



## Witnessing Lessons from the Areopagus

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It's not easy being named Dennis, I can tell you. Kids call you "Dennis the Menace" on the playground. Others often misspell your name "Denise," and they even call you "Denise"—to your face. There are hardly any heroes named Dennis. Your namesakes include an eccentric basketball player, a failed presidential candidate from Ohio, and an old regular on *Saturday Night Live*.

But there is one Dennis who keeps me from walking down to the courthouse and changing my name to Hector tomorrow. It's Dennis (*Dionysius* in Greek) the Areopagite, who came to faith in Jesus Christ after hearing a mostly ineffective sermon by Paul around the year 60 AD. Dionysius was one of only a few converts made that day, and we know little about how his Christian life played out afterward.

Was that day of meager conversions a failure or a success for Paul? Perhaps numerically it was a failure, but maybe in the true conversion that took place in the heart of Dionysius, it can also be seen as a great success.

But perhaps more importantly, what does Paul's sermon teach us about sharing the faith? How does it guide us in contextualizing the gospel message, and how can we use Paul's example to convince postmodern skeptics about the reasonableness of faith? The audience at the Areopagus was in many ways similar to today's

*In many ways, the issue of living without reference to God is not a new question. Dennis Di Mauro examines this as a first-century problem, addressed by Paul in one of his sermons from the book of Acts, the so-called Sermon at the Areopagus.*

Millennials: an ancient “spiritual, but not religious” generation.<sup>1</sup> Can we use this ancient address to convince today’s young adults that a “life without God” is untenable? Furthermore, how can we connect with Millennials while staying true to the core of the gospel: that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised on the third day?

## THE SERMON

Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus, a hill north of the Acropolis literally called “the hill of Ares” (or “Mars Hill” in Latin), was a place where the Athenian court would meet for discussions.<sup>2</sup> As such, Paul had secured a forum of high import, since this council “had great power, trying crimes and regulating, for example, city life, education, philosophical lectures, public morality and foreign cults.”<sup>3</sup>

William Willimon describes the Areopagus as a place where the “Athenians spent their days doing what intellectuals enjoy—relieving their boredom by searching for new ideas.”<sup>4</sup> The Athenians were an undoubtedly curious lot, but as Ben Witherington puts it, they were “seekers after the curious rather than the *Κυριος*.”<sup>5</sup>

The first question that arises is why Paul was summoned before the Areopagus at all. Our first clue in answering this question comes from Luke’s portrayal of the sermon itself. Paul’s address, reminiscent of Socrates’s earlier defense before the Athenian authorities, is portrayed by Luke in a similar fashion, since both Socrates and Paul were accused of introducing new gods.<sup>6</sup> Was Paul arrested and is now being tried, or is he there for another type of hearing? Bruce Winter believes that Paul wasn’t arrested, but was instead summoned to defend the gospel, because “one of the long-established tasks of the Council of the Areopagites was to examine the proofs that a herald [an introducer of a novel god] might offer in support of his claim that a new deity existed.”<sup>7</sup> So Paul seems to have had the freedom to speak about Jesus without having to immediately defend himself of a crime.

Paul also appears to have had time to prepare the speech. It is well crafted, using alliteration throughout, especially through a repetition of the letter π.<sup>8</sup> He also

<sup>1</sup>Athenian popular culture was also sex obsessed, providing yet another similarity with modern culture. Daryl Charles notes that, “With hermaphrodites commonplace at house doors and innumerable symbols of phallic worship and sex obsession on public display throughout the city (some of which were attached religious significance), one can envisage the dislocation in the Apostle’s spirit as he engages a culture in moderate decline.” See J. Daryl Charles, “Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul’s Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16–34),” *Trinity Journal* 16/1 (December 1995) 51.

<sup>2</sup>Justo L. González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 201; N. Clayton Croy, “Hellenistic Philosophies and the Preaching of the Resurrection (Acts 17:18, 32),” *Novum Testamentum* 39/1 (1997) 24.

<sup>3</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 563.

<sup>4</sup>William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) 142.

<sup>5</sup>Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 535.

<sup>6</sup>Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions of Acts*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 189–190.

