



Submitted: 07/10/24

Revised: 29/11/2024

Accepted: 28/12/2024

## **Missioning through the “unknown God” Narrative Analysis of Acts 17:16-34**

Samuel Parluhutan Sirait<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> HKBP Theological Seminary, Pematangsiantar, Indonesia  
samuelparluhutan99@gmail.com

### **Abstract:**

Christianity has yet to reach all parts of the world, hence the need to contextualize the gospel to all parts of the world. Understanding how the gospel should be preached in context requires a specific approach. However, research on context-specific approaches for missional purposes is limited. The main purpose of this study is to provide a new method of approach in missions as well as provide a new understanding of missions. The data presented is based on literature study and adapted to the narrative analysis approach. The results of the analysis show that Paul demonstrated a deep understanding of the culture and religion in Athens, recognizing the diversity of its gods and philosophical traditions. He used cultural references, such as the altar to the “unknown God” and the Greek way of speaking to build relationships with his audience in Acts 17:16-34. This article provides how evangelism should be done through the “marriage” of culture with the spread of the gospel such as providing new methods of inductive approaches, contextualizing relevant teaching and dialogical and continuous preaching, so that the mission process can be effective.

### **Keywords:**

Acts 17:16-34;  
contextualization; mission;  
narrative criticism.

Copyright @2024,

Samuel Parluhutan  
Sirait



## **INTRODUCTION**

In today's contemporary era, humans live and coexist in a very pluralistic world, where various religions and views in the world. Especially in the regional context, which is Indonesia, where there are many tribes and cultures that have their own style. A census conducted in 2010 noted that Indonesia has more than 300 ethnic groups or tribes, more precisely there are 1,340 ethnic groups in the country.<sup>113</sup> The challenge in spreading the gospel is to establish a productive and respectful dialog between religions is very real. In this context, Paul's approach to preaching provides valuable lessons. Paul acknowledged and respected his audience's spiritual quest before introducing his own beliefs, creating a more empathetic and understanding dialogue. Paul also used cultural and intellectual references that his audience recognized to convey his message, demonstrating the importance of adapting the message to be relevant to the audience's context.

A contextual approach needs to respect local values and traditions, thus avoiding resistance that may arise from the perception that evangelism is an attempt to replace or erase their cultural identity. In addition, a context-appropriate approach also avoids evangelism being perceived as cultural imperialism, where religion is seen as a tool to impose a foreign culture. Instead, contextualized evangelism respects and values local culture, seeing it as a medium to deliver the transformative message of the gospel. As such, it also minimizes cultural resistance and conflict, and encourages constructive dialogue between evangelists and local communities. Therefore, there is a need for a new and effective method of approach so that the preaching of the gospel can be conveyed properly.

Iwan setiawan<sup>114</sup> said that the way to contextualize is to exchange ideas, First is the basis of contextualization, which is born from a burdened heart. The second way of contextualizing is exchanging ideas with people in Athens here

---

<sup>113</sup> Andrean W. Finaka, “Sebaran Jumlah Suku Di Indonesia | Indonesia Baik,” accessed May 29, 2024, <https://indonesiabaik.id/infografis/sebaran-jumlah-suku-di-indonesia>.

<sup>114</sup> Iwan Setiawan and Reagen Petrus Banea, “Kontekstualisasi menurut Kisah Para Rasul 17:16-34,” *Te Deum (Jurnal Teologi dan Pengembangan Pelayanan)* 12, no. 2 (June 2023): 374–75.

Paul knows the conditions in Athens at that time so that the method is done by exchanging ideas, not only that, the way Paul did to approach, Paul commended the local culture to go deeper into the preaching of the gospel, this was done with the intention that they pay attention, after that Paul entered the core of preaching, namely preaching the gospel. Third, is the impact of Paul's contextualization where some believe and some reject.

While Sugiono<sup>115</sup> argues that the models of Paul's approach are the persuasive interactive dialog model (vv. 17-18), the religio-cultural identification model (vv. 22-23), the locative accommodation model (vv. 19, 22), the literalist adoption model (vv. 23-24). In addition, Paul's contextualization steps can be formulated in three main principles. First, according to Sugiono, Paul always paid attention to the personal dimension of the people he met, taking into account their cultural, social, and educational backgrounds. He realized that these differences affect how a person receives the gospel message. Secondly, Paul tailored the preaching of the Word according to the specific needs of each individual in the context. He made sure that the gospel message was relevant and able to address the real needs that existed in the society in which he served. Thirdly, Paul used symbols that were familiar to his audience as a means to explain the gospel. By utilizing local cultural symbols, Paul made it easier for people to understand the concept of God, making the gospel more relevant and acceptable. These three principles helped Paul to realize effective contextualization in his cross-cultural evangelism.

In contrast to the opinions of Iwan Setiawan and Sugiono who emphasize the external aspects of Paul as a factor in his success in mission. I emphasize more how internal Paul himself made the mission successful through narrative criticism, Paul succeeded in “marrying” the local culture with Christianity and Paul did not rush to marry it but slowly by introducing the universal concept of God first, namely the powerful God who created the earth and everything in it

---

<sup>115</sup> Panjhi Sugiono, “Pendekatan Penginjilan Kontekstual Paulus Berdasarkan Kisah Para Rasul 17:16-34,” *Jurnal Ilmu Teologi dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 1, no. 2 (December 2020): 100.

