



The Acts of the Apostles

Acts 16-17: "Apologetic" Ministry

In the section from Acts 16:1-17:15 we see enacted some familiar themes. The message spreads; opposition arises; Paul is unfazed; God is in charge. In Acts 17:16-34 Paul preaches the good news to Gentiles, but Gentiles whose training has been not in Hebrew scripture but in Greek thought.

In Acts 16:1-5 we are further reminded of what Paul's letters also indicate: Paul's apostleship included a company of colleagues. When Paul and Barnabas part (unhappily) at the end of Acts 15, Paul picks Silas as his new companion and then in chapter 16 adds Timothy to the group. There is perhaps an echo here of the way in which the company of the apostles had to be filled up when Judas separated – much more dramatically – from their company. Like the twelve, Paul does not witness alone.

There is a more significant tension between Acts and Galatians when it comes to the story of Paul's having Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:1-5). The reasons Timothy needed to be circumcised are a little unclear. Would the fact that he had a Gentile father guarantee that he was uncircumcised, despite the fact that Jewish identity, at least for the Rabbinic tradition, usually passes through the mother? Does Paul have him circumcised in order to placate the Jewish Christians or to appease Jews who would otherwise oppose the Christian movement? (In Acts we see how well that worked.) What is oddest about the story is that Paul has the circumcision performed and then goes on to inform his (Jewish) listeners of the decision reached at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, which explicitly does not demand circumcision of the uncircumcised. (See last week's study and Acts 15:28-29). Paul, the first-person letter writer, unlike the "Paul" in this narrative, apparently wrote the book of Galatians to condemn people who would do what he, as the character in Acts, has just done – insist on circumcision as a requirement for male participation in the community. The one possible way to square this circle is to suggest that Paul thought of Timothy as Jewish (through his mother) and insisted on circumcision as a requirement for Jewish Christians but not for Gentile ones. We have always been skeptical of the claim that Paul thought Jews required circumcision to be justified while Gentiles did not.

In the brief section 16:6-10 we note again that God is in charge and that God is expanding Paul's mission wider and wider. As Carl Holladay points out, in Acts 15:36 Paul suggests to Barnabas that their next journey should be a return visit to the communities where they have already planted the seed of the gospel, but now Paul is called by a man from Macedonia to

expand his itinerary far to the west. (See Holladay's notes in the Harper's Bible Commentary, p. 1100) By now we know that in Luke and Acts visions and messengers are sent by God to further God's agenda (see Luke 1:6, 2:10, Acts 9:3, 10:3, 10:11).

In Acts 16:10 we find the first passage that is written in the first-person plural – “we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia.” Scholars disagree over the significance of this use of the first person. It may be an indication that at some points in his narrative the author (perhaps Luke) introduces himself into the action to show that he was an eye witness. It may be that this and other first-person accounts show our author using a written source, again presumably from an eyewitness (see Luke 1:2). It may be that, like other writers of the time, Luke uses this device to make his narrative more vivid.

Now Paul stops in Philippi, to found the church to which he wrote his affectionate epistle to the Philippians. In Acts 16:11-15 we find the story of the conversion of Lydia, which highlights an important feature of Paul's churches, both in Acts and in the letters: women of relatively high rank often play a role of considerable influence in the new Christian communities. We also note an important feature of Acts' own narrative: when a person comes to faith he or she is then baptized – presumably both in water and in the Holy Spirit. And, in a feature that has puzzled Baptists from the time of the Reformation on, it looks as though as head of a household – family and slaves – Lydia has the whole lot baptized along with her.

The next section of Acts, 16:16-35, presents one of the longest and liveliest vignettes in the whole book. Note a few features of the text. The slave girl has prophetic powers because she is possessed by a magic spirit. As is often the case in the Gospels, the demonic spirit says the right thing for the wrong reasons. Paul and Silas are indeed “slaves of the most High God” and they are about to proclaim “the way of salvation” (16:17). Paul exorcises the spirit, perhaps because it is only a spirit and not The Spirit, and perhaps because here as elsewhere Acts wants to insist that even right proclamation should not be undertaken for gain. No prophet for profit, Professor Attridge might say. (How dare he!)

In the next section (vv. 19-24) we see the complicated relationship among Christian Jews, synagogue-based Jews, and the Roman authorities – a relationship that will shape much of the drama of the opposition to Paul. As with Peter in Acts 12:6-19, God provides a miracle, but here the point is not the escape but the opportunity for witness. The jailer is about to kill himself, presumably because he has failed in his custodial duties, but Paul – knowing both the jailer's mind and the current census of the jail – persuades him to preserve his own life.

It is this miraculous knowledge more than the miraculous earthquake that moves the jailer toward faith, and his question gives Paul the chance to preach a very Pauline sermon, brief though it be: “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:31; see Paul's version of such proclamation in Romans 10:10)

The story ends with a dramatic encounter between Paul and the Roman authorities. Perhaps because they have heard of his generosity to the jailer, the Roman authorities want Paul and Silas to leave jail secretly and be on their way. The Paul of Acts like the Paul of the letters specializes in speaking and acting boldly. Now, one might think a little belatedly, Paul announces that he and Silas are Roman citizens and should be vindicated in the full light of day.

