that Paul uses the rhetorical device called *insinuatio* to present the role of Jesus (i.e. the gospel) in an indirect way.[24] This is because Jesus is only presented in this speech here in a surprisingly discreet manner. Consequently, according to Sandnes, Paul's aim in this speech is not necessarily immediate conversion, rather it is to gain another hearing.[25] He further supports this notion in his observation of the two opposing reactions to Paul's message: on the one hand the jeering of some and on the other hand an inquisitive response.[26] While there is certainly some merit to Sandnes' rhetorical analysis, he fails to consider several observations. First, why would Paul here attempt to hide the identity and role of Jesus from his audience when earlier Luke describes Paul preaching in a direct manner Jesus and the resurrection to the Stoics and Epicureans (v. 18)? Second, if Paul's goal was not conversion, why is there a direct call for all men to repent (v. 30)? Third, Sandnes fails to note the third and most significant response to Paul's address, the conversion of a member of the Areopagus Council, Dionysius.[27] In contrast to Sandnes, it seems best to

[24] Sandnes, "Paul and Socrates," 18.

[25] Ibid., 19.

[26] Ibid.

[27] For an excellent discussion of the possible significance of this conversion, see Daryl J. Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan

understand Paul's approach in the *peroratio* as direct and confrontational.

Considering both the *probatio* and the *peroratio*, Paul's argument confronts the Athenians with this thought: "repentance is required of all in view of the natural knowledge of God possible in the world and in view of his new revelation."[28] The times of ignorance are now over, and God has appointed a day of judgment for all the world. God appointed a Man as judge and has proved this Man's right to judge by raising him from the dead. Herein lies a confrontational message which causes Paul's audience great consternation. To the Epicurean, the concept of a future and final judgment is contrary to their thinking as evidenced by their outright rejection of theodicy. And as Charles notes, "to the Greek intelligentsia, the idea of somatic resurrection is patently absurd, for it flies in the face of the Platonic-Stoic view of psycho-immortality."[29] Marcus also notes the Greek aversion to a resurrection, for according to Greek thought, "the body, in fact, was what people were trying to *escape* from. As a pithy Greek sentence sums it up, *soma sema*, 'the body is a tomb.' "[30] It is clear that as Paul concludes his speech, he does not compromise the message of the gospel to keep peace. Rather, he confronts his pagan audience with the truth that judgment is sure for those who fail to repent.

In summary, the Apostle Paul tactfully and yet forcefully confronts his Athenian audience with the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Charles aptly notes, Paul's speech "begins with the epistemological assumptions of its hearers, it builds on a common understanding of the cosmos, yet it climaxes in

---

Mind: Paul's Encounter With Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics," *Trinity Journal* 16 (Spring 1995), 61-62.

[28] Zweck, "The *Exordium*," 97.

[29] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind," 52.

[30] Marcus, "Paul at the Areopagus," 148.

the fullest self-disclosure of the creator—the resurrection of the God-man."[31]

Missiological Implications of the Areopagus Speech

A surface analysis of this passage has led some interpreters to view Paul's speech at Athens as a negative example of cross-cultural compromise. The Apostle Paul made certain concessions to his pagan audience, and the results were a blurred message accompanied by a negative response. In light of the significant conversion of Dionysius and the clear confrontational closing of the speech, however, it seems best to view this event positively as a paradigm for cross-cultural ministry. Several missiological principles of contextualization from Paul's Areopagus speech can now be enumerated.

First, Paul uses a commonly recognized form of Greek speech to communicate biblical truth. As noted above, a detailed analysis of Paul's speech reveals a rhetorical strategy familiar to the Greek culture, especially the philosophically minded Stoics and Epicureans. In so doing, Paul departs from the conventional form of speech associated with his Jewish brothers. As Charles aptly states, "the striking significance of Acts 17:16-34 is the ability of Paul to clothe biblical revelation in a cultured and relevant argument to his pagan contemporaries."[32] For Paul, it is not the form that is important, rather what is essential is the content communicated by means of that form. The Apostle Paul is able to find common ground by communicating the gospel through Greco-Roman rhetoric.

Second, Paul exhibits an acute sensitivity to his audience's philosophic and religious background. This requires

---

[31] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind," 55.

[32] Ibid., 53.

an in-depth knowledge of the receptor culture. Here, Paul is able to utilize his background from Tarsus for his benefit. Tarsus, one of the three university cities in the Greek world, offered Paul an outstanding educational opportunity. As evidenced in this speech, Paul apparently took advantage of this opportunity, showing himself well-schooled in Greco-Roman literature, philosophy and religion. Having this background, Paul was able to take pagan writings and reinterpret them from a biblical perspective. Essential to any effective cross-cultural ministry is at least an understanding of the receptor culture's religion, philosophy, and literature.

Third, and most importantly, the Apostle Paul exhibits a contextual balance that allows him to adapt the gospel to the cultural flavor of his audience without accommodating that gospel message. In other words, this speech reveals the Apostle Paul as one who is sensitive to his audience and yet committed to the essential truths of the gospel. Charles notes three non-negotiable teachings in Paul's speech to the Athenians:

> 1. The apostle stresses the sovereign lordship of the one true God.
> 2. Proof of divine self-disclosure can be found in the resurrection of the God-man, Jesus Christ.
> 3. The movement of a faithful apologetic is always in the direction of moral accountability.[33]

In summary, Paul is able to effectively change the *form* (i.e., the typical form of presentation) of the gospel message while keeping the *content* of that message intact.

---

[33] Ibid., 60-61.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to glean principles of contextualization from the Apostle Paul's speech before the Areopagus Council. As has been demonstrated, this speech functions as a paradigm for cross-cultural missions. Paul is able to take the message of the gospel, clothe it in Greek form, and communicate it to a people in need of the Savior. This is precisely the call of the evangelical minister today. All over the world, culturally diverse people are in need of the one true Savior, Jesus Christ. With this in mind, it is imperative that the evangelical minister wrestle with this process of contextualization and seek to bridge cultural gaps with the message of Jesus Christ.