(vv. 24), then slowly incorporated aspects of Christianity in it, and at the end as a climax introduced the God who rose from the dead, namely Jesus, so that the people in Athens, especially those present at the Aeropagus Council, could understand what Paul wanted to convey. The narrative of Acts 16:17-34 about Paul in Athens. I provide a new understanding of mission, namely mission with a pattern or method using an inductive approach that emphasizes the process of approach starting with the general context to a specific context (Christianity), coupled with utilizing social aspects such as language style and mindset as a supporting factor for effective mission.

## **METHODS**

The author examines the text of Acts 17:16-34 using a narrative analysis approach. Analytical research is an attempt to understand and convey the biblical message in a way that is compatible with the form of narrative and personal testimony, which is the hallmark of Scripture and the basic model of human communication.<sup>116</sup> Narrative analysis also treats the text as a “mirror” that projects a specific image, the narrative world, which influences the reader's perception so that they can adopt certain values and make them a force that affects and transforms the lives of Christians.<sup>117</sup> The author uses literature references that are appropriate to the context and theme of the mission being studied. In addition, the author also uses a narrative analysis approach with a content analysis method that is an in-depth discussion of the content of written or printed information.<sup>118</sup> The reason the author uses narrative analysis with the content analysis method and uses literature studies as a source of literature is because the narrative in the Book of Acts is presented in the form of a historical story that is suitable for study with narrative analysis.

---

<sup>116</sup> Petrus Alexander Didi Tarmedi, “ANALISIS NARATIF: SEBUAH METODE HERMENEUTIKA KRISTIANI KITAB SUCI,” 332.

<sup>117</sup> Tarmedi, “ANALISIS NARATIF: SEBUAH METODE HERMENEUTIKA KRISTIANI KITAB SUCI,” 332-33.

<sup>118</sup> Stevri Lumintang and Danik Lumintang, *Theologia penelitian & penelitian Theologis*, (Jakarta: Geneva Insani Indonesia, 2016), 114-15.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Socio-cultural context of Acts 17:16-34**

The city of Athens made great contributions in sculpture, literature, philosophy, and oratory. By the time of Paul, the city had suffered even more setbacks. Nevertheless, Athens still enjoyed a state of “such renown that the weakening of the Greek name could be sustained by its popularity”. The writings of Starbo and Ovid refer to Athens as a tourist center and the site of great festivals, attractive and surrounded by many philosophers and mystics.<sup>119</sup> The city is home to a wide range of ethnicities, cultures, and social strata, including native Greeks, Romans, merchants from different regions, and prominent philosophical figures. Athens was also a destination for tourists and students interested in the richness of Greek culture and knowledge. Both in the marketplace and on the Areopagus, where Paul gave his speeches, people from these diverse backgrounds gathered, creating a heterogeneous and dynamic environment where an exchange of ideas and beliefs could take place.<sup>120</sup>

At the center of Stoic philosophy is the teaching that seeks common grounds for proper action and living. These fundamentals will overcome all difficulties and obtain pleasure in life.<sup>121</sup> The Stoics lived their lives in accordance with the sensibilities of the mind and heart, controlling instincts and making them the culture of life. Divine experience became the determinant of the culture of life that appeared in orderly behavior.<sup>122</sup> The second is the Epicurean group that emphasizes the teachings of living freely and enjoying life to the fullest. This group tended not to think too much about the divine in enjoying life. Their goal was to find happiness and peace in the world. In the Epikurus group's view, physical pleasure is the main goal in living life. Individual interests are prioritized. This teaching was developed by a man named Epicurus who was

---

<sup>119</sup> 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 (1995): 50.

<sup>120</sup> Steven M. Sheeley, *Narrative Asides in Luke-Acts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 136–37.

<sup>121</sup> Armaidly Armawi, *Filsafat Barat: pra-modern* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2021), 74.

<sup>122</sup> Darmawijaya, *Kisah Para Rasul* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2006), 195.

born in 341 BC in Athens.<sup>123</sup> While Paul was in Athens, a city rich in culture, diverse religious traditions and philosophies that included the Stoics and Epicureans.<sup>124</sup>