<sup>7</sup>Bruce W. Winter, “Introducing the Athenians to God: Paul’s Failed Apologetic in Acts 17?” *Themelios* 31/1 (2005) 41.

<sup>8</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 383.

uses common forms of Greek address, calling his listeners “men” and “Athenians,”<sup>9</sup> and he follows a contemporary pattern of Greek argument, “establishing ethos, then offering logos, finally concluding with pathos.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul candy coats the address by flattering his Greek listeners with a *captatio benevolentiae*, a customary sort of complimentary introduction, as he notices an altar with an inscription to an unknown god, a type of altar that was not uncommon in Athens at the time.<sup>11</sup> Atef Gendy explains the origin of these altars. He writes, “There is a story telling that a plague hit Athens in the sixth century BC. Hundreds of sacrifices had been offered to every known god in Athens but the plague continued. Epimenides [a sixth-century BC prophet and poet from Crete] suggested that an important god must have been missed in the process of offerings. After erecting an altar to the ‘Unknown God’ and offering a sacrifice, the plague stopped.”<sup>12</sup> This presumably started the practice of sacrificing to unknown gods, an observance which assured that every god (including an unknown one) was placated.

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Paul leveraged this religious practice to introduce another “unknown god,” Jesus of Nazareth. He starts with a bit of flattery designed to soften the hearts of the Athenians, calling them “very religious.”<sup>13</sup> Paul cleverly recognizes their religiosity, in contrast to others, including many Greek philosophers who cavalierly discarded their panoply of gods as simply fictional characters of popular myths. He gestures to an altar of an unknown god who has no name, but (as he is soon to explain) is a very special man whom God has appointed. To convince his listeners to accept Jesus, he explains that “he was simply proclaiming a deity that Athens had, although unaware, already been recognizing and honoring.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Charles, “Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind,” 54.

<sup>10</sup>Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 518.

<sup>11</sup>González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, 202; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005) 194; Bruce, “Introducing the Athenians to God,” 381.

<sup>12</sup>Atef M. Gendy, “Style, Content and Culture: Distinctive Characteristics in the Missionary Speeches in Acts,” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 99/3 (2011) 257.

<sup>13</sup>Interestingly, the writers of the King James Version translated the word *δεισιδαιμονεστέρους* as “very superstitious,” rather than “very religious.” This translation is not out of the realm of possibility and if correct, proves Paul to be even blunter than he already appears to be. Such a translation would fully explain his limited success that day. See D. Mark Davis, “Acts 17:16–34,” *Interpretation* (January 2003) 64; Joshua W. Jipp, “Paul’s Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16–34 as both Critique and Propaganda,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131/3 (2012) 576; and Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 520.

<sup>14</sup>Joseph Pathrapankal, “From Areopagus to Corinth (Acts 17:22–31; I Cor 2:1–5): A Study on the Transition from the Power of Knowledge to the Power of the Spirit,” *Mission Studies* 23/1 (2006) 67. Also see Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 519.

Now Paul could have gone on like this for the rest of his talk. He could have explained that this unknown god, Jesus, proclaimed a kingdom of heaven on earth, that he worked for justice and peace, and that he died for our sins in Jerusalem. All of these things are not dissimilar from what the Greeks knew about their own gods. Paul could have also avoided any doctrine that might have disturbed the religious presumptions of his listeners. By proclaiming a partial gospel, he probably could have made many more converts that day, sticking to a message that was easy to swallow.

We see this technique used today by many popular preachers. For example Joel Osteen, rather than discouraging the consumerism of his listeners, actively promotes it. He explains that God will give believers the “victory” of a big house or a nice car if they will just stop “thinking so small” and “allow God” to bless them. This strategy, rather than questioning contemporary values, affirms them. If today’s preacher simply follows the *zeitgeist*, converts will follow.

But unlike Osteen, Paul quickly abandons his introductory flattery and moves into a more challenging message about an omnipotent God who made heaven and earth. N. T. Wright describes this god as a “creator God which is the foundation of all good news, all gospel.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this is a god like no other, certainly unlike any in the Greek pantheon. Wright explains that “with a creator God, you know that even though things seem to have gone very badly wrong in certain respects you are not simply in the hands, or at the disposal, of a bunch of incompetent, mutually squabbling, or actually malevolent deities.”<sup>16</sup> At this critical juncture in his sermon, Paul wipes the table of this panoply of gods in favor of a single creator God who made, and still guides, the world.

