

Paul's Speech at the Areopagus

The Biblical book, *Acts of the Apostles*, is both an exciting and a challenging book to read. While in our Bibles it is physically separated from Luke's gospel by the insertion of John's gospel, almost everyone agrees that Luke wrote both books. I certainly think so. Luke wrote *Acts* as a book that parallels his earlier gospel in both literary and religious themes. *Acts* describes the church's beginnings in sacred Jerusalem and traces its spread to imperial Rome.

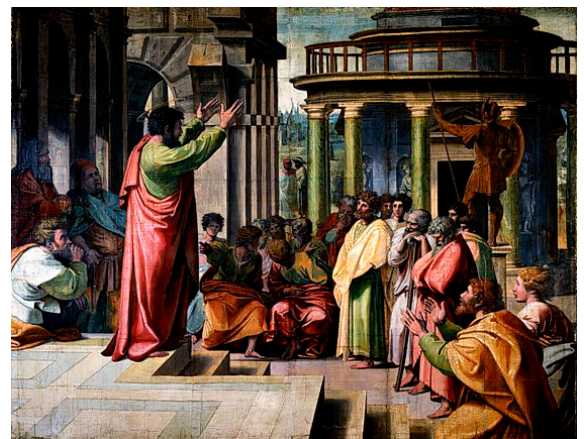
I once taught a class at Mt. Olivet Lutheran where we read the speeches in *Acts*, which are both conspicuous and central to understanding the book's message. The first great speech in *Acts* is chapter 2, the Day of Pentecost, which is brought about by the descent of the Holy Spirit with visible tongues of fire. Because of this event and the prominence of the Spirit in *Acts*, it is a book that is always associated with the workings of the Spirit. A brief but lovely musical tribute to the Spirit, *Holy Spirit, Light Divine*, by the Hamilton Family, can be found [here on YouTube](#).

The most famous of these public oratories is Paul's defense of Christianity at the Areopagus in Athens. My teacher in comparative religion saw this speech as an encounter between what he called the wheel and the line. At the Areopagus the so-called nativist religions, which see life as a never ending, purposeless circle, meet Christianity, which sees history as a marching in a line with a definite purpose. While there is some truth in this, it is only partially true as the pagans in Athens were familiar with Jews, who also see history as a line. But far more to my point, such an understanding fails to grapple with the offense that Paul had given with his preaching in Athens. What had Paul said that so angered the Greek philosophers in Athens? I think it was the encounter of secular philosophy with the sacred.

As background to the speech, we learn that Paul was irked to see so many idols in the city - what could be worse than such open idolatry? He immediately set about to remedy this sad state of affairs by engaging in conversation with anyone he could find in synagogues and the marketplaces.

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens were so offended by the "babbler" Paul that they, "laid hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus." Was this an informal arrest?

Acts 17:22-31, from this week's reading, gives us the central portion of Paul's response in ten verses. Paul's defense of Christianity flows logically point by point, is grounded in the Old Testament, and is carefully targeted at pagan intellectuals. As such, it is often seen as a model for speaking to the secular intellectuals of our time.



Saint Paul delivering the Areopagus speech. Rafael, 1515

I would like to emphasize three points from the speech.

First, Paul begins by claiming there is a God who made the world and everything in it, and that he is Lord of heaven and earth. Everything follows from and is dependent upon this first point. He is offering the Biblical perspective on creation.

Second, Paul states that the creator God is not served by human hands. God needs nothing from us, since he himself gave to all mortals life and breath and all things. In Christian theology this statement is known as creation *ex nihilo*, meaning God creates from nothing and without an inner need to create something. It is an act of pure grace.

Third, and deeply shocking to intellectuals then and now, Paul flatly states God has given assurance to all by raising a man from the dead to be judge over us.

Such a religious framework would have been radically unlike the paganism of the time. I sometimes wonder which was more offensive: the idea that God needs nothing from us and cannot be manipulated, or the claim God raised Jesus from the dead.

In his commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, the New Testament scholar Robert Wall tried to place the encounter between Paul and the Greeks in a broad context. He did this by pondering what the underlying issue might have been that caused the pagan philosophers to oppose Paul. Wall postulates that acceptance of Paul's message would have required the Epicureans and Stoics in Athens to surrender everything they valued and to accept a new outlook and a new way of living. Perhaps Wall is correct. If he is, could the same be said about today's continuing encounter between the secular and the sacred?

Notes:

This week's lectionary lessons can be found at the [Vanderbilt Divinity School library](#). They are:

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:8-20
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

Our thanks to Susan for suggesting three musical selections for this Sunday. In addition to the song, mentioned previously, [Holy Spirit, Light Divine, by the Hamiltons](#), Susan suggests:



**Statue of St. Paul.
(From wikipedia).**

[*Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart*](#)

[*Spirit of God - City Hymns*](#)

Both of these hymns nicely celebrate the gift of the Spirit.