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Gospel in Confrontation with Culture: Paul's speech in Athens

Abstract: Paul's speech in Athens, as accounted by Luke in Acts 17:16-34, provides an insight into the fundamental aspects of communication between the Gospel Announcement and human culture. His missionary strategy is greatly influenced by the place (*topos*) where Paul chooses to announce. The concept of Paul's kerygma in the synagogue is christological-soteriological, whereas his announcement at the marketplace and the Areopagus is a cosmological-eschatological model. In Athens Paul finds himself for the first time in a culture that is open to ideas; the method he uses there is therefore not doctrinal-catechetical but dialogic-narrative. He successfully combines both the Jewish and Hellenistic traditions of thought as well as considers the ideological and formal principles of the rhetoric of the time. By using this two-sided hermeneutic approach, Paul succeeds in addressing the fundamental anthropological and cultural concepts of the time without concealing the difference between Stoic cosmology and Biblical creation theology. The speech is a carefully thought-out model of inculturation of the Christian kerygma of the Early Church and thus also presents a challenge to the current interfaith as well as intercultural dialogue.

Key words: New Testament, Gospel, Acts of the Apostles, christology, apostle Paul, topos, agora, areopagus, culture, Hellenism, rhetoric, word, intercultural dialogue

Povzetek: **Evangelij v soočenju s kulturo: Pavel v Atenah in Korintu**

Iz Pavlovega nastopa v Atenah, kakor ga je posredoval Luka v Apd 17,16–34, je mogoče razbrati temeljne vidike komunikacije med evangelijskim oznanilom in človeško kulturo. Njegovo misijonsko strategijo pomembno sooblikuje prostor (*topos*), v katerem oznanja. Pavlova kerigma v shodnici je kristološko-soteriološko zasnovana, oznanilo na trgu oziroma areopagu pa ima kozmološko-eshatolški koncept. Pavel v Atenah prvič vstopi v idejno odprt prostor kulture, zato tam njegova metoda ni doktrinarno-katehetska, temveč narativno-dialoška. V govoru na areopagu je združil tako judovsko kakor helenistično miselno tradicijo ter upošteval idejne in formalne koncepte tedanje retorike. Z ambivalentnim hermenevitičnim pristopom mu je uspelo nagovoriti temeljne kulturno-anthropološke koncepte tedanjega časa, hkrati pa ni zamolčal razlike med stoiško kozmologijo in biblično stvarjenjsko teologijo. Govor je domišljen model inkulturacije krščanske kerigme prve Cerkve in je kot takšen izziv tudi za sodobni medverski in medkulturni dialog.

Ključne besede: Nova zaveza, evangelij, Apostolska dela, kristologija, apostol Pavel, topos, agora, areopag, kultura, helenizem, retorika, beseda, medkulturni dialog

Not only is the Bible the book of all books, but is also the book of culture in the most global meaning, for it represents the universal history of the world and life from the creation of the world to the eschatological stage thus embodying the entire genesis of the human culture (Söding 1995, 11–29). The primary foundation of the dialogue between the gospel and the culture is the Word, which is the foundation of human culture. The biblical concept of the universal history, reflected in the Judeo-Christian religion and culture, is based on the position and the metaphorical meaning of the *Word* in the life of a human being (Stanonik 2011, 553–557). The Judeo-Christian God speaks to man and calls him by his name (Isa 40:26; Ps 147:4), invites man to hear Him and to live by His word (Det 6:4–9; Jer 1). Communication between God and man, which is the origin of culture, reaches its highest form in the New Testament. The Son of God Himself becomes the Word (John 1:1–18), becomes the personal communication between God and man. The Word allows man to discover the fundamental existential, eschatological and theological truth so that he can enter into community with God. By means of narrative theology Biblical authors developed a model of communication between God and man that encompasses all aspects of human existence and culture in the widest sense of the word.

Through Paul the Apostle, the first communicator of the Gospel message into the Greek culture, the process of communication between the Announcement of the Gospel and the human culture will be presented in short. Paul's address in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) as the center of Greek culture and philosophy provides an insight into some fundamental aspects of the communication between the Gospel Announcement and the culture where Paul's life principle was fulfilled. As he wrote in his Letters to the Corinthians: To the Jews he became like a Jew, to those not having the law he became like one not having the law and to the weak he became weak, so that by all possible means he might save some (1 Cor 9:20–23).