It is also important to understand that Paul’s audience included philosophers, such as the Stoics, who were sympathetic to his attack on the pantheon. Rudolph Pesch explains that “[the fact] that this God ‘doesn’t live in handmade temples’ (cf. Acts 7:48); [is a] biblically revealed truth (cf. Isaiah 66:1) [that] is also not alien to the Stoic understanding.”<sup>17</sup> So at least some of Paul’s listeners would have resonated with this bold frontal attack on idolatry.

But Paul also reveals that this omnipotent creator God is an immanent and loving God. He states that God “is actually not far from each one of us,”<sup>18</sup> in contrast to the prevailing Greek belief that the gods were “far removed from the lives of human beings and [took] no real interest in them” (Acts 17:27).<sup>19</sup>

Paul also contextualized his message by quoting well-known philosophers. For instance, in verse twenty-eight he cites Epimenides, “In him [God] we live and

<sup>15</sup>N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everybody*, vol 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 89.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>17</sup>“Dass dieser Gott ‘nicht in handgemachten Tempelhäusern wohnt’ (vgl. zu 7, 48) die biblisch geoffenbarte Wahrheit ist auch der Stoischen Aufklärung nicht fremd.” See Rudolph Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Zurich: Benziger Verlag, 1986) 137.

<sup>18</sup>All Bible quotes in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>19</sup>Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 514.

move and have our being,” and then the Stoic philosopher Aratus, “for we are indeed his [God’s] offspring.” Interestingly, this second quote was pulled from Aratus’s poem *Phaenomen* where human beings are described as Zeus’s offspring.<sup>20</sup> So once again, Paul seeks to use popular Greek categories of thought to explain Jewish ideas.<sup>21</sup>

Then Paul inserts a little logic. If we are God’s offspring, as the Stoic philosophers believe, how then could we also be his creator, the manufacturer of idols? Furthermore, how can we then think that a “divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man?” (Acts 17:29, NIV). Man cannot create his own creator and therefore, the entire Greek religious system must be false.

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Paul further explains that the creator God has sovereign control over all humankind, determining its “allotted periods and the boundaries of [its] dwelling place[s]” (17:26). God ultimately controls the length and the physical dimensions of our lives. To demonstrate the dependence that humanity has on God’s providence, Paul uses the verb ψηλαφήσειαν to describe how humans search for God. Often translated as “feel their way,” the term actually describes the fumbling of a blind person in the dark, and is a metaphor for how unsaved human beings seek God.<sup>22</sup> Without the true God, we are essentially in the dark.

How to grant government sanction for such a god may have also been a problem for the Areopagus, since Paul’s “god” did not hold the attributes of other foreign gods who had been admitted into the pantheon in the past. Paul’s “god” wouldn’t require a plot of land upon which to erect a temple, nor would a new feast day be added to the Athenian calendar. Paul’s “god” also wouldn’t have upheld the supremacy of Athens (or the genetic superiority of its people), since it was a sovereign God who created and sustained the entire world.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of his address, Paul ceases all efforts to flatter or contextualize and turns instead to urgent warnings. In fact, he makes his boldest statement yet to his Athenian audience: the time of God’s patience is at an end. The Lord was willing to show some leniency to primitive people in the past, but the educated Greeks

<sup>20</sup>González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, 202; Charles, “Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind,” 58.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Pervo highlights Luke’s apparent belief that Greek religiosity was a *praeparatio evangelica*. He writes: “that gentile history and religion are, at least to a degree, parts of the prehistory of Christianity, as was the history of Israel.” See Clare K. Rothschild, *Paul in Athens* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 79.

<sup>22</sup>Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 528.

<sup>23</sup>Winter, “Introducing the Athenians to God,” 45–47; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 526.

should know better, and now they must repent. Those failing to change their ways will have to answer to Jesus himself, a man whom God has appointed. Not only that, but God has proven his appointment by raising Jesus from the dead.