## Characterizations

### Paul

Paul is the main character in this narrative. Paul, who had left Thessalonica and had just arrived in Athens, saw the city filled with graven images.<sup>125</sup> Then Paul went to the synagogue to exchange ideas with the Jews and those who feared God, after which Paul was brought to the Areopagus to testify about God. Paul was prone to feelings of sadness, in verse 16 Paul is shown to be very sad because he saw idol statues. However, some scholars say that the real feeling Paul felt when he saw the idols in the city of Athens was not sadness, but anger (In the Septuagint (LXX), *paroxuno* is used to express God's extreme anger against idolatry by the covenant people (Deut. 9:7, 18, 22; Psalm 106:29; Isaiah 65:2-3; Hosea 8:5). This word describes Paul's monotheistic zeal and “deep horror of idolatry”.<sup>126</sup> The Greek word *paroxino*, which is used in this text and usually translated as “provoked” or “stirred,” shows that Paul was not only compelled to preach the gospel to the Athenians because of his observation of their city and culture; the word paroxysm emphasizes Paul's anger directed at idolatry. It arose from his hatred of idolatry which awakened in him a deep jealousy for the Name of God.<sup>127</sup> *Paroxynomai* which means to become angry just because of human anger (Only appears twice in Acts 17:16; 1 Corinthians 13:5).<sup>128</sup> Paul was not impressed by the philosophical elements in the city.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> Pranoto Iskandar, *Sebuah Pengantar Kontekstual* (Cianjur: IMR Press, 2010), 93.

<sup>124</sup> Henry J. Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 245.

<sup>125</sup> Mikeal Carl Parsons, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 286.

<sup>126</sup> G. A. Lotter and G. G. Thompson, “Acts 17:16-34 as Paradigm in Responding to Postmodernity,” *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 39, no. 4 (July 2005): 701.

<sup>127</sup> David Ribeiro, “PAUL'S DIALOGUE WITH THE AREOPAGUS IN ACTS 17:16-34: PRESENTING ABSOLUTE TRUTHS TO A RELATIVISTIC WORLD,” (1999): 1-2.

<sup>128</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (v. 1) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975), 110.

Paul is presented as an accomplished public speaker, as evidenced by the fact that his speeches follow the archetype of the classical Greco-Roman rhetorical style.<sup>130</sup> Before delivering the gospel message to the locals, Paul carefully observed the surrounding polytheistic culture and religious practices. Paul presented an unfamiliar theistic view of the universe to his Athenian audience, but he followed the conventions of Athenian orators and used formal rhetorical techniques, the art of persuasive oral communication.

Paul is portrayed as the main character in this narrative, this is because it is Paul who spreads the news of Christ and it is clear that one of the major themes in Acts is the mission to Gentiles or non-Jews.<sup>131</sup> In this narrative Paul also has “interlocutors” who are against him, namely the Epicureans and Stoics (who later become foil characters) who support Paul as the main character of this narrative, besides that Paul also has demands by people in Athens to give his testimony at the Areopagus Temple. Another evidence that Paul is the main character of this narrative is the dominance of Paul or Paul is the most highlighted in this narrative, this is evidenced by the number of Paul's conversations in this narrative.

### **Epicureans and Stoics**

The Epicureans and Stoics are portrayed as unbelieving or stubborn and also judgmental, which is seen in them saying *peleter* (Pembual in TB2) to Paul. Epicurus, as the founder of the Epicurean school, taught that happiness can be found in pleasure. For them, there is no absolute standard of right or wrong; everything that gives pleasure is considered right. Pleasure was considered a natural instinct and should be strived for. They adopted materialism and atheism, believing that God is the result of individual creativity. Their main focus

---

<sup>129</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 707.

<sup>130</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Nachdr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 518.

<sup>131</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament. A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 203–04.

is on the physical aspect, while the soul is considered to be united with the feelings and emotions of the body. Death was seen as the ultimate pleasure with no afterlife. Later, Zeno as the founder of Stoicism, gave teachings from the porches of temples in Athens, and his followers became known as “porch people” or “Stoics”.<sup>132</sup> Zeno argued that the followers of Epicurus were too emotional and emphasized the need for more rational thought. The main foundation of Stoicism is reason, where the mind is considered to be above all things, and virtue is considered the ultimate value. In the Stoic view, God is regarded as the spirit of reason in the universe, while the gods in the Pantheon are seen as concepts derived from reason.<sup>133</sup> This response shows a tendency to reject the content of Paul's sermons. Some of them can agree on one thing: they were not impressed with Paul. They called him a “babbler” (*spermologos*; v. 18), literally meaning someone who is like a chicken pecking at the ground, chasing and pecking at ideas he doesn't even understand.<sup>134</sup>

The people there thought Paul was a novice, an amateur who was out of his league. Others, however, recognized that he was a preacher of a foreign religion. All this happened because Paul included the resurrection in his preaching. Telling unbelievers about the resurrection received no better response in Paul's day than it does today, a fact that should encourage us not to hold back when it comes to the central truth of the gospel: no resurrection of the body, no gospel.<sup>135</sup> The second response showed interest in hearing more of Paul's messages. Both responses arise from the assumption that Paul is a 'preacher of strange gods'. This assumption is emphasized by the word 'apparently'. In other words, the assumption that Paul was 'a preacher of strange gods' indicates an opinion that should be explored further by those responding.

---

<sup>132</sup> Bob Yandian, *Acts: A New Testament Commentary* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House Publishers, 2016), 256.

<sup>133</sup> Yandian, *Acts*, 256.

<sup>134</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, *The New American Commentary* v. 26 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1992), 367.

<sup>135</sup> Brian J. Vickers, *ESV Expository Commentary: Vol. IX. John - Acts*, eds. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton, and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 502.



