

# A Creative Interpretation of Paul's Speech at the Areopagus in Athens<sup>1</sup>

—vanThanh Nguyen, SVD

While the first half of the Acts of the Apostles focuses on the deeds of Peter, the second half focuses much on the missionary work of the Apostle Paul. Luke records three important missionary journeys in which Paul and his companions traveled to many distant shores, traversed a huge landmass that covered thousands of miles, and founded many Christian communities.<sup>2</sup> Paul's missionary activities fulfill Jesus' commission: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). Many people readily embrace the Good News, but some will also resist and strongly oppose. There are stories of success as well as failures. The question is, what do we do when the people we work with or minister to are disinterested or even hostile? How do we go about telling the story of Jesus in a way that might engage the listener on his or her own ground? The story of Paul in Athens, especially his sermon at the Areopagus, can teach us much about preaching to a hostile audience as well as about inculturation.

This brief interpretation of Paul's speech at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22-31) consists of three parts. The first part offers an historical background of the text in an unconventional way. I have to warn you that I will refrain from doing the standard perhaps insightful, but often boring, exegesis of the text, which as a New Testament scholar is not easy to do. Rather, I will engage in a creative re-telling of the story through the lens and words of the character Dionysius, the Areopagite, who was actually converted through the preaching of Paul in Athens. Then, I will give a brief remark about the lesson of the text and Luke's portrait of Paul. And finally, I will conclude by offering several points for further discussion and sharing. Without further ado, let me retell the story of Paul's visit to Athens through the words of Dionysius, the Areopagite.

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1 This piece was delivered as a Bible Study session on May 19, 2016 at the inaugural meeting of the Global Forum of Theological Educators in Dorfweil, Germany, on May 16-20, 2016. For the first time, key theological educators from the six major church confessional families—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Independent churches from around the world—came together in one united forum in order to learn from each other and to share about the current situation of theological education and ministerial formation on a global scale.

2 The dates of Paul's three missionary journeys are as follows: The first journey took place in 44-48 CE (Acts 13:1—14:28); the second journey in 49-52 CE (Acts 15:36—18:22); and the third journey in 53-57 CE (Acts 18:23—20:38).



### Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>3</sup>

*My name is Dionysius the Areopagite. I was a member and judge of the Areopagus. I was converted to Christianity by the preaching of the Apostle Paul during his Areopagus sermon. The Areopagus is located on the north-western side of the Acropolis, which in ancient Athens functioned as the high court of appeal for criminal and civil cases. During Paul's time, this rocky hill was referred to by the Romans as "Mars Hill," which was a platform for discussing matters pertaining to religious life in the city. Curious about the disturbing new message that was being echoed around the city, the Council of Areopagus summoned Paul to present his case and to hear about a new movement, which was called "The Way." Since I happened to be a member of that high Council, I was there when Paul delivered his sermon. But first, allow me to tell you a little about my beloved city and its inhabitants.*

*Athens was the heart of Greek culture and philosophy. It is the city that produced many great philosophers, like Socrates, Pericles, and Plato. It is widely referred to as the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of democracy. Although Athens was well past its golden age by the time Paul arrived, it was still considered the greatest university city of its time, and intellectuals from all over the Roman Empire were drawn to it. One customary activity of the Athenian intellectuals was to gather in public squares and marketplaces to argue and debate any new thing or idea that surfaced. Different groups argued and defended their philosophies. Some espoused a philosophy called Epicureanism, which teaches that the gods were remote from the world and didn't particularly care about what was going on in it. The evidence of suffering in the world strengthened their argument for the absence of God. The Stoics however argued that everything came from the mind of Zeus, and therefore, human beings have no control over life or death but simply live at the whim of the gods. For the Stoics, everything is predetermined; human beings have no freedom whatsoever.*

*Athens wasn't just an intellectual city, it was also a religious center for worship. Temples and shrines dedicated to all sorts of gods and goddesses were found everywhere in the city. The Greeks had a god for every occasion. There was Ares, the god of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. There was Hestia, goddess of fire, and Poseidon, god of the sea. There was Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and Nike, god of victory. There was Dionysus, the god of wine, and Asclepius, god of healing. At every turn and practically in every niche, there were statues of idols, gods and goddesses made of marble, gold, bronze, or wood in all shapes and sizes. There was even a shrine dedicated to an unknown god.*