Paul's message has now become a bitter pill. Winter notes that, "Those who came as the assessors suddenly found that they were being confronted with having to face the fact that there will be a divine assessment of their lives."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, at first glance it would appear that commanding the Greeks to repent was the single most objectionable element of his message. But Paul's audience may have heard this directive before from Stoic and other philosophical schools going back as far as Xenophanes in the sixth century BC.<sup>25</sup>

Instead, the most problematic element of his sermon was likely the claim that a man, namely Jesus, had been raised from the dead. Resurrection was a phenomenon that was widely rejected by the Greeks. In the Aeschylus play *Eumenides*, the god Apollo inaugurates the court of the Areopagus. In doing so he states that "when a man dies, and his blood is spilled on the ground, there is no resurrection."<sup>26</sup> People don't just rise from the dead. Once you are dead, you are dead. The talk was over.

Paul had to contend with many of the objections that we also have to address today. Resurrection is the first and foremost stumbling block since it is completely antithetical to everything we know about life and death. Paul takes a substantial risk of hijacking his message by even mentioning it. But as Willimon so astutely notes, "appeals to reason and to observation of the natural world can only be taken so far in the proclamation of the gospel. Eventually revelation must be invoked and the scandal of faith to reason and experience must be made plain."<sup>27</sup> Paul knew that he had to preach the scandal of the gospel, including resurrection, regardless of the cost.

But despite the abrupt cessation of Paul's sermon in verse thirty-two, Luke tells us that "some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (17:34). So the sermon wasn't completely without effect. Dionysius, a member of the council and obviously a person of high standing in the community, and some who were with him, were converted that day.<sup>28</sup> But while Damaris was also mentioned, she was probably not converted at the Areopagus, but likely some time

<sup>24</sup>Winter, "Introducing the Athenians to God," 58.

<sup>25</sup>González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, 202.

<sup>26</sup>Wright, *Acts for Everybody*, 93.

<sup>27</sup>Willimon, *Acts*, 144.

<sup>28</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 571. Gill holds the minority opinion that "the names [Dionysius and Damaris] are not those of real people but are plausible inventions by the author to illustrate and lend particularity to his point that a few Athenians, but prominent ones, were converted to Christianity by Paul's speech." See David Gill, S.J., "Dionysios and Damaris: A Note on Acts 17:34," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999) 483–490; Rothschild notes that it is "no surprise that someone with the name Dionysius ('son of Zeus'), namesake of the god known to regularly die and return to life, was quick to trust the message." See Rothschild, *Paul in Athens*, 80.

later, since women would not have been present at the court.<sup>29</sup> The subsequent fruit of these conversions is also unclear, since there is no record of a church developing in Athens to support these new converts.<sup>30</sup>

#### LESSONS ON MISSION FROM THE AREOPAGUS

So how can Paul's sermon be used to better share the gospel of Jesus to Millennials in the twenty-first century? How can Paul's evangelistic method be tailored to reach our young adults, perhaps the most unchurched generation in recent history?

##### *Acknowledge Their Tolerance*

As we explained above, Paul started his address with a *captatio benevolentiae*, an opening flattery acknowledging the religiosity of his Greek audience. Now "religion" is a word burdened with a great deal of baggage these days, so perhaps acknowledging the "tolerance" of Millennials is a better way to soften the message.

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***Perhaps it would be useful to acknowledge this kindness. This recognition will help Millennials know that we as Christians see them as a special generation, one with a search for goodness which can ultimately lead them to God.***

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A high degree of cultural and religious tolerance was very apparent in first-century Athens. Robert E. Dunham notes that "the cultural flow [in Athens]...included a steady procession of foreign deities, for by the time Paul stood in the markets of Athens, a great many religions were co-existent at the center of the Hellenistic world. Tolerance of foreign divinities was apparently quite remarkable. As people moved to Greece, they brought their gods with them, and they were welcomed."<sup>31</sup> So both first-century Athens and twenty-first century America consider tolerance to be a highly extolled virtue.