Therefore, Paul is brought to a different public space than before, namely from the marketplace or Agora (ἀγορᾶ), to the Areopagus Council. The purpose was to encourage Paul to explain further about the 'new doctrine' that he was preaching (v. 19), namely the doctrine of Jesus and His resurrection.<sup>136</sup>

According to the discussion above, people from the Epicurean and Stoic factions are characters whose character foils, this is because the Epicureans and Stoics reject the teachings given by Paul about Christ, this is characterized by the faction making fun of Paul and saying that Paul is a “peleter” (TB 1) or a “pembual” (TB 2). This is in stark contrast to Paul who preached the message of Jesus.

### **People in the Areopagus**

The people in the Areopagus listened to the testimony given by Paul, but there was a double reaction: some people mocked and some people were open and willing to listen.<sup>137</sup> This shows that the people in the Areopagus at that time had diverse traits. The people in the Areopagus who heard Paul testify had many traits, so they cannot be identified as protagonists or foils characters. Their responses when Paul finished testifying were also different, so the unity cannot be said to be a protagonist or foils character. However, there is another characterization, namely the characterization of the chorus or Walk-On in the form of a passive character, not a big influence, but provides color to the narrative.

### **Flow or Plot**

The plot used in this narrative is forward. This is evidenced by the plot or storyline that takes place over several Episodes in Athens consisting of five events. (1) Luke reports Paul's missionary activities in the synagogue and in the

---

<sup>136</sup> Bonaventura Priyo Sutejo and R.F. Bhanu Viktorahadi Pr., “The Relevance of Paul’s Preaching Activities in Athens to the Preaching of the Church Based on Acts 17:16-34,” *Khazanah Sosial* 4, no. 1 (March 2022): 148.

<sup>137</sup> B. F. Drewes, *Tafsiran Alkitab: Kitab Kisah Para Rasul* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2014), 345.

agora (17:16-17). While preaching and teaching in the local synagogue was Paul's custom (see on 17:2), and while he had preached the gospel to Gentile audiences before, the specific reference to the Athenian agora where Paul established contact with the Athenian population is a new feature in Luke's narrative, as is his reference to Paul here doing missionary work alone, without coworkers (verse 16). (2) Luke recounts an encounter with the Epikuros and Stoic philosophers in the agora (verse 18), a passage that could be combined with verses 16-17 but is better seen as a separate event marking the transition from Paul's ongoing missionary service in the city to an appearance before the Areopagus Council. (3) The next event is the invitation given to Paul to appear before the Areopagus Council (verses 19-21). (4) This is followed by Paul's speech before the Areopagus Council (verses 22-31). (5) The last incident recounts the effect of the speech and the conversion of some individuals (verses 32-34).<sup>138</sup>

The plot used in this narrative is episodic plot, which is a plot that presents each episode in a stand-alone manner where each episode is connected by the same main character.<sup>139</sup> This is in line with the narrative of “Paul in Athens” which is the topic as well as making Paul the main character in the narrative of this passage, in the passage after and before the passage of Acts 17:16-34 also features Paul as the main character in the narrative, where in Acts 17:1-15 tang is a narrative that makes Paul one of the main characters of the narrative and the passage of Acts 18 is a continuation of the narrative of Paul in Athens where Paul is only briefly in Athens to continue his journey to Corinth.

---

<sup>138</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 1126.

<sup>139</sup> Tarmedy, “ANALISIS NARATIF: SEBUAH METODE HERMENEUTIKA KRISTIANI KITAB SUCI,” 350.

## **Paul's pattern of approach to the people in Athens**

### **Inductive Approach**

Paul gives his opinion or argument in claims, namely the first claim, which is then not presented in the context of Christianity, but begins with a proper understanding of God, of the one God, the Creator of all things. The language used builds as much as possible on contact with the wider philosophies of the time (particularly the stoics), but is essentially Jewish monotheism and creation theology presented in its universal implications. God, the Creator, is sovereign, the creator of all things and all peoples.

God's creation means that there is a God-given relationship between God and man, which only finds proper expression in worship that is not idolatry. This can be seen where in verse 22 when Paul is brought to the Aeropagus Council he first gives an introduction to the context of the time, then in verses 24-25 he describes God in general and in verse 26 Paul gives the statement “from one man he made all nations” which refers to Christianity and the emphasis on God raising the dead indicates Christianity and the culmination of Paul's message is the proclamation of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Paul explains that God has appointed the day on which he will judge the world with justice by Jesus, who has been raised from the dead as a guarantee for all people (verse 31). In this way, the Athenian expression of religiosity in the multiplication of idols is corrected, and the full continuity of Christian preaching with the Jewish apologetics and polemics that had become a tradition in the wider Hellenistic world is reaffirmed. Implicit also is the fact that this school of Jewish theology provided a different basis for the relationship between Jews and Gentiles than had developed in mainstream Judaism.<sup>140</sup> Paul is described as using this philosophical “natural theology” approach only once in Acts. Natural theology is

---

<sup>140</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 275.

defined as a type of theology that seeks to provide arguments for theological topics based on reason.<sup>141</sup>

