

Comparison of Paul's Missionary Sermons in Acts

	Acts 13:13-52	Acts 14:8-20	Acts 17:16-34
The Context			
Geographical location	Pisidian Antioch	Lystra	Athens
Audience: cultural and religious background	Diaspora Jews and God-fearing Gentiles	Pagan Gentiles, indigenous Lycaonians	Pagan Greek Gentiles
Audience: education and socioeconomic background	Probably educated, including some people with social status (v. 50)	Unsophisticated townspeople and peasants	Educated, cultural elite, including Stoic and Epicurean philosophers and members of the Areopagus (vv. 18, 22, 34)
Setting	Diaspora synagogue	Public forum	Meeting of the Areopagus council
Preparation for the sermon	Synagogue worship, reading of Scripture (vv. 14-15)	Healing of a lame man (vv. 8-10)	Paul is distressed over idolatry (v. 16); days of dialogue in the synagogue and marketplace (v. 17)
Occasion for the sermon	Synagogue worship, Paul invited to speak	Misinterpretation of the healing by Lystrans, attempt to	Misunderstanding of Paul's preaching; Paul brought before the ruling council

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		offer sacrifices to the missionaries (vv. 11-13)	to explain (vv. 18-19)
The Contextualized Message			
How the message is characterized	“Word of salvation” (v. 26; cf. vv. 44, 48, 49); “good news” — that the promise to our fathers has been fulfilled (vv. 32-33)	“Good news” of turning from idols to the one true God (v. 15)	“Good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (v. 18)
Address	“Men, Israelites, and God-fearers” (v. 16); “Brothers” (vv. 26, 38)	“Men, why are you doing this?” (v. 15)	“Men, Athenians” (v. 22)
Initial point of contact	A shared history; the story of God’s election and faithfulness toward Israel (vv. 17-22)	A shared humanity (v. 15)	The Athenians’ religiosity; worship of the unknown God (vv. 22-23)
Rhetorical style	Deliberative rhetoric; imitation of the Septuagint	Deliberative rhetoric (interrupted before completion)	Deliberative rhetoric; use of rhetorical

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			techniques (insinuation, irony, etc.)
Preparation for the gospel	Recital of Israel's history, God's promise of a Davidic messiah (vv. 17-22)	General revelation, God's gracious witness through nature (vv. 15-17)	General revelation, God made humans to seek him (v. 27)
Description of God	"God of this people Israel" (v. 17); active in Israel's history	"The living God," Creator of all things (v. 15), gracious Provider and Sustainer of human life	"The God who made the world and every- thing in it" (v. 24); Ruler of nature and history, universal Judge. Not confined to human temples or made by human hand- s; self-sufficient
God's dealings with people in the past	God's faithfulness throughout Israel's history, focusing on David (vv. 17-22)	God graciously allowed all the nations to follow their own ways (v. 16)	God allotted the (historical) times of all nations' existence (v. 26); God graciously overlooked their former ignorance (v. 30)
Themes tailored to the audience	Fulfillment of God's messianic promise to	God's provision of rain, fruitful crops, and food (v. 17)—basic needs of life	Various points of con- tact with Stoic and Epicurean philoso- phy; e.g., God's provi-

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	the Israel; Scripture testifies to Jesus' resurrection		dential care (vv. 26-27), unity of the human race (v. 26), God is near (v. 27), we are his offspring (v. 28)
Cultural resources used	Citations from the Hebrew Scriptures; Jewish methods of interpretation	Local religious background; Zeus seen as god of weather and vegetation (v. 17)	Language and traditions from Greek philosophy; quotations from their poets (v. 28)
The kerygma	The story of Jesus' crucifixion at the hand of the Jews, burial, and resurrection as the fulfillment of prophecy (vv. 27-33)	<i>Theological</i> kerygma (incomplete?); the story of the Creator God (vv. 15-17)	God has appointed the "man" Jesus, whom he raised from the dead, to judge the whole world (v. 31)
Challenge to the audience's worldview	Call to reshape Israel's interpretation of its history and Scriptures in light of the resurrection;	Challenges pagan polytheism and idolatry	Confronts the fundamental worldview of Stoicism, Epicureanism and popular religious

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	Jews must abandon religious exclusivism		pluralism; Greek notions of history and the afterlife
Evangelistic appeal	They must believe in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and justification (vv. 38-39); warning of judgment for following the pattern of Israel's unbelief (vv. 40-41)	Turn from idols to the living God (v. 15)	All people must repent, on account of God's coming judgment through the resurrected Jesus (vv. 30-31)
The Response			
Response to Paul's preaching	Initial openness to the grace of God, then rejection and persecution from the Jews; the gospel is offered to the Gentiles, who receive it (vv. 42-52)	Some "disciples" (v. 20), but most Gentiles continue in their misunderstanding (v. 18). Jews from neighboring towns win over the crowds, stone Paul and leave him for dead (vv. 19-20)	Some scoff at the resurrection, others want to hear more, some believe (vv. 32-33)

3. PAUL'S LETTERS

Doing Theology in Context



From Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

ROM 15:19

If Acts tells us stories of contextualizing the gospel in evangelistic settings, then Paul's letters are unrivaled in offering examples of doing contextual theology for diverse Christian communities.¹ To be sure, Paul's epistles have not always been read in this way. Earlier generations of scholars tended to think of Paul chiefly as a dogmatic theologian, the originator of a grand system of belief. If, however, there is agreement on anything about Paul today, it is that the man from Tarsus was not a systematic theologian, at least not in the modern sense of someone who wrote treatments of different theological topics. Recent interpreters of Paul have viewed him as a pastoral theologian, a task theologian, a missionary theologian, a hermeneutical theologian, and the like. These different portraits all support the understanding that Paul is a *contextual theologian*—his letters, case studies in the contextualizing of the gospel in ways that intersect the concrete lives and cultures of his hearers. My concern in this chapter, then, is not simply in the

¹ Regarding which letters should be included in Paul's authentic writings, see the brief but incisive discussion of Luke Timothy Johnson (*The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], pp. 271-73). Johnson questions the methodological assumptions behind the widespread view that Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastoral Letters (1-2 Timothy, Titus) are non-Pauline. I agree with Johnson that, in particular, criteria which evaluate the style and content of these disputed letters against some perceived norm of consistency in the seven unquestioned epistles tend to be highly subjective. Such measures of which letters could or could not have been written by Paul fail to reckon with the great variety in style and theme within *all* of Paul's letters, including the seven normally taken to be Pauline. As a matter of practical method, I will base my conclusions about Paul's theological contextualization primarily on the generally accepted letters and Colossians, which is considered to be authentic by many interpreters of Paul. I believe that these findings, however, can find support in the entire Pauline corpus.