However grudgingly the authorities agree, apologize and yet apparently ambivalent about this new movement, tell them to get out of dodge, or in this case, Philippi (16:39).

In Acts 17:1-15 the journey of Paul, Silas, and Timothy continues. In both Thessalonica and Berea they share the good news first in the synagogue. In Thessalonica the Jews vigorously object. In Berea Paul fares somewhat better till the aforementioned Thessalonian opponents arrive to stir up the crowd. In both Thessalonica and Berea there are Gentiles who come to believe. In Thessalonica it is clear and in Berea probable that the Gentiles who listened eagerly to Paul were, like Cornelius, already interested in the teaching of the synagogue. When the Bereans bring Paul to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy temporarily behind, he preaches to Gentiles who had not been listening eagerly at the fringes of the synagogues.

Acts 17:17-21 sets the scene for Paul's speech at the Areopagus. The general description of the Athenians as philosophical faddists (v. 21) takes on more specific shape in the description of Paul's debating opponents as Stoics and Epicureans. There is no doubt that Stoicism and Epicureanism were alive and well as philosophical options during Paul's time and during the time of Acts but attempts to locate his speech as a direct response to particular Epicurean or Stoic writings remain mostly guesswork. The stuff was in the air as John Locke was in the air at the time of the American Revolution and Sigmund Freud and his critics are in the air now – whether or not most of us have read any of these thinkers or can quote them in detail.

There are two ways of reading the setting of the speech at the Areopagus and each is plausible. One possibility is that Luke sees this as a kind of hearing on the model of the trial of Socrates who was sentenced to death by the Council at the Areopagus for his theological mistakes. Perhaps Luke is saying that, like Socrates, Paul was unjustly accused. If this is the setting for our narrative, then the narrative ends when Paul escapes in 17:33.

The other possibility is that Paul is satisfying the curiosity of some of the Athenian thinkers. He therefore goes to the Areopagus further to specify his claims about God and Jesus. If this is the case, then in 17:33 he wraps up the speech and walks away. Acts has instances both of testimony before accusers and of preaching before potentially sympathetic audiences. (For the former, see for instance Paul's defense in Acts 22, and for the latter, Peter's speech in Acts 2:14-36.)

Whatever the occasion, what Paul delivers is a classic example of apologetic preaching—that is, he makes the case for the Christian movement to unbelievers. It is somewhat beside the point whether Paul's sermon would make a convincing case in a philosophical theology class, then or now. We can see how he adapts what he has to say to his audience.

First, he assumes that they are worthy of his attention. Apologetic preaching for Paul does not begin with condemnation but with commendation. (If “you are extremely religious” [17:22] is ironic, it is almost impossible to make sense of the rest of the discourse).

Second, he pays attention to the concrete situation of his hearers, drawing their attention to the altar he has seen, dedicated “to an unknown God.” Again, we have no way of knowing

whether such an inscription stood on a first century Athenian altar, or whether Luke applies editorial license either in changing or inventing the inscription.

Paul's ability to be observant opens to a fairly simple but straightforward theological argument, not from Scripture as his sermons to Jews always do, but from a claim that God is evidently creator of the world. Like his later interpreter St. Augustine, Paul claims that all of us seek and long for God, but that the God we seek has already drawn near to us. At this point Paul quotes a line of Greek poetry; again, there are good guesses as to his source but no absolute certainty (Acts 17:28).

Moreover, Paul argues, since we humans are God's offspring and created as God's images, it is impossible that sub-human images "gold, silver, or stone" could rightly represent the human-making God (v.29). Paul here echoes traditional Jewish criticism of idolatry (see Second Isaiah, Wisdom of Solomon).

To this point Paul has argued from general theological principles, but now he shifts into a kind of indirect nod to Christian faith followed by a full-fledged assault (vv. 30-31). The nod comes with the eschatological claim that God will judge people for their ignorance. In a Jewish context Peter and Paul claim that it is ignorance that led the Jews to crucify Jesus. In this Greek context Paul argues that the ignorance is evident in the practices of idolatry and polytheism.

And now the all-out Christian claim: this judgment will happen in the man Jesus whom God has raised from the dead. The Athenians have already been much atwitter about Paul's preaching of Jesus and Resurrection (perhaps thinking that Resurrection, a Greek word in the feminine, is a goddess who accompanies the male God Jesus in v. 18). In classic terms Paul has preached a kind of proto-gospel, preparing his hearers for the gospel itself. But before the altar call he has to move beyond his general monotheistic claims to name Jesus and his resurrection.

Unlike many earlier evangelical moments in Acts where many believe, here the believers seem to be few – but perhaps two names are still known in Luke's community: Dionysius and Damaris.

No wonder he thought it was time to head on to Corinth.