

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS: ACTS 17:16-21 PAUL AT ATHENS

A TERM PAPER SUBMITTED TO DR. RICK RASBERRY

FOR PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COMPLETION OF THE COURSE,

BIBL 424-W01 ACTS

BY

MAX LEWIS EDWARD ANDREWS

APRIL 14, 2008

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	2
II.	Paul in the Synagogue and Marketplace (vv 16-17).....	2
	a. A Provoking Spirit (v 16).....	2
	b. Paul’s Reasoning (v 17).....	3
III.	Paul Shifts from Theology to Philosophy (vv 18-19).....	4
	a. An Encounter with Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers (v 18).....	4
	b. A Desire to Learn (v 19).....	6
IV.	Paul Setting the Stage for his Witness (vv 20-21).....	7
V.	Conclusion.....	7
VI.	Bibliography.....	9

I. Introduction

In Acts 17:16-21, Luke begins the account of Paul arriving in Athens focusing on two major aspects. The first focal point is that the initial Athens missionary team is Paul alone. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke focuses on the development of the Church and how group ministry advances the Gospel. However, Paul arrives in Athens by himself waiting for Silas and Timothy. The second focal point that is often overlooked is the fact that Paul is actually in Athens! This may not seem important because geographical location is always included in Luke's account of missionary journeys. Paul's missionary journeys were carefully planned and centered on trade-routes, sea-ports, places where there was much coming and going. He started with Roman Asia, moved on to Greece, and then set his sights on Rome and Spain.¹ Paul arrived in Athens during his second mission, AD 48-51, and at this point it was the intellectual capital of the world.² Here in Paul's arrival to Athens, Paul's method of ministry focused on the individual and the audience, and used his reason and intellect to convey the Gospel message.

II. Paul in the Synagogue and Marketplace (vv 16-17)

A. A Provoking Spirit (v 16)

Athens was no longer a political or commercial influence in the world but was most famous for the people's intellect. The impact Athens had on the current Roman Empire was quite impressive with Roman students attending Athenian universities for training along side the continuing cultural presence. It should be interesting to note that Paul did not plan on preaching

¹ David Alexander; Pat Alexander, *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*, (Oxford, England: Zondervan, 1999), 659.

² Kenneth O. Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 287.

in Athens as he was there waiting for Silas and Timothy.³ Paul had turned his steps from Thessalonica and Berea, where he had briefly preached and headed towards Corinth, stopping by Athens.⁴ This fact may also be concluded due to an absence of a church plant by Paul mentioned in the Scriptures, although it could be likely that there was one started later by converts. As Paul made his way through Athens he observed the city's idolatry, and his spirit was provoked (Gr. παρωξύνετο [root- paraxuno] - to irritate, provoke, arouse to anger).⁵ Paul's spirit became so upset he burned with anger and irritation because of the sinful idolatry (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 4:23; Joshua 24:14; Judges 10:13-16; Psalm 106: 19-22; Isaiah 42:8; Luke 16:13). Because the Greek uses such a passionate word to describe his frustration it should be noted that this is not a sinful anger as Scripture instructs the believer to hate evil (Psalm 97:10).

B. Paul's Reasoning (v 17)

When evangelizing, it should be important to recognize that Paul used reason to determine his method of evangelism. Reason consists of principles of logic and method; these principles consist of the formation of simple truths and axioms that may be used to overcome problematic thinking and doing.⁶ Here Paul used his typical preaching methods with reason by sharing the prophetic claims of the Christ fulfilled through Old Testament Scripture. An issue Jews may have objection to in the Resurrection is the idea that the Messiah would be political, confusing the first coming of Christ with their ignorance to the references to Old Testament

³Edward G. Dobson; Charles L. Feinberg; Edward E. Hindson; Michael Kroll; Harold L. Willmington, *King James Version Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), 1332.

⁴ Werner Keller, *The Bible as History*. 2d rev. ed. (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books 1995), 360.

⁵ Studylight. *Book of Acts Nestlé-Aland 26* (1989; The New American Standard Bible), <http://www.studylight.org/isb/bible.cgi?query=Acts+17%3A16§ion=0&it=nas&oq=1ti%25201%3A10&ot=bhs&nt=na&new=1&nb=1ti&ng=1&ncc=1>

⁶ Paul Guyer, *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 396.

