



The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas: Paul's Mars Hill Experience for Our Pluralistic World

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Philosopher Paul Copan and New Testament scholar Kenneth Litwak team up to show how Paul's visit to the multicultural and multireligious city of ancient Athens (found in Acts 17) provides a practical model for presenting the message of Jesus the Messiah in our own pluralistic and often relativistic world.

Was Paul's Speech at Athens a Mistake?

Some have argued that Paul's approach at Athens was all wrong, but we disagree and find the evidence for this to be shaky at best.

The late evangelical New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce wrote a classic study of the apostle Paul titled *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. His biblical commentaries as well as his books on the trustworthiness of the New Testament have been a reliable resource for many Bible-believing Christians; so readers will likely be surprised to read Bruce's negative comments on Paul's Areopagus (Mars Hill) speech in Acts 17. To most Christians, it would appear that Luke, who devotes much space to summarizing Paul's conversation with the Athenians and his speech to them, speaks quite positively about Paul's strategy. After all, he, the narrator himself, gives no hint of disparagement about Paul's approach. Yet Bruce creates a mood of depression and discouragement after Athens: "Paul travelled from Athens to Corinth in a mood of dejection." Paul's attempts had been met with "polite amusement," and the response had been "much less encouraging" than in the cities of Macedonia he had just visited – Philippi, Berea and Thessalonica.

Bruce believed that Paul's preaching had been something of a failure not only in terms of response, but strategy as well. Bruce allows that Paul's speech at Athens was perhaps more of a laying of the groundwork for the gospel rather than directly evangelizing. But Paul was "experimenting with this approach" to Gentile evangelism to discover what would be most effective; so "it is probable that Paul's decision at Corinth [to directly preach 'the word of the cross,' as in 1 Cor 1:18] was based on his assessment of the situation there [at Athens]."

Similarly, the late William Ramsay claimed that Paul – because of the apparently meager response to his Areopagus speech, in which he cited Stoic thinkers for reinforcement – was "disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by his experience in Athens. He felt that he had gone at least as far as was right in the way of presenting his doctrine in a form suited to the current philosophy; and the result had been little more than naught." Another biblical scholar, Ralph P. Martin, asks, "Had Paul failed in this situation?" However, Martin does not answer the question.

So, the argument goes, Paul determined that at his next stop, he wanted to "know nothing" while he was with the Corinthians "but Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). At Corinth, Paul would preach "the foolishness" of Christ crucified, not with "excellence of speech" and human reasoning (cf. 1 Cor 1-2), but by the power and Spirit of God. So, no more philosophical reasoning for Paul! No more quoting of pagan thinkers in an attempt to build bridges with his pagan audience! From now on, he was just going to give people the unvarnished gospel!

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BOOK EXCERPT

Paul Copan is the Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He has written several books, including *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical and Scientific Exploration*, and he has edited several others, including *The Rationality of Theism* and *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* Formerly he served with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and taught at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois.

Kenneth D. Litwak earned his PhD at the University of Bristol in England and is adjunct professor of New Testament studies at Azusa Pacific University and Asbury Seminary. He is the author of *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the History of God's People Intertextually*.

But is this what really happened? Does this fairly represent Paul's thinking as portrayed in the book of Acts and in his epistles, particularly 1 Corinthians? In this chapter, we challenge the notion that Paul was not faithfully presenting the gospel and that his approach was a mistaken deviation from his standard gospel preaching. Paul's Areopagus speech truly reflects the heart of Paul's Christ-centered strategy. This approach has important implications for the believers engaging in crosscultural missions. Not only that; it gives key insights into "cross-worldview communication" – the phrase one Christian philosopher uses for apologetics, which attempts to defend the Christian faith in the marketplace of ideas.

Typically, those who oppose Christian apologetics today are more likely to be inside the church than outside. And even if they do not consider Paul's approach wrong-headed, they often consider attempts at cross-worldview communication or apologetics to be detracting from the gospel or somehow adding works to grace.

The biblical scholar N. T. Wright observes: "Much Pauline scholarship in the last generations has ignored this [Areopagus] speech." In this book, we want to explore the background, details and implications of this speech for the wisdom it affords us as we connect with today's Athenians in our own culture.

– Taken from chapter two