*It was on a cool sunny spring day in the year 50 CE that Paul arrived in Athens. The Acropolis and the agora (marketplace) were bustling with people and general commotion. Paul had just come from the north, leaving Luke, Timothy, and Silas behind to care for the newly founded communities. Paul had caused an uproar in many of the towns and cities he had previously visited, for example, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea. It was in Thessalonica that his friends had to slip him away in the night to safety. His opponents kept pursuing him wherever he went. Paul had hoped that in a bigger city like Athens, he might be able to elude his opponents a little more easily.*

*When Paul arrived in Athens, he was alone and a stranger in a big city. As was his custom, he sought out the agora, that is the busiest part of the city, to rent out a shop. We call these storefront shops *insulae*.<sup>4</sup> They are very popular in our time. One can find almost anything for purchase here. I love to wander these shops to look for new gadgets or find precious artifacts and antiques. The ancient agora is similar to your modern shopping malls or outlet stores. The difference is that these *insulae* usually have sleeping quarters on top; furthermore, along the*

<sup>3</sup> The following excerpt is adapted from my book entitled, *Stories of Early Christianity: Creative Retellings of Faith and History* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2013), 97-102.

<sup>4</sup> These ancient complexes, which are similar to modern tenement buildings or commercial complexes, are still visible today at the archaeological ruins in Ostia (Italy) and Corinth (Greece).



shops, the cardos or the streets are beautifully decorated with columns, marble pavement and mosaics. Since Paul was a tentmaker and a leather craftsman, he was very good with his hands. He can do magic with a piece of leather using just a needle and thread. Since tents are constantly in demand for local dwellers and travelers and since leather goods such as sandals, bags, purses, belts, hats, etc., are basic necessities for daily living, Paul's shop was well visited by many a passerby. He seemed to work day and night. It was purely by accident that I stumbled into his shop. One day while going down from the Acropolis the straps on my sandals broke, so I came to his shop to get my sandals repaired. Since that first day, I have returned to his shop almost every day to listen to him talk about the man called Jesus the Christ who died but rose from the dead. What I heard and discovered in that shop changed my life forever.

Ever since the age of reason, I had pondered and followed various philosophies and worshiped many gods and goddesses. There was a period when I followed the teaching of Epicureanism, which claims there is no god. When being an atheist didn't satisfy my intellectual curiosity and reasoning, I picked up Stoicism. The belief in predestination and that human beings have no freedom didn't seem right to me either. Since philosophy didn't satisfy all my longings, I turned to religion by worshipping different gods and goddesses. My favorite was Dionysius, the god of wine and gladness, and the name given to me by my parents. However, being a judge of the Council of Areopagus, I needed a lot of wisdom and guidance from the gods, so I frequently prayed to the goddess Athena. I even have a shrine set up for her in my house. Since every aspect of our life was under the purview of some god or goddess, it was natural for us to seek out the gods for assistance and protection. Revering the right god or goddess for the right occasion is the key to fortune and blessings. I have a friend who even has a shrine dedicated to "an unknown god." But after having met Paul and hearing the story of the life and message of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, everything began to make sense to me. The God of Jesus Christ isn't remote from human affairs. God actually reached out to the world and made the first move. God so loved the world that God sent his only beloved Son to save the world from corruption and sin. However, his people did not accept him but rather put him to death by means of crucifixion, but God raised him up again on the third day. Paul talked much about Jesus Christ as the Logos or Wisdom who existed from the beginning, who was with God, and is God. What the tentmaker from Tarsus said made sense to me. There must be only one God in whom we believe, move and have our being; otherwise, life is meaningless and empty.

While all the conversations I had with Paul in his shop made a lot of sense to me, I was not completely convinced until that marvelous sermon on the Areopagus. That speech helped pull everything together. It answered all my philosophical questions and dispelled every doubt I ever had about the existence of God. Paul seemed to have done his homework well. He had studied and understood our philosophies; he knew about all our gods. He was also familiar with our culture and customs. He understood our way of thinking and being. To use your modern terminology, he had "inculturated" well. The words he spoke were very familiar to us Athenians. He quoted Greek poets and philosophers. The words he used, "The God who made the world and everything in it..." (17:24), come straight out of Stoic philosophy. The phrase, "In him we live and move and have our being" (v. 28) is a quotation from a Greek philosopher named Epimenides. The line, "For we too are his offspring" (v. 28), comes from a well-known Greek poet, Aratus. To involve us even more in his argument and discourse, he complimented the religious atmosphere of our cultural milieu saying, "I see that in every way you are very religious" (v. 22). He mentioned an altar with the inscription: "To an unknown god" (v. 23). Paul had engaged us Athenians by using our own philosophies and practices to make a point. He spoke a language that we could understand.