1. Athens – pious and superstitious

Paul visited Athens at the beginning of the summer in the year 50 A.D. According to Luke's chronology this was within Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 15:40–18:22), after he was forced to leave quickly from Philippi, Thessaloniki and Berea. Jews from everywhere had rejected Paul's interpretation of the Bible's message that Jesus Christ was the Messiah and they incited others to banish Paul from the city. It seems that only in Athens Paul felt safer although he does not say much about his stay there in his letters, which is under no circumstance a reason to doubt about the historical significance of Luke's message. In

his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul only mentions his stay in Athens while sending off his co-worker Timothy to strengthen and encourage Thessalonians in their faith (1 Thes 3:1). He never wrote any letter to the Athenians which suggests he never established a strong bond with the community there. At his arrival in Athens, the cultural and intellectual capital of Greece, he was able to admire numerous temples, palaces and squares that were rebuilt by the Romans after they conquered the city in 86 B.C. To Flavius Josephus, Athenians are the most religious among all Greeks (*Against Apion* II, 130). Paul also considers them very religious, even zealous in their worship of supernatural forces (*deisidaimonesterōi*, 17:22). In *koinē* Greek the term may mean very religious, but it may also mean superstitious (Dibelius 1939, 30). Paul chose this ambiguous term deliberately to stress the significance of his connection to his listeners. Paul was aware that Athens was the center of knowledge and culture and accommodated Socrates and Plato in its Golden age, so he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (Acts 17:16). Luke's account of the Athenians was that some of them became followers of Paul and believed; among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris (17:34), but Paul's preachings in Athens had little success.

2. Paul's missionary method between the synagogue and the marketplace

Although the structure of storytelling in Acts 17:16–34 about Paul's mission in Athens tells us that Luke was the editor, it contains certain elements of Paul's missionary method, his rhetoric, semantic and theology. Paul's speech on the Areopagus (v. 22–31) is placed in a narrative framework (v. 16–21 and v. 32–34) which holds critical information on the understanding of Paul's missionary approach. In this context, Luke clearly highlights two key *topoi* of Paul's activity, both of which appear in all Paul's speeches: the *synagogue* and *marketplace (agora)*: »So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.« (Acts 17:17) The place – *topos* which Paul chose for his announcement had great influence on the hermeneutics and the semantics of his speech and needs special attention when interpreting Paul's speech. Paul's address at the Areopagus was a part of or a continuation of his preaching at the marketplace. The Areopagus was not a place Paul chose on purpose within his missionary strategy; rather he was invited there or was led there from the marketplace. The audience mostly stayed the same.

2.1 The synagogue

When he arrived in a town, Paul looked first for the Jewish place of worship, the synagogue: He did so in Damascus (Acts 9:20), in Pisidian Antioch (13:13–14), in Iconium (14:1), in Thessalonica and in Berea (17:1–10), in Corinth

(18:4–7), in Ephesus (19:8) and other places. There he met his countrymen and god-fearing foreigners who were mostly Greeks. Based on the Letters he sought to persuade them that Jesus is the promised Messiah and that He had to suffer and rise from the dead. In Thessalonica, a few weeks before he arrived in Athens, he went into the synagogue and reasoned with them for three Sabbath days explaining that Jesus is the true Messiah and that he had to suffer and rise from the dead (17:3). During weeks he worked with his own hands around town to grow even closer to the people (1 Thes 2:9). He worked not only so that he would not be a burden to anyone (1 Thes 2:9; 2 Thes 3:8; 1 Cor 4:12; 2 Cor 12:13ss), but understood it as part of his Gospel preaching (Acts 20:33ss; 1 Cor 9:15–18; 2 Cor 11:7–12). This usually irritated his countrymen even more. In Thessalonica they launched a dirty campaign against Paul and a few of his converts. They were brought before the city officials and were charged with national treason and promoting a coup d'état, however, they were not accused of heresy and blasphemy. They accused them of »defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus« (Acts 17:8). Paul's proclamation of the suffering of God's Messenger and His shameful death on a cross is the greatest sin and the most difficult part to understand and accept in the entire Paul's gospel, which Paul keeps repeating in the synagogues. His ministry of the cross was most radical in Corinth's synagogues where he arrived from Athens. Only through the message of the cross can man reach God's wisdom (1 Cor 1:21). Paul constantly reverts to it, omits polite and long-winded talk, and rejects every other topic so that the Corinthians do not lose sight of what is important: »For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.« (2:2) He reveals to them his weakness and rhetorical inability (2:3–4), to convince them not to rest their faith in human wisdom, but in God's power that was revealed in the scandal of the cross (Liftin 1994, 174–178).

Paul's ministry in the Jewish synagogue in Athens is only briefly mentioned (Acts 17:17a), but his testimony in the marketplace and before the Areopagus is described in great detail. That does not rule out the possibility that Paul preached the gospel of Christ crucified in the Athenian synagogue as well.

