

PAUL'S AREOPAGUS SPEECH: A LESSON ON CREATION AS AN EVANGELISTIC TOOL

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Abstract. In his apologetic speech on the Mars' Hill, the apostle Paul used largely the theme of creation. It wasn't meant to be a lecture on creation *per se*, otherwise Paul would have contrasted his Jewish perspective with that of his audience. Rather, he used such an approach as an evangelistic tool. Whether the apostle used a pre-structured speech or simply delivered a spontaneous one we cannot know. What we know is that Paul looked for a common ground with his audience as a starting point in communication. This time, the common ground he landed on was the realm of natural revelation. But the theme of creation is also used as an argument for the common origin of humankind and God's impartiality in his offer of salvation. The apostle's aim was not to give the Athenian philosophers a lesson on creation but to proclaim the God of the Jewish faith and Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, his speech in the Areopagus stays as a lesson on how the theme of creation, or another theme for that matter, can be used to efficiently communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To the postmodern reader, the apostle Paul is an excellent example of adaptability to various circumstances and atypical audiences.

Keywords: Apostle Paul, Areopagus, creation, evangelism, sermon, speech.

1. The Athenian Setting for the Speech

Paul's speech before the Areopagus, one of only two speeches in Acts delivered before a pagan audience (cf. 14,15-17), has gained notoriety as "the exemplary meeting between Jerusalem and Athens,"¹ or between the Judeo-Christian religious thought and the Greek philosophical thought. Surely, for Luke Athens was not only the cultural capital of the world, but also the quintessence of pagan, Gentile thought. Paul's proclamation of the Christian message in this most famous of the Greek cities must have been a formidable challenge. J.A. Fitzmyer is certainly right when he refers to the episode as "one of the highlights of Acts."²

Paul is said to have been deeply disturbed by the number of idols he saw in Athens during his first days in the city (Acts 17,16). Luke presents the short narrative in two phases. First, motivated perhaps by his disturbance, Paul engages in private discussions in the synagogue and the market place. His interlocutors are the "Jews and the devout persons" in the synagogue and "those who happened to be there" in the marketplace (v 17). It is probably here, in the *agora*, that his first

¹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (SP 5), Collegeville, 1992, 318.

² J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York, 1998, 601.