Scripture intended to prophesy the second coming. Paul used a simple truth that was held in authority, Old Testament Scripture, by both the Jews and himself.

Paul then moved on to the Agora where he preached and reasoned with Gentiles and anyone else who would listen in the marketplace. Paul had to use his intellect to evangelize with unbelievers and pagans to convince them that he knew the truth.⁷ Paul's reasoning with the Gentiles would have to be more historical and metaphysical based on the death and resurrection of Christ due to the fact that the Gentiles did not hold the Old Testament Scriptures as an authority. Here in the Agora, the Gentiles became confused with Paul's preaching for they did not understand his message because they felt as if he were pulling many philosophies together in one.

Paul set an example for all believers in always being ready to give the Good News whenever and wherever an opportunity might possible. It is important for the believer to be on their toes and ready to provide an answer for any question brought to them and be able to act appropriately when faced with any situation (I Peter 3:15).

II. Paul Shifts from Theology to Philosophy (vv 18-19)

A. An Encounter with Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers (v 18)

Athens' leading schools of philosophical thought were the Epicurean and Stoic schools, these philosophies were the leading representatives in the confusion caused by Paul's preaching. Epicureanism, founded by Epicurus (BC 342-270), is mainly a materialist philosophy believing that the universe is composed mainly of atoms but does not deny the existence of gods. However, there was no belief in divine providence, and life's purpose was to live as free from

⁷ J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress. 1997), 138.

pain as possible.⁸ The Epicureans were very existential and would accept the notion of existence before essence or material before immaterial.⁹ They abandoned the search by reason for truth and adopted a hedonistic approach to life through experience. According to John, in his Gospel account, even Pilate had a desire to search and find truth (John 18:38 NASB).

The Stoic school of thought was one of harmony with nature, using rational abilities one possesses, and depending only on oneself for needs. Their theology of God is some sort of world soul similar to pantheism. Stoicism was founded by Zeno (BC 340-265) and took its name from a “painted stoa.”¹⁰ While these two philosophies are different, they are both secular alternatives to dealing with life and problems.

Some of the Gentiles called Paul an idle babbler (Gr. σπερμολόγος [spermologos] - picking up seed).¹¹ This is metaphorical to a beggar in the marketplace picking up seed and using what he can get. When Paul presented the Gospel message, the Gentiles had the impression that he was taking many different philosophies and gods, abstracting certain commonalities and putting them together to create a new message. The Greeks use the term “deities” in several of their writings for pagan gods. It is used nowhere else in the New Testament in this sense but occurs fifty times for evil spirits and is, therefore, usually translated “demons.”¹² Paul preached Christ’s resurrection, and the Gentiles could have thought that Jesus, as the new god, and the resurrection

⁸ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, Acts* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 366.

⁹ William S. Sahakian; Mabel L. Sahakian, *Ideas of the Great Philosophers* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1966).

¹⁰ Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 288.

¹¹ StudyLight. *Book of Acts Nestlé-Aland 26* (1989; The New American Standard Bible), <http://www.studylight.org/ism/bible.cgi?query=ac+17:18&it=nas&ot=bhs&nt=na&sr=1&l=en>

¹² Doris W. Ridders. *The Scofield Study Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).

(anastasis) as His chief goddess.¹³ The lack of cultural filtration by the Gentiles by believing Paul was proclaiming new gods as a polytheist, gives example to the need to analogous illustration when witnessing cross culturally which Paul later used in verse 23.

Paul's technique in evangelism will vary in approach, but draws down to Jesus and the Resurrection as quickly as possible. Here he sets another example in witnessing; Paul left no room for tangents. Christ set this example of ministry when speaking to the woman at the well (John 4), and when she would get draw off the main message, Jesus would bring the message back to light. Paul also uses a relevant subject to present the Gospel just as Jesus did.

B. A Desire to Learn (v 19)

The philosophers and the other Gentiles decided to take Paul to the Areopagus. Paul was not put on trial at the Areopagus, due to the name of the Athenian court being the same, but was merely brought to it. Confusion between a trial and appearance can be drawn from the same trial Socrates was tried before for introducing new gods and ideas; however, his trial was not held at the Areopagus. On the same note, it is likely that Paul was seen before the court as he converted Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus (v. 34). The Areopagus was both a court and a hill, due to the fact that the court traditionally met on that hill. The term means "Hill of Ares", Ares is the Greek god of war parallel to the Roman god of war, Mars. The term would be used interchangeably just like Wall Street can either mean a street or a place of stock exchange.¹⁴

Luke never mentions the philosophers and Gentiles in the agora as being hostile towards Paul. On the contrary, they opened up to him with a desire to hear what he was saying and to learn about his message. The willingness to stay open-minded about something may indicate

¹³ Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 288.