### **Contextualization of relevant gospel preaching**

Contextualization is an attempt to convey the message to all levels of society. The importance of reaching out to all segments of society and creative strategic planning is evident in this quote. Blessed is the nation that has flexible people like Paul, who are able to reach out to different segments of society. If we don't have one person who is able to do as much as Paul did, we must ensure that various individuals are involved in reaching all segments of society with the gospel. Just as Paul preached in the synagogue, we need people who will preach to Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the church.<sup>142</sup>

First of all, the basis of contextualization is that it arises from a burdensome inner feeling. Secondly, the contextualization method involves an exchange of ideas with the people in Athens. As such, Paul knew the situation in Athens at the time and adopted the thinking-together approach as a means to communicate. However, not only that, Paul's approach involved complimenting the local culture, with the aim of getting their attention to the gospel message, but it is also evident that Paul took advantage of the Athenians' habit of being excited about new discoveries. Therefore, everything Paul said at the Areopagus Council in the text of Acts 17:22-31, apart from being an answer to the problem posed by the Athenians who were known to be very curious people (17:21), is also a narrative that presents Paul's sermon to the Athenians at the Areopagus.<sup>143</sup> This interest, which was certainly true in ancient Athens, generally characterizes the urban culture of coastal cities, which, according to scholars is characterized by “openness” to “new things” in terms of language, social and political customs,

---

<sup>141</sup> M. Dennis Hamm, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 60–62.

<sup>142</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Acts: From Biblical Text-- to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 482.

<sup>143</sup> Charles K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Introduction and Commentary on Acts XV - XXVIII* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 833.

lifestyle, and place of residence. “This observed interest sets the rhetorical scene for the speech that follows, in which Luke cleverly reverses his readers’ expectations by letting Paul show that in presenting the true identity of the ‘unknown God’ he is presenting something far from new.”<sup>144</sup>

Paul is portrayed as giving a new teaching using language and speech patterns familiar to the audience and even quoting their own poems to illustrate his message, this speech reflects the culmination of Paul's efforts to overcome the religious, cultural, and intellectual conflicts he has faced since his arrival in Athens.<sup>145</sup> This is evidenced when Paul uses the same rhetorical methods described by Aristotle in his 4th century BC work, *Retorike* (Ῥητορική). In Paul's speech there are several things that are in accordance with the culture of the time, such as 1. offering *exordium* and *narratio* (introduction and narrative story of what has happened) (verse 17:22-23a); 2. presenting *propositio* and *partitio* (claims/positions and arguments) (verse 17:23b-27); 3. providing *confirmatio* (positive evidence of his arguments) (verse 17:28-29); and 4. ending with *peroratio* (call to action) (verse 17:30-31).<sup>146</sup> Paul, as the skillful Greco-Roman rhetorician did, provided a place for controversial announcements such as repentance, judgment day, and the resurrection of Jesus.

In addition, Paul's speech also fulfills the three principles of rhetoric expressed by Aristotle, namely *ethos* (conviction or convincing character), *logos* (ratio or strong argumentation), and *pathos* (emotion or emotional appeal).<sup>147</sup> *Ethos* (Acts 17:22-23) is where the speaker establishes his credibility, *logos* is a logical argument (verses 24-29), *pathos* (vv. 30-31) is where the speaker uses emotional appeals to encourage his audience to engage in his arguments and respond to the questions posed and challenges given. In summary, from a

---

<sup>144</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 244–245.

<sup>145</sup> David K. Bryan and David K. Pao, *Ascent into heaven in Luke-Acts : new explorations of Luke's narrative hinge* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 275-76.

<sup>146</sup> James W Ellis, “The Apostle Paul in Athens: ‘An Unknown God,’ Pagan Poetry, and Christian Contextualization,” *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 11, no. 6 (2023): 26.

<sup>147</sup> Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 518.

rhetorical standpoint, Paul's speech puts him on par with the high-caliber philosophers of the ancient world, proving that it is unlikely that Paul had any direct training in Stoic philosophy, but his dialogues with outsiders undoubtedly exposed him to elements of Stoic thought circulating in middle-class intellectual discourse.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, Paul's speech at the Areopagus is the only sermon narrated by the author that was delivered to the Gentiles by an apostle to the Gentiles.<sup>149</sup>

Broadly speaking, Paul's argument (vv. 17:24-29) is very similar to the structure of the Stoic arguments used to prove the existence of the gods and their attributes. This argument usually starts with the existence of the gods (cf. v. 24a). It then moves on to detail their character (vv. 24b-25) and then illustrates that they rule the world (v. 26). The argument ends with a demonstration of how the gods take care of people and their needs (vv. 27-29). This shows that Paul not only mastered the rhetorical devices of his time, but also the arguments of others.<sup>150</sup> Then, Paul entered the core of preaching, namely delivering the gospel teachings. Third, the results of Paul's contextualization efforts can be seen from the community's response, where some people believed while others rejected.<sup>151</sup> Afterwards, Paul made the smart decision to use the context of the church at that time as the foundation for delivering the word. In Athens, where there were educated people known for the presence of epicureans and stoics, Paul wisely adopted this context as the basis for contextualization. This can be seen through the choice of language used by Paul when preaching, where he chose words that suited the intellect and understanding of the Athenians, who tended to be rhetorical.

