

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

Why Philosophers Don't Get Invited to Preach Twice

Acts 17:16-34

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On what is called St. Paul's Second Missionary Journey, Paul traveled through several cities in Greece. *Acts* 17 talks about three of these cities Paul visited: Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. In Thessalonica he spoke chiefly to the Jews, but was not well-received. In fact, his preaching made people so angry that he had to flee to Berea, maybe a day's journey from Thessalonica, leaving behind his traveling companions. *Acts* says that the Jews he spoke to in Berea "were of a more noble character," and they examined the Scriptures to see if what he said was correct or not. But when his opponents from Thessalonica heard he was in Berea, he had to hop on a ship and travel another day south to Athens while he waited for his companions to catch up to him.

Now Athens was probably a good deal like the city of his birth, Tarsus: both were cultured cities with rich architecture and a vibrant intellectual life. While waiting for his friends to find him, Paul wandered around Athens. What he saw there alarmed and disturbed him.

The Athenians were eclectic in their approach to religion. A seafaring people, they traveled broadly and collected gods and traditions from other places and brought them home. The Athens Paul encountered was full of temples, altars, and statues of gods, demigods, soldiers, and politicians. Petronius, a Roman who visited Athens at around the same time, wrote that "it is easier to find a god in Athens than a man!"

As he had done in previous towns, Paul told his news about Jesus and the Resurrection with the Jews in the local synagogue. But he was so distressed by the idolatry in Athens, he also decided to tell his news to the Gentiles in the marketplace.

While the Thessalonians argued with Paul and the Bereans scrutinized Paul's arguments, many Athenians simply laughed at him. "What is this *spermologos* trying to say?" they asked. "Spermologos" literally means "seed-picker" or "seed-talker" and implies that the one speaking has picked up little bits of learning like a little bird picks up seeds and is now spitting them out again, undigested and without understanding. To many of the Athenians he sounded like a hayseed, an uneducated wack-job street-preacher with lots of nerve but not much brain.

Others, slightly more generous, thought that maybe Paul was trying to introduce a new set of gods to them. In Greek, "Jesus and the Resurrection," is *Iesous kai Anastasis*. Paul

evidently needed to invent a word to describe the Resurrection, so he used the word that means “rising up from sleep”: *Anastasis*. This is a feminine noun that later became the name I gave my daughter, “Anastasia.” Some Athenians thought that Paul was adding two more gods to the Pantheon: Jesus and his bride Anastasia.

This time Paul spent in Athens seems to have been a turning point in his preaching, where he learned how to speak about Jesus in a new way. Up till now he had spoken as a Jew speaking to other Jews. He argued from the Bible and from tradition, counting on his hearers to be familiar with both. Now he discovered that speaking only in words that are comfortable and familiar to him was tantamount to not speaking at all, since no one understood him. Or perhaps it was worse, since he seemed to be making a laughingstock of that which he most cherished.

This was a moment of crisis for Paul and for Christianity. Would Christianity remain a faith of Greek-speaking converts from Judaism? Would the Christians insist that anyone who wanted to join them speak their language and their language only?

The answer came, for Paul, in an invitation.

A few people, some Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, heard Paul and were intrigued by what he said. They invited Paul to meet with them on the Areopagos.

The Areopagos, or the Areios Pagos or Mars Hill, was a very important site for ancient Athens. It was once the location of the Athenian assembly and a site for jury trials. It was also the site of several significant events in Athenian mythology and history.

The hill is part of a cluster of hills that includes the Akropolis, and at the feet of which lay the ancient town of Athens. The hills and city are quite close – from the top of either one it is only a few hundred yards to the marketplace. From the top of the Areopagos one is only a stone’s throw or so from the temples of Hephaestus and Athena and scores of other altars and temples.

It is here, according to Aeschylus’s myth, that modern justice was begotten when Orestes was being pursued by the Furies. Orestes became a victim of the old law when his mother Clytemnestra killed his father Agamemnon. The old law required him to kill his mother by making it his duty to avenge his father. At the same time it forbade anyone to kill one’s mother. The old law simply could not be satisfied and either way he was damned. After killing his mother he fled to the Areopagos, chased by the Furies. There the goddess Athena met him and gave him a trial by a jury of his peers. The jury was evenly split, and so Athena cast the deciding vote in his favor, declaring that the law should err on the side of mercy. The Areopagos thus became symbolic of fairness, mercy, and justice.

Another episode from Athenian history is important as well: about twenty-six centuries ago (roughly 595-592 B.C.), the city of Athens suffered a plague. They sent to the

Delphic Oracle to inquire about this, and the Pythian priestess replied that the plague came because of sin, and so they should purify the city to have the plague end.

Advice from the Oracle is notoriously either misleading or short on details. If you know which god is offended, you know which god to mollify with sacrifices. But the Oracle didn't say which god was angry with Athens.

Diogenes Laertius records that the Athenians sent Nicias to Crete to seek the help of a prophet by the name of Epimenides. Plutarch and Diogenes tell us that Epimenides was a poet, a philosopher, and a prophet. We still have a few of his most celebrated lines:

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead: thou livest and abidest forever,
For in thee we live and move and have our being.

Epimenides agreed to come, and when he arrived he told the Athenians to bring him the following morning a flock of sheep that had not grazed. He released the sheep on the Areopagos and had them followed. Where sheep lay down on the grassy slope instead of eating, altars were built and the sheep were sacrificed on them. On each altar¹ Epimenides told them to inscribe the words *agnosto theo*, “to an unknown god.” The plague ended immediately.