Today, tolerance is characterized by sensitivity to others' feelings, and is motivated by a kindness that was often shrugged off by previous generations. Perhaps it would be useful to acknowledge this kindness as something that makes Millennials special, perhaps evidence of a purposefully kinder generation rather

<sup>29</sup>Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts*, 193; John Chrysostom believed that Damaris was Dionysius's wife, but this has been questioned by later commentators; see Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 141. Witherington offers the possibility that she could have been at the Areopagus, as a foreign woman or as a ἑταῖρα, an educated woman who would serve as the companion of an Athenian citizen. See Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 533.

<sup>30</sup>González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, 203; Eusebius's belief that Dionysius was the first bishop of Athens is likely legendary. See Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts*, 193. Many myths were also popularized about the later life of Dionysius, who was falsely believed to have written numerous medieval mystical works, which supported doctrines developed in the Middle Ages. He was also thought to have traveled to France after his conversion, founding the monastery of St. Denis, outside Paris. See González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, 203.

<sup>31</sup>Robert E. Dunham, "Acts 17:16–34," *Interpretation* (April 2006) 202.

than an effort to “be politically correct.” This recognition will help Millennials know that we as Christians see them as a special generation, one with a search for goodness which can ultimately lead them to God.

### *God Created Everything*

Another major stumbling block to the faith is the Pauline message that God created everything. Modern science often teaches that a divine explanation of the universe’s creation must be jettisoned and replaced with the secular assumption that matter has always existed. But as Paul knew full well, God’s creation of the world is the key to understanding our place in the universe and the need to remove modern “idols” from our lives. Books such as Francis Collins’s *The Language of God* can help Millennials understand God’s design of human life and his plan for the world in light of evolution and modern science.<sup>32</sup> In addition, an understanding of God’s ongoing creation is a crucial part of any evangelization effort. As Raymond H. Bailey notes, “He is not a mere cause who sets the natural order in operation and withdraws. He is the ruler who providentially oversees history and persons.”<sup>33</sup> Our belief in a creator moves forward into a belief in a loving sustainer.

### *Resurrection (and Miracles) CAN Happen*

Resurrection was in Paul’s day, and is today, another major stumbling block to accepting the gospel. The belief that “when a man dies, and his blood is spilled on the ground, there is no resurrection,” is as common today as in was in first-century Greece. Resurrection is empirically false and goes against everything we experience in life. Nevertheless, there is another truth: “with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26). This is not only a spiritual truth, it is also a widely held belief today. In fact, a recent poll has demonstrated that belief in God is still very common in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps this belief could be leveraged to open the possibility that an all-powerful God could decide to perform miracles to further his divine will, and perhaps even a resurrection.

### *Jesus Needs to Be Brought Up*

Recently, I was offered the opportunity to give the opening invocation for a session of the Virginia Senate. I received a confirmation letter from the clerk of the Senate which in bold letters instructed me to reference an attached excerpt from “When You Are Asked to Give Public Prayer in a Diverse Society: Guidelines for Civic Occasions,” a publication of the National Conference for Community and Justice. In that document, I was told that “inclusive [and consequently, proper] public prayer...uses inclusive terms for deity rather than particular proper names

<sup>32</sup>Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup>Raymond H. Bailey, “Acts 17:16–34,” *Review and Expositor* 87 (1990) 483.

<sup>34</sup>Currently at 89%; see “Most Americans Still Believe in God,” *Gallup*; <http://www.gallup.com/poll/193271/americans-believe-god.aspx> (accessed January 11, 2017).

for divine manifestations.”<sup>35</sup> Translation in an overwhelmingly Christian nation? Don’t utter the name of Jesus. When I asked my senator’s secretary if this was a hard and fast rule, I was told these were merely guidelines, and I could pray any way I wanted.