¹⁴ Polhill, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, Acts*, 366.

that the philosophers and Gentiles did not know any truth. When one may know an objective truth, there is no reason to stay open to any other options or suggestive truths because if there is only one truth there is no need to be open to another.¹⁵

IV. Paul Setting the Stage for his Witness (vv 20-21)

Luke opens verse 20 in a bit of an ironical sense. Previously in verse 18, the philosophers were calling Paul a babbler, which was a strong term to use and a bit humiliating. Now, the same philosophers that were calling him a babbler were the same ones who were making inquiries about learning more, they wanted to know what these strange things meant. It is important to recognize that Paul had to have made quite the impression for case for Christ based off of his witness for Christ and the Resurrection. The philosophers had just heard the Gospel, “these strange things” and now wanted to know what it meant. The curiosity of the philosophers reasoned with Paul’s presentation now weighs in balance.

It could be debated that Paul had given a full Gospel presentation to the Philosophers at the Agora before the Philosophers’ call of babbling and strange things took Paul to the Aeropagus. Paul later gave another Gospel witness at the Aeropagus (17:22-34), to more Gentiles in a more formal atmosphere. Luke then seemed to use sarcasm in verse 21 in how the Athenians and strangers did nothing but tell each other about philosophies and new teachings.

V. Conclusion

Luke’s account of Paul’s initial visit to Athens in Acts 17:16-2, focuses on Paul’s individual ministry. While the remaining ministry accounts in the book of Acts emphasizes and highlights group ministry, Paul takes on the city of Athens while he waits for Silas and Timothy.

¹⁵ Norman L. Geisler; Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), 259.

Being that Paul was in the intellectual capitol of the world, Paul's method of individual mission should be emulated. A difficulty a mission team could encounter in intellectual debate or discussion is the possibility of construing one another's thoughts and points. Intellectual reasoning and convincing is better on an individual level, so one knows what to specify without another team member intruding on any discussion. Paul uses the words of Christ in Matthew 7:6 by not casting any pearls before swine by focusing only on the Gentiles' issue with polytheism later address in the succeeding verses.

In conclusion, Paul faithfully carries out the Lord greatest commandment in loving the Lord God with all his heart, soul, and mind. He does so intellectually with exhibiting the love for Christ with his mind by bearing a bold witness and evangelizing to the Gentile philosophers.

VII. Bibliography

Alexander, David; Alexander, Pat. *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*. Oxford, England:

Zondervan, 1999.

Dobson, Edward G.; Feinberg, Charles L.; Hindson, Edward E.; Kroll, Michael Kroll;

Willmington, Harold L.. *King James Version Commentary*. Nashville, TN:

Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005.

Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*. Nashville, TN:

Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998.

Geisler, Norman L.; Brooks, Ronald M.. *When Skeptics Ask*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker

Books, 1990.

Guyer, Paul. *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*. New York, NY: Cambridge University

Press. 1992

Keller, Werner. *The Bible as History*. 2d rev. ed.. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble

Books 1995.

Moreland, J. P. *Love Your God With All Your Mind*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

1997.

Polhill, John B. *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological*

Exposition of Holy Scripture, Acts. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press. 1992.

Ridders, Doris W. *The Scofield Study Bible*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

2005.

Sahakian, William S.; Sahakian, Mabel L.. *Ideas of the Great Philosophers*, New York,

NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1966.

StudyLight. *Book of Acts Nestlé-Aland 26*, (1989; The New American Standard Bible),

[http://www.studylight.org/isb/bible.cgi?query=Acts+17%3A16§ion=0&it=na
s&oq=1ti%25201%3A10&ot=bhs&nt=na&new=1&nb=1ti&ng=1&ncc=1](http://www.studylight.org/isb/bible.cgi?query=Acts+17%3A16§ion=0&it=na&oq=1ti%25201%3A10&ot=bhs&nt=na&new=1&nb=1ti&ng=1&ncc=1)