2.2 Marketplace – agora

The *agora* was a central spot in every Greek city-state. It was the center of the social, cultural, political and commercial life of the city. It was also the place where the idea of an open and a free city, and the idea of democracy was accomplished. In the *agora*, any person could present their ideas and opinions and defend them. Before the Hellenistic period, cities in the Near East did not have such an open space system. They thought it was not only useless but dangerous as well (Penna 2001, 368). It is impossible to overlook the symbolism in Luke's account. The Agora of Athens was unique due to its central position in the city, the fact that it was surrounded by mighty temples and public buildings, that it lay between the Acropolis, the Areopagus, the Pnyx and the Museum, and also due to the memory of famous people who gave speeches there. The most prominent of them all

was surely Socrates (Sandnes 1993). Paul's activity on the Athenian Agora has great symbolic and material significance for both Paul and the missionary strategy of the Early Church. This is the only explicit mention of Paul addressing and reasoning on the Agora with those who happened to be there (v. 17). To describe Paul's argumented discussions with Jews and pagans on questions of religion, Luke most often uses the verb *dialegomai* (Acts 17:2; 18:4, 19; 19:8, 9; 20:7, 9; 24:25), which brings to mind the activity of Greek philosophers. Paul never argues like that in Jerusalem (24:12). Clearly he wanted to point out that his preachings were not meant only for his adherents and selected crowds but for everyone who was willing to listen to his address. The Agora was a public place and so when Paul reasoned there, he avoided the influence of the place of worship, which was a novelty in the Apostle's strategy. Here, Paul finds himself within a culture that is open to new ideas. His method was therefore not catechistic but dialogic narrative.

3. Paul's audience

Luke gives special mention to Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, representatives of two main schools of Greek philosophy at the time, among those who debated with Paul (Acts 17:18), establishing an intercultural context of the Judeo-Palestinian kerygma of Jesus' death and resurrection in the Hellenistic environment. Epicureans were known to be materialists and hedonists for their denial of the transcendence. They believed that pleasure is the highest aim and greatest good in life and that gods do not interfere with human lives as that would only disrupt their pleasure. For Epicureans, the only purpose in life is to gain knowledge of nature, to free oneself from superstition and from fear of death and as well as of gods. Stoics, on the other hand, were more respected for their pantheistic philosophy and their profession that all human beings are created equal as every person possesses a primordial divine fire. A human being can achieve self actualization if they live in accordance with nature or the universal *logos* that they discover in themselves and the world. The main controversy between both philosophies was the matter of divine providence (*providentia*) or the divine-human relations. The Stoics dedicated much of their attention to this issue, the Epicureans, on the other hand, neglected it (Cifrak 2007, 105–107; Hoppe 2009, 111–113). Tarsus, where Paul was born, was home to many Stoic philosophers, so Paul was surely familiar with Stoicism from that time and also from his study of Pharisaism. Flavius Josephus writes about the similarities between the Stoics and Pharisees, both of whom had a positive viewpoint on the immortality of the human soul, and the similarities between the Epicureans and Sadducees that talked of divine indifference to human life (*JW* 2, 119, 162–165; *Vita* 1, 12).

Paul's discussion with the people in the marketplace produced mixed response, but it failed to attract wider attention. Some people thought him a babblers (*spermologos*), others an advocator of foreign gods (Acts 17:18), which meant greater

danger for Paul. The verb *dialegomai* (17:17) calls forth the analogy with Socrates and his debates on questions of life with the citizens of Athens in the Athenian marketplace. The Socrates analogy leads a part of the audience to the conclusion that Paul was brought to the Areopagus as if before a court to defend himself (Pesch 1986 II, 135; Sandnes 1993, 14–16). *Areios pagos* is a small hill south of the Agora, but it also stands for the judicial council of Athens whose members met there. However, the context and the semantics of Paul's speech lean towards the interpretation that the philosophers took him away from the marketplace, as they were eager to hear his teaching, which is implied in the last comment in v. 21 (Penna 2001, 370–371).

4. The semantics of Paul's speech at the Areopagus

Paul's speech at the Areopagus, which can be viewed as a continuance or an extension of his speech in the Agora, is a highlight in the missionary kerygmatic approach of the Early Church. Modern researches of the text emphasize the presence of both the Paulinian tradition and Luke's editing. By using concepts of Stoicism, Greek culture, and the Jewish tradition that took its shape with the Septuagint, Luke succeeded in expressing the novelty of the Christian kerygma (Jipp 2012; Marguerat 2011, 114–116; Rossé 1998, 636–641). The Stoic terminology and the topics of Paul's speech intertwine with the Biblical semantics and structure which clearly reflect the faith in God, the creator of the world and of man who will be brought before the Judge of the living and the dead, Jesus Christ. The whole speech is designed as a dialogue between God and man, between faith and human ratio (*fides et ratio*), between Christianity and paganism, and between philosophy and culture (Trstenský 2011, 205–206).