But I wonder how many pastors were coerced into erasing the name of Jesus from their prayers? One can see where all this will lead—removing pastors altogether, along with any allowable reference to a name of a deity. This is actually the practice already in the Maryland House of Delegates. A recent prayer in that esteemed body asked that “those who are washed in the spirit of purple and black fill the bodies and souls of our Ravens with the spirits and the souls of all who are cheering them on to victory.”<sup>36</sup>

Now one might counter by pointing out that Paul didn’t utter the name of Jesus either. He simply refers to Jesus as a “man [that God] has appointed” (17:31). But I would argue that this omission of Jesus’s name was designed by Paul to pique the curiosity of his listeners. “Who is this man,” they might then ask, and “how does he fit into God’s plan?” Furthermore, the power of this salvific figure is unmistakable. Paul explains that he will judge the entire world with justice. God has also provided solid proof of Jesus’s authority by raising him from the dead. Paul refuses to stop short of delivering the whole gospel, because to do so would have been a dereliction of his charge to faithfully share the faith.<sup>37</sup> He, and we, must tell the whole story: Jesus is our savior, he is risen, and he will be our judge.

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*But when one exhorts a people to repentance, he or she has committed the cardinal (postmodern) sin, that is, the “sin” of judging another person. So repentance may be the most difficult hurdle of all. How do we preach repentance to a generation that has never been taught about sin?*

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### *Repentance Is Needed*

Paul explained that true conversion requires repentance, especially repentance for the sin of idolatry. In Paul’s day, idols were made of “gold or silver or stone,” and they still can be—idols of our money, our homes, or our jewelry. But of course idolatry goes much deeper than that: including idols of politics, power, consumerism, unbridled sexual freedom, racism, and hate. Bailey has noted the great similarities between first-century Greek and twenty-first century Western society.

<sup>35</sup>The National Conference for Community and Justice, “When You are Asked to Give Public Prayer in a Diverse Society: Guidelines for Civic Occasions” (2000) 1, [https://www.nccj.org/sites/default/files/uploaded\\_documents/updated\\_prayer\\_guidelines\\_brochure.pdf](https://www.nccj.org/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/updated_prayer_guidelines_brochure.pdf) (accessed January 17, 2017).

<sup>36</sup>Kate Havard, “In Delegates They Trust: Md. House Members Lead Secular Prayer,” *Washington Post*, March 9, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/in-delegates-they-trust-md-house-members-lead-secular-prayer/2013/03/09/571fef8e-810a-11e2-8074-b26a871b165a\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.384c66502829](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/in-delegates-they-trust-md-house-members-lead-secular-prayer/2013/03/09/571fef8e-810a-11e2-8074-b26a871b165a_story.html?utm_term=.384c66502829) (accessed January 11, 2017).

<sup>37</sup>Justo J. González, *Three Months with the Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003) 106.

Each is a “highly pluralistic society with a plethora of competing philosophies and value systems. . . . [which] prides itself on its diversity and freedom of thought and expression.”<sup>38</sup> This “freedom of thought” may be our greatest idol of all.

But when one exhorts a people to repentance, he or she has committed the cardinal (postmodern) sin, that is, the “sin” of judging another person. So repentance may be the most difficult hurdle of all. How do we preach repentance to a generation that has never been taught about sin? This will take some educating, even more time, and a great deal of patience.

Nearly every pastor dreams about building a huge church. We look at megachurch pastors with envy. How did they do it, and can we do it as well? Well, there is one thing for certain: we should try. Evangelism has been so neglected in our Lutheran tradition that few pastors or laypeople witness at all anymore—perhaps they never did. But Paul always looked for opportunities to witness to the gospel—in court, in the synagogues, in the markets, even while imprisoned. To him, the Great Commission was just that, a commission, not a suggestion.

We also need to be realistic about growth. Paul learned at the Areopagus that preaching a gospel of divine creation, resurrection, and repentance to a pagan audience would not result in a basketball arena full of converts. Reflecting on that day at the Areopagus, Bailey asks, “Does it not often take more than one encounter, more than one presentation of the gospel, to effect a conversion? Rarely are persons converted today on the first hearing of the gospel in a twenty-five-minute sermon.”<sup>39</sup> An Osteenian gospel might have done the trick quickly, but Paul discovered that the gospel of Jesus Christ took time, and that means that evangelization will be a long game, one that shares the love of Jesus without compromising the truth, while relentlessly searching out the lost, maybe even a guy named Dennis, with the free gift of salvation. ☩

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<sup>38</sup>Bailey, “Acts 17:16–34,” 481.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 484–485.