I was not only captivated but completely convinced with his good news, and I became a believer that day. There was a woman named Damaris and a few others who were also converted. Many others however were unconvinced. Some sneered while others walked away in disbelief over the issue of the resurrection of the dead. As for



me, I am forever changed, thanks to the great Apostle Paul who introduced me to the Good News of the Lord Jesus Christ!

### Paul the Missionary and Skillful Orator

That concludes the creative retelling of the event. What follows now is a brief remark about the character of Paul and what we might learn from him. First and foremost, what impresses me about Paul's speech at the Areopagus is his tolerance and respectful attitude toward the Athenians (Acts 17:22-31). Even though Paul was greatly distressed by the many idols, he did not chastise them for their beliefs. Instead, Paul sought to meet the Athenians on their ground stating, "I see that in every respect you are very religious" (v. 22). He chose his words carefully and respectfully throughout the whole speech. He did not mock their idols nor was he judgmental and self-righteous. Paul had taken the time to look around and get the "feel" of their culture and beliefs, including the altar of the Unknown God. Interestingly, Paul did not spend a lot of time criticizing their idols, except to point out that they were images made by human design and skill. Notice also how Paul gently corrected them saying "we" instead of using the more accusatory "you" (vv. 28-29).

Paul engaged the Athenians by using their own philosophies and practices. As a culturally sensitive missionary, Paul had respectfully contextualized the Gospel message for his audience. While Paul demonstrated a conciliatory attitude toward the Athenians, at the same time he refused to water down the Gospel message. Paul stood firm regarding the message of the Gospel, criticizing pervasive idolatry and religious pluralism. He challenged his listeners to abandon their old ways of honoring idols and worship the one true God. Paul sought to convince the Athenians by means of a rhetorical argument. Paul stood in their midst, the position of a Greek orator, and addressed his audience according to the conventional pattern of Greco-Roman rhetoric.<sup>5</sup>

While the sermon has elements of judicial rhetoric, Paul's purpose was ultimately deliberative, seeking to change his audience's beliefs and behavior. He did so with great sensitivity and rhetorical skill, drawing on the ideas and language of his listeners to establish points of contact with them. He used whatever persuasive tools he had acquired to engage the Athenians' worldview and philosophy.

Paul's sermon at the Areopagus is an outstanding example of cross-contextual missionary preaching found in the New Testament. While showing cultural sensitivity to the Greeks, Paul proclaimed the Christian message with integrity and boldness. The sermon conveys many insightful lessons and implications for preachers and missionaries today; for example, the need to contextualize and transpose the Gospel with care and creativity so as to engage with all sorts of listeners, even nonbelievers. Effective preachers must display rhetorical skill as well as flexibility and firmness. While establishing rapport with the assembly, preachers must also remain faithful to the Christian message, avoiding hasty accommodation to the dominant culture while inviting authentic transformation.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul clearly used the following conventional pattern of Greco-Roman rhetoric: *exordium* or introduction (vv. 22-23a); *propositio* or proposition (v. 23b); *probatio* or proff (vv. 24-29); *peroratio* or exhortation (vv. 30-31); *insinuatio* or deferral (vv. 18 and 30).





**vanThanh Nguyen** is a religious missionary of the Society of the Divine Word (S.V.D.). He is Professor of New Testament Studies and holder of the Bishop Francis X. Ford, Maryknoll, Chair of Catholic Missiology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois. He has published widely in the fields of Bible, migration and mission. His book publications include *Peter and Cornelius: A Story of Conversion and Mission* (2012), *Stories of Early Christianity* (2013), and co-editor of *God's People on the Move: Biblical and Global Perspectives on Migration and Mission* (2014). For more information see: <http://www.ctu.edu/academics/vanthanh-nguyen-svd>.

