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## Easter 6 • Acts 17:16–31 • May 25, 2014

Michael Redeker

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, [redekerm@csl.edu](mailto:redekerm@csl.edu)

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Ascension Day is fast upon us. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus assures his disciples that, even though he is leaving them, he will not leave them as orphans. He will send them the helper in the person of the Holy Spirit. The helper will comfort, lead, and guide them in truth.

The disciples would remain to carry out the Lord's mission and ministry, in the world but not of the world, so that others would come to faith through their word. They would bring the Christian worldview to people with differing worldviews. Would there be times when they wished Jesus were standing right there next to them? Would there be times when they might wonder if they had the right words to say in order to bring the gospel to people as clearly as possible?

Today's reading finds Luke's Paul in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. Paul, never one to waste an opportunity to evangelize and share the gospel, took a tour of the city to find out more about the Athenians; what shaped their lives and formed their worldview. Paul, a monotheistic Jewish Christian, quickly realized that he was clearly the visitor! Pluralistic paganism had the home field advantage in Athens. Most of the residents would know little, if anything, about Scripture. Would that deter Paul? Hardly! He was always ready to make a defense for the hope he had in Christ (Epistle for this Sunday, 1 Peter 3:15). As the saying goes, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. What would be Paul's approach in Athens?

## Exegetical Notes

Verse 17:16: *paroxynō* (παροξύνω): Paul's spirit was aroused within him (by anger, grief, or a desire to convert them). His desire was that everyone should hear the gospel and come to faith in the one true God. This should be the posture of every Christian as well, for all religions are not the same. They do not worship the same god, and they do not lead to salvation.

Verse 17:18: Epicurean and Stoic philosophers: The Epicureans regarded the world as the result of random motion and combination of atomic particles. A general uncertainty of life was part of Epicurean teaching. All fear of divine intervention in life or punishment after death was gone. In addition, the gods would have nothing to do with human existence. They detached themselves from humanity. And death is simply the final end. The philosophers maintained that philosophical discussions were the path to a happy life, that humans were mortal, that the cosmos was the result of chance, and that there was no such thing as a provident god.

*symballō* (συμβάλλω): BDAG cites Acts 17:18 under definition 1, "to engage in mutual pondering of a matter, converse, confer with someone." Definition 5, "to come into conflict with someone," is not the meaning in this verse. Paul did not engage in a quarrel or fight with the philosophers. He simply engaged them using language and concepts familiar to their worldview in order to make connections for the gospel proclamation.

Verse 17:20: The Athenians were polite, yet skeptical, due to serious concern.

Verses 17:22–23: *deisidaimōn* (δεισιδαιμόνων) can be used in a denigrating sense, viz. "superstitious." In this text it is used in a laudatory sense in Paul's introduction, "devout," "religious."

"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Joseph Fitzmyer points out:

[Paul] realizes that pagan Greeks do not worship the "true" God of Jews and Christians, but he tries to show that the God whom he proclaims is in reality no stranger to the Athenians, if they would only rightly reflect. His starting point is Athenian religious piety, and he tries to raise them from such personal experience to a sound theology. Their piety, in his view, does not go far enough.<sup>1</sup>

Verses 17:24–29: Paul tailored his proclamation to the Athenians so that they "should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him." The Christian worldview meets the pagan worldview at various junctures in this section of Paul's speech. For instance, the cosmos did not come about through random chance, but rather from God who is intentional. The true God is not detached and uninterested in humanity, as the philosophers understood the gods to be, but rather God is truly interested and cares for and about creation and all creatures, including humanity. In fact, some of their very own poets have pointed out as well!

Verses 17:30–31: God would no longer overlook human ignorance, if indeed he had in the past. Paul proclaimed that all people are to repent and turn to the one

true God. Jesus is the man to whom Paul referred, the one whom God raised from the dead. The resurrection would have certainly been another new teaching in contrast with the philosophers' understanding of death as the end.

Verses 17:32–34 are not included in the reading for the day, but it is important to note that there were some who pondered Paul's words and were brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Among them was Dionysius, who Eusibius identifies as the first shepherd of the diocese of the Corinthians.

### **Preaching Suggestion**

The preacher could use this text as an opportunity to help equip and encourage the saints in the pew to be ready to give a defense of their Christian hope. He can bring in parts from the Gospel reading to encourage the hearers primarily that they are never alone in this world. Christ has not abandoned us for we are baptized children of God (Epistle for the Day). Because the Spirit of truth dwells within us, we are encouraged to give a defense of our faith when asked. One does not need to have a theological treatise in hand in order to give a defense. Rather, like Paul, we can reflect on God's work in our lives (Psalm of the Day, Psalm 66:8–20), and simply tell the story of God who became human, like one of us, in Jesus Christ and the wonders he has done and continues to do.

This is also an opportune time to encourage building non-judgmental relationships with those with differing worldviews. Get to know them and find out what shapes and forms their thinking and outlook. When God provides the opportunity to share Christ, they will have a better understanding in order to tailor the gospel message. After all, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

Michael J. Redeker