---

<sup>148</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts. Volume 3, 15:1-23:35: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 607–08.

<sup>149</sup> Alan J. Bale, *Genre and Narrative Coherence in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 157.

<sup>150</sup> Martin Dibelius and K. C. Hanson, *The Book of Acts: Form, Style, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 114–21.

<sup>151</sup> Iwan Setiawan “Kontekstualisasi Menurut Kisah Para Rasul 17:16-34,” 378.

So it can be seen that the pattern of Paul's evangelism in Athens saw a religious culture there that had a pattern of gods or polytheism and then saw a temple for the “unknown God” Paul used this to contextualize the gospel to non-Jews in Athens so that the people there could understand the message conveyed by Paul and could easily accept what Paul wanted to emphasize. Paul placed a transformative culture so that he could modify the culture in the light of his teachings.

### **Dialogical and Continuous Preaching**

The dialogical and contextual approach to preaching in this passage can be identified from several key aspects. First of all, Paul demonstrated a deep understanding of the local context by paying attention to the social circumstances in Athens before preaching the gospel. Second, despite rejecting idolatry, Paul still respected the local culture and used these cultural elements as a starting point to teach the truth about Christ. Thirdly, Paul communicated the messages of Christ in a way that was relevant and understood within the context of the Athenian culture. Last, while some people rejected the gospel message, there were also those who were attracted to and accepted the message, such as Dionysius, Damaris, and others, showing that a culturally sensitive approach can open the door to deeper dialog and understanding.

The continuity aspect is portrayed by Luke using the same term, “he argued” (διελέγετο; 17:2; 17:17), to describe Paul's teaching before the Jewish audience in the synagogue and before the Greek audience in the agora. The term indicates a dialogical style of teaching, where the audience can ask questions and make comments, and can also refer to a discourse or lecture. The imperfect tense of the verb indicates that Paul's missionary activity continued in the Jewish community and among the Athenians. The imperfect tense of this verb shows that Paul's missionary activity continued in the Jewish community and among the Athenians. The prepositional phrase translated as “day by day” (κατὰ πᾶσαν ἡμέραν) marks that Paul's teaching in the agora became a habit, which is also

reinforced by the present participle which describes his audience as “those who happened to be there” (παρατυγχάνοντας).<sup>152</sup> This shows the usual pattern of Luke's writings where Paul first approaches the Jews. However, what is striking here is that, in contrast to other passages, we are told that Paul preached both to Jews in the synagogue and to Gentiles in the marketplace at the same time. The use of the word “dielegeeto” describes Paul's manner of discussion in the marketplace, which is reminiscent of the Socratic method. This verse describes the scene with a distinctive local color. It should be considered a literary creation as it gives color to the narrative. The clear contrast between the two groups only serves to create a certain environment.<sup>153</sup> As a result, Paul's narrative in Athens in Acts 17:16-34 provides a clear picture of the importance of a culturally open approach to evangelization, respecting local traditions and delivering the religious message in a way that is relevant and understandable to the local community.

### **Mission in Indonesia with a multicultural context**

Mission is one of the tasks of the church so that all people can speak of a personal God with special characteristics or referred to as *Missio Dei*.<sup>154</sup> Mission in the Vulgate, the word “mittère” is translated from the Greek words “pempain” and “apostelein” which means to send. These two Greek terms appear 206 times in the New Testament. The term “sent ones” or *missionarius* comes from the Greek word *apostolos*. Their task is called *missio*, which is translated from the Greek word *apostolé*, which appears 4 times in the Acts of the Apostles. In the development of their use, the terms mission and apostolate, which basically mean the same thing, have changed in meaning. The term “apostolate” or “apostolate” is used to refer to general pastoral activities, while “mission” or

---

<sup>152</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 1132-33.

<sup>153</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 189.

<sup>154</sup> J. Andrew Kirk and Pericles Katoppo, *Apa itu misi?: Suatu Penelusuran Teologis* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2012), 27-28.



“sending” is used for activities of spreading the faith.<sup>155</sup> The explanation of Paul's approach to contextualizing the gospel teachings to the general public in an area or region, which in this context was Athens, provides some things that can be adopted in today's mission.

### **Not Denominations but Christ**

Preach the gospel to the whole world and make disciples of every nation. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:19-20). Then he said to them: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). These are the two great commissions that Jesus gave to everyone who believes in him. When Paul was in Athens, he sequentially used the theocentric method and the Christocentric method. Initially, Paul spoke in general terms about God as the creator, governor and sustainer of the universe (theocentric method). After that, he began to discuss God's special role as the judge who will judge everyone.<sup>156</sup>

From the beginning, preaching must be Christ-centered (*en christo*) - Christ-focused. Preaching must be faithful to its calling to be one with Christ as the center of the Kingdom of God (cf. John 15; Galatians 2; Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12, 14). Christ is God's grace, God's reconciliation, God's steadfast love, God's justice, and God's care. When everyone is one with Christ, the public space becomes a shared space, living in God's grace. The incarnation of Jesus is an act of God that makes the virtual world into the real world, God becomes human (John 1:14). The essence of the incarnation itself is presence, His word is present, so the church is present in the reality and facts of human life. God's presence is seen in the transformation of heaven to earth. This transformation is expressed by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer: “hallowed be your name; your kingdom

<sup>155</sup> Edmund Woga, *Dasar-Dasar Misiologi* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 2002), 14.