This, then, is the context of today's reading. When Paul arrived at the meeting of the Philosophers on Mars Hill, he did not speak to them about Jesus and the Resurrection as foreign words and ideas. Rather, he spoke to them in their language.

As a devout Jew it probably galled him to say it, but he began by saying “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way!” Then he told them what he saw: an altar to *agnosto theo*, the altar to an unknown god, built by Epimenides six centuries earlier. The altar served a double purpose: through it Paul affirmed both their religion and their own recognition of ignorance about God. “What you worship as unknown I now proclaim to you as known.”

Then with a sweep of his arm he could gesture from the Temple of Hephaestus to the Parthenon and say to them, “God does not dwell in houses made by human hands.” He then told them what their “own poets” (meaning Epimenides, of course) said: “in God we live and move and have our being.”

So there was Paul, standing on a site holy to the Athenians, reminding them that on this very spot the Athenians had celebrated both human justice and divine mercy. He reminded them that this hill at the heart of their city was already a sign to them of the love of wisdom, of human sin, of the bondage of law, and of the grace and healing of

¹ Inferring from Philostratus's *Life of Appolonius of Tyana* and Pausanias's *Description of Greece*, I.1.14

God. And then he completed the story that Athenian myth and history had begun by telling them about Jesus and the Resurrection.

What shall we learn from this? Let me suggest two things:

First, perhaps Christians do not just need proclaim Christ to others; maybe we need to have God proclaimed to us, too. In Lent in my church we veil the crosses and remember that here in the Shadowlands East of Eden God is veiled to us. In *Acts 17* Paul reminds us that the hidden, unknown God nevertheless pierces through the veil to find us. Perhaps Gerard Manley Hopkins was right to say that all the world is charged with God's grandeur. If that's so, then all of our studies—all our world, even—can become opportunities to seek God through God's creation. What veils in our lives might God be piercing through? We might not know if we don't pay attention.

Second, I wonder if Christianity doesn't always face times of crisis like Paul faced in Athens. Perhaps it is the job of every Christian to seek to be not just a proclaimer but a translator as well. Perhaps, as Robert Farrar Capon has said, missionaries do not bring Jesus to the world, because Jesus is already present. All they can bring is the news of Jesus, and that often means reminding people of what they already know. Perhaps the proclamation of Christ needs to begin with a study of the landscape to see what language God already speaks here. The alternative may be the insistence on telling people about Jesus in words that are comfortable and familiar to us but wholly alien and alienating to others. And who knows? We might just find that wherever we go there are already altars to *agnosto theo*, and people worshipping at them, waiting for the unknown God to become known.

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Side note on geography:

The city of Athens is in a valley shaped like half a bowl, with one side open to the sea. The ancient city of Athens is actually a few miles inland from the shore, however. Rather than building a city on the shore, they built around a handful of small hills that surge up out of the center of the bowl. Three of these hills, Filopappos hill, Mars Hill (in Greek: Areopagos), and the High City, or "Akropolis," are clustered together, and nestled at their base, in a compact area, is the old marketplace, or Agora. Atop the Akropolis sat a number of temples, the most famous of which is the temple of the Virgin Athena, or Athena Parthenos, or, simply, the Parthenon.

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Text of Acts 17 (entire chapter):

17After Paul and Silas* had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, 3explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah* to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the Messiah,* Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.’ 4Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. 5But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the market-places they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason’s house. 6When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers* before the city authorities,* shouting, ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, 7and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.’ 8The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, 9and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

Paul and Silas in Beroea

10 That very night the believers* sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. 12Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. 13But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. 14Then the believers* immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. 15Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

Paul in Athens

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place* every day with those who happened to be there. 18Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babblor want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) 19So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ 21Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26From one ancestor* he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27so that they would search for God* and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” 29Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ 33At that point Paul left them. 34But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

HOLY COMMUNION
Wednesday, March 15, 2006

Prelude Brass Choir

Invocation LBW p. 56

Confession and Forgiveness

Prayer

Scripture Acts 17:16-34

Sermon *“Why Philosophers Don’t Get Invited to Preach Twice”*
Dr. David O’Hara
Dept. Of Philosophy

Hymn *“O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”* LBW 559

Holy Communion

Blessing

Benediction

Postlude Brass Choir

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

CHILI FEED - There will be fund raiser for the Spring Break Service Learning Trips to New York City and the Gulf Coast **TODAY - March 15th from 11:00 am - 2:00 pm in the 3-1 Room. \$5.00 minimum (other donations are welcome)** Help us help them. Come support us as we spend our Spring Break serving those in need.

SERVICE OPPORTUNITY: The SW MN senior high youth gathering is in Sioux Falls, March 31-April 1. They are seeking college students to be "security" in the motel hallways between 9 pm and 3 am. Volunteers would have access to motel facilities and be given rooms for the night. This is during Augie's spring break. If you are interested, see Carol.

CHAPEL CALENDAR

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| Wednesday (15) | Chili Feed fundraiser -3-1 room...11:00 am - 2:00 pm |
| Thursday (16) | Convocation - Outstanding Alumni Lecture - Linda Rusch, '80, Gonzaga Law Prof. - Chapel |
| Friday (17) | Worship, 10 am - Taylor Swartz, Sr. Speaker;
Admission Admitted Student Day |
| Sunday (19) | Worship, 11 am - Sweet Fellowship Outreach Team |
| Monday (20) | Worship, 10 am - Pr. Paul |
| Tuesday (21) | Youth Mentors, 10 am |