Paul begins his speech with *captatio benevolentiae*, a classical rhetorical technique, designed to capture the goodwill of his audience by praising their piety, the evidence of which still exists in several sacred monuments. In the beginning, Paul emphasizes man's natural yearning for God (*desiderium naturale*) and the search for transcendence and he proclaims the Christian message (v. 22–23). A special mention is given to the altar with the inscription »To an unknown God« (v. 23). There is no account of such an altar in any of the sources from the Antique, but there is evidence of the existence of an altar in Athens dedicated to »unknown gods«. This is proof of the openness of Hellenistic cities and an extraordinary religious susceptibility of the Athenians, who sensed there were other gods that were not included in their pantheons. The openness of the Greek philosophy to transcendence was called *praeparatio evangelica* by the Church authorities (Penna 2001, 373; Pesch 1986, 136; Taylor 2007, 249–254). Paul ties his speech to this tradition and partly modifies his dedication, thus giving the ignorance of the pagans to know true God (1 Thess 4:5, Gal 4:8; 1 Cor 15:34; Jer 10:25; Job 18:21; Wis 13:1; 14:22) a biblical meaning and at the same time defending himself against dangerous accusations of advocating foreign gods. In this manner he refers

to the key topic of the theological concept that he will later present, although differently, in Corinth, namely the inability of human nature to comprehend God. In Corinth, Paul supports this claim with the central role of the cross in hermeneutical theology. In Athens, he does it with Isaiah's theology of creation and history: »Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!« (Isa 45:15) Three main claims of Paul's speech that concur with topics found in Isaiah's context support the fact that Paul deliberately relied on Isaiah's prophetic tradition: God is the only Creator of the universe and is the origin of life (v. 24–25); man is made in the image of God and is capable of coming to a knowledge of God and is able to enter a relationship with God (v. 26–28); creating any image of God is incomplete and may be misleading (v. 29).

The main body of the speech consists of three parts: In the first part, which is *cosmological* (v. 24–25), Paul speaks of a universal God, the creator of the universe (*kosmos*), who is not tamed or limited by man-made temples or other structures made by man and does not need anything from him. This claim was mutual to both the biblical Jewish tradition (Amos 5:21–25; Isa 1:11–17; 42:5; 45:18; 66:1ss; Jer 7:1–15) and the concepts of that time found in Stoicism, Epicureanism and Neopithagoreanism. Also common to all was a more inner worship of God and a cautionary take on the arrogance of humans who thought that by building temples and practicing a cult they could influence God. According to Seneca, God can only be properly worshipped by those who imitate Him (Penna 2001, 374; Rossé 1998, 643). Paul's statement »The God ... does not live in temples built by human hands« (v. 24), summarizes both the Greek and the Jewish traditions (Philo of Alexandria, *Vita Mos* II, 88; Flavius Josephus, *AJ* 8.227) as the fundamental Hebrew message of the creation of the world found in Isaiah: »Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?« (Isa 66:1) thus portraying Christianity not as a herald of some new cult, but as an ally of the mind and culture of man not by suppressing the culture but by expanding its limits.

The second, central and the most accomplished part, is *anthropological* (v. 26–28). Paul evaluates man as the true and only image of God. Man is dependent upon God, but also communicates with Him, which implies his value. »From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.« (v. 26) Using the ambiguous term »from one« (*ex enos*) he keeps the double hermeneutic approach. It was Paul's intention to address Jews, who believed that from one man – Adam – God created the whole mankind, and the Stoics, who believed in the existence of arche, the source or origin of all things that exist. Bearing in mind this dualism it is possible to interpret times (*kairoi*) and boundaries (*horothesai*). Greeks considered »times« chiefly in terms of season, Jews, on the other hand, thought of them as historical periods; »boundaries«, for Greeks, were natural laws, and for Jews they were expressions of God's will (Marguerat 2011, 115). The dualism of this inspires reflection and search in the audience and prepares them for receiving the announcement. Here, Paul sums up one of the main

Biblical traditions about the dignity of origin of each man and the fundamental equality of all people, a tradition which served in the Jewish-Christian Revelation to complete every human culture and leave a permanent mark in it (Gen 1:18; Deut 5:1–31; Rom 5:12–19). Man is no toy of the gods; he is created in the image of God and possesses an inalienable dignity. God set the boundaries of space and time, not to limit the freedom of man, but to enable him to live in freedom (Gen 3:1–7; Ps 74:17), and He did not create man only to cast him away, but to maintain with him the bond through man's most noble virtue of searching and yearning. Paul expresses this in the core statement of the concentric structure of the speech: »God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.« (v. 27) The meaning of man's life is to seek God and to find Him. God wants man to seek Him (cf. Isa 45:19; 55:6; Wis 13:6). The infinitive *zēteïn* in this sentence construction depends on the main verb *epoiēsen* (v. 26) whose subject is God thus emphasizing the search for God as part of man's nature in God's creation. God does not reveal Himself to man at once and completely, but gradually and at His own will. Man is therefore not enclosed within himself or determined but constantly has to strive for transcendence. For man, God remains a mystery and an inexhaustible depth, as Paul writes to Romans: »How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!« (Rom 11:33) Whenever man believes he has found God, what he has really found was an idol. Man must seek God »in simplicity of heart« for »He will be found of them that tempt him not; and sheweth himself unto such as do not distrust him« (Wis 1:2). This is a point where theology and philosophy intersect again. Paul's contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, claims that man desires nothing more than to seek God, although His discovery transcends all human ability (*Spec. leg.* I 32:36). There are many examples of human ability to search out God in the Greek Hellenistic philosophy, e.g. Seneca: God is near you, he is with you, he is within you (*Epistulae* 41:1, Pesch 1986, 138).

In the conclusion of the main body, Paul addresses common issue in the Biblical account of creation and the Greek philosophy, by quoting his Cilician compatriot, the poet Aratus: For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, »We are his offspring« (v. 28). After careful consideration, Paul chose this quote from the poem *Phaenomena* (*Phainomena*) to indicate the possibility of integrating the philosophical ontological deliberation into the Biblical theory of creation which was revealed to man, and their mutual support. A similar notion can be found in Plutarch's *Moralia*: »For the world is a most holy and divine temple, into which man is introduced at his birth.« (*Moralia* 477; Penna 2001, 378; Pesch 1986 II, 143) Paul, of course, speaks of a personal God who addresses man as an individual and is sought by him (v. 24, 26, 28). By using this ambiguous hermeneutic approach Paul succeeds in addressing the entire cultural world and not concealing the difference between the Stoic cosmology and the Biblical creation theology.

In the third part (v. 29), Paul emphasizes the spiritual essence of God pertaining to all human beings. This part of the discussion was probably close to the Stoics who taught that all human beings come from God. Even the highest and the most

imaginative works of art and the spirit – man’s artistic and spiritual activity – cannot encompass and fully express God. Paul criticizes different idolatrous practices that prevail not only over ideologies that are based upon reason but also over Jewish and Christian religious practices. Therefore, this becomes the focal point of Paul’s criticism of various ideologies in his most important theological letter (Rom 1:21–23: »Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools«; cf. Isa 44:9–20; Wis 13–15). Man’s greatest danger is not making idols but the creation of thinking concepts and ideologies that divert man from his origin.

With the criticism of idolatrous practices from which no man is immune Paul arrives at the conclusion of his speech (*peroratio*), the Christian message (v. 30–31), and calls for conversion to Christianity and penitence. Here, two complementary aspects of the pre-Christian kerygma that complement the non-Jewish, i.e. pagan or cultural world are pointed out: the call for repentance (*metanoia*) and the announcement of the eschatological judgement which invokes the knowledge of personal responsibility. In doing so, Paul communicates the significance of critical deliberation of one’s own positions and the willingness to transcend them, which is the primary starting point of a dialogue between the Revelation and culture or any type of communication among those who have different opinions. Without it, no man can grow spiritually, personally or in social terms. At the same time, man must realize that he is responsible for his own actions not only for himself but in front of the world (v. 31). Paul stays consistent in his ambiguous hermeneutical approach that unites audiences with the truth of man’s deepest desires by not mentioning Christ as Universal Judge, as he does in the Letters to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:9–10). Many saw the omission of Christ’s name in the Areopagus speech as the main reason for the lukewarm response to Paul’s ministry in Athens.

5. Conclusion

Paul and Luke’s intention was primarily not only to spread the Christian message to the pagan world, as it was seen from the kerygmatic viewpoint, but more importantly to make known a broader view of the human history and the Christian revelation that all cultures will be able to comprehend and follow. The willingness to transcend oneself, the awareness of the final judgement and the responsibility it brings toward the world and life still from the basis for the dialogue between religions and cultures. At the same time this basis is the richest foundation of man’s spiritual growth and the assurance of his survival.

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