<sup>156</sup> Ramses James Damping, “DISTORSI TEOLOGI MISI KAUM OIKUMENIKAL INDONESIA DITINJAU DARI PENGAJARAN KISAH PARA RASUL 17:16-3” 7, no. 1 (2022): 18-19.

come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:9-10). The gospel of Jesus Christ makes the heavenly nature happen on earth. This is repositioning, where the holiness, kingdom, and will of God who reigns in heaven, become manifest on earth.<sup>157</sup>

Christology is dialogical, pluralistic and evolutionary.<sup>158</sup> New Testament Christology is the result of dialogue, although this does not mean that the early Christians simply borrowed images that existed in Jewish and pagan thought to understand Jesus. When Christians used images from the pagan world to describe Christ, they did so carefully through critical adaptation of those views. For example, the Greek view of the universal logos and the Jewish concept of wisdom being active in creation were existing patterns of thought. These patterns were adopted in a critical manner. In this process of adoption, there was a kind of “dialog” between Christianity and these ideas. Christology in the New Testament must be understood as part of a gradual evolutionary process.<sup>159</sup> However, this evolution is not linear and progressive. Instead, it develops like a spiral, slowly deepening the understanding of the mystery found in Jesus.

### **An “adaptive” Theology**

The process towards adaptive theology is influenced by several factors, namely social and cultural changes that make society develop with new values and norms, so religion needs to adjust without losing its identity. Then, interfaith dialog requires openness and respect for other beliefs, so an adaptive attitude helps build harmonious relationships and cooperation. And theological renewal allows religious thought to evolve according to the needs of the times, while

---

<sup>157</sup> Martongo Sitinjak, “Misionaris Di Ruang Publik: memberitakan Injil Dalam Dunia Yang Terus Berubah,” in *Konteks Berteologi: Pergumulan Teologis Dalam Kehidupan Bergereja Di Indonesia (Festschrift 65 Tahun Pdt. Dr. Darwin Lumbantobing)*, 48–62.

<sup>158</sup> Jan. S. Aritonang, “Keunikan Kristus dan kemajemukan,” in *Agama dalam Dialog*, ed. Olaf Schumann (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1999), 196.

<sup>159</sup> Jan. S. Aritonang, “Keunikan Kristus dan kemajemukan”, 196-97.

maintaining basic values.<sup>160</sup> However, what is most important in creating an adaptive theology is for the gospel to be universally understood according to the context and experience of every human being.

Mission interacts with the local cultural context, transforming but not erasing it. Local culture is not only considered an “object” but can also be a “subject,” meaning that culture itself is a force that can be positive or negative, supportive of humanity or anti-humanity, glorifying God or anti-God. This cultural ambivalence shows that when talking about the “seed” of the gospel being sown in cultural soil, it is as if the seed is active and the soil is passive.<sup>161</sup>

Richard Niebuhr also offers how faith relates to culture with 5 ethical attitudes, which are:<sup>162</sup>

1. Radical attitude that does not recognize the relationship between faith and culture
2. Accommodation that makes culture accommodated and utilized to explain Christian faith
3. Synthetic attitude of faith and culture into complementary values
4. Dualistic culture is placed in a position that may be right and may be wrong
5. Transformatic, which is by placing culture under the light of the Bible and then transformed so that it can be accepted in the Christian life

So we can see the pattern of Paul's evangelism in Athens seeing the religious culture there which has a pattern of gods or polytheism and then seeing a temple for the “unknown God” Paul used this to contextualize the gospel by setting a culturally transformative attitude and theology that he applied to the non-Jews in Athens so that the people there could understand the message conveyed by Paul and could easily accept what Paul wanted to emphasize. Paul

---

<sup>160</sup> Dapot Damanik et al., “Sikap Adaptif dalam Konteks Keragaman Hidup Beragama,” *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 8, no. 2 (April, 2024): 1049–1950.

<sup>161</sup> Emmanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Berteologi Dalam Konteks: Pemikiran-Pemikiran Mengenai Kontekstualisasi Teologi Di Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2000), 163–64.

<sup>162</sup> Darwin Lumbantobing, *HKBP do HKBP, HKBP Is HKBP: Penggalan Teologis Dalam Sejarah, Tradisi, Dan Dogma HKBP* (Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2017), 238–39.

was culturally transformative so that he could modify the culture in the light of his teachings.

Mission, which is not only defined as preaching the gospel but also as witnessing, is ultimately a real presence, as it introduces core Christian values in diverse lives. It is also called substantive because it demands the elimination of symbols and formalities in the spread of Christianity. This means that the proclamation of the good news of peace for all people does not require specific claims to Christianity. If such claims were made, the substantive mission would undermine its own purpose.<sup>163</sup> Thus, an adaptive contextual theology is the application needed to present these substantive Christian values.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thus, Acts 17:16-34 concretely illustrates the importance of contextualizing the gospel message in preaching. Paul realized that a contextual approach was necessary for the gospel message to be understood. Paul offers several methods, the first is an inductive approach, which is an approach that moves from general context to specific context so that through this process Paul successfully “marries” understanding in Christianity according to the context in Athens at that time. Then contextualizing relevant teaching, Paul saw how the Athenian context at that time and then adopted the pattern so that it could be understood by the people in Athens. Lastly, dialogical and continuous preaching, Paul implemented a two-way conversation and the teaching he taught did not stop but was continuous. In today's pluralistic and diverse contemporary world, the contextualization method as practiced by Paul becomes very relevant to answer the challenges in preaching the gospel. Through inclusive, relevant and previously offered approaches, moreover, the core of evangelism should be Christ-centered and not on the teachings of certain denominations and also have

---

<sup>163</sup> Syaiful Arif, “Misi Kristen dan Dampaknya bagi Kemajemukan,” *Jurnal Multikultural & Multireligius* 13, no. 1 (2014): 88.

an “adaptive” theology so that the message of the gospel can be delivered in a way that is more acceptable and understandable to various groups of society.

## REFERENCES

- Arif, Syaiful. “Misi Kristen dan Dampaknya bagi Kemajemukan.” *Jurnal Multikultural & Multireligius* 13, no. 1 (2014): 88.
- Aritonang, Jan. S. “Keunikan Kristus dan kemajemukan.” In *Agama dalam Dialog*, ed. Olaf Schumann. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1999.
- Armawi, Armaidy. *Filsafat Barat: pra-modern*. Depok, Sleman, D.I. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2021.
- Bale, Alan J. *Genre and Narrative Coherence in the Acts of the Apostles*. Library of New Testament studies 514. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.
- Barrett, Charles K. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Introduction and Commentary on Acts XV - XXVIII*. London: T&T Clark, 1998.
- Brown, Colin. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (v. 1)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975.
- Cadbury, Henry J. *The Book of Acts in History*. ed. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2004.
- Damanik, Dapot, Wilson Simanjuntak, Jaya Nainggolan, and Antoni Ricardo Pasaribu. “Sikap Adaptif dalam Konteks Keragaman Hidup Beragama.” *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 8, no. 2 (April 2024): 1044–1051.
- Damping, Ramses James. “DISTORSI TEOLOGI MISI KAUM OIKUMENIKAL INDONESIA DITINJAU DARI PENGAJARAN KISAH PARA RASUL 17:16-3.” *Jurnal Teologi Biblika* 7, no. 1 (2022): 18-19.
- Darmawijaya. *Kisah Para Rasul*. Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2006.
- Dibelius, Martin, and K. C. Hanson. *The Book of Acts: Form, Style, and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Drewes, B. F. *Tafsiran Alkitab: Kitab Kisah Para Rasul*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2014.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016.
- Ellis, James W. “The Apostle Paul in Athens: ‘An Unknown God,’ Pagan Poetry,

- and Christian Contextualization.” *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 11, no. 6 (2023): 20–33.
- Fernando, Ajith. *Acts: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998.
- Finaka, Andrean W. “Sebaran Jumlah Suku Di Indonesia | Indonesia Baik.” Accessed October 6, 2024.  
<https://indonesiabaik.id/infografis/sebaran-jumlah-suku-di-indonesia>.
- Singgih, Emmanuel Gerrit. *Berteologi Dalam Konteks: Pemikiran-Pemikiran Mengenai Kontekstualisasi Teologi Di Indonesia*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2000.
- Hamm, M. Dennis. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005.
- Keener, Craig S. *Acts. Volume 3, 15:1-23:35: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014.
- Kirk, J. Andrew, and Pericles Katoppo. *Apa itu misi?: Suatu Penelusuran Teologis*. Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2012.
- Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- Lotter, G. A., and G. G. Thompson. “Acts 17:16-34 as Paradigm in Responding to Postmodernity.” *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 39, no. 4 (July 2005): 695–714.
- Lüdemann, Gerd. *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Lumbantobing, Darwin. *HKBP Do HKBP, HKBP Is HKBP: Penggalan Teologis Dalam Sejarah, Tradisi, Dan Dogma HKBP*. Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2017.
- Parsons, Mikeal Carl. *Acts*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Polhill, John B. *Acts*. The New American commentary v. 26. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1992.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament. A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Ribeiro, David. “PAUL’S DIALOGUE WITH THE AREOPAGUS IN ACTS 17:16-34: PRESENTING ABSOLUTE TRUTHS TO A RELATIVISTIC WORLD.” *WRS Journal* 6, no. 2 (August 1999): 12-15.

- Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Acts: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012.
- Setiawan, Iwan, and Reagen Petrus Banea. “Kontekstualisasi menurut Kisah Para Rasul 17:16-34.” *Te Deum (Jurnal Teologi dan Pengembangan Pelayanan)* 12, no. 2 (June, 2023): 359–378.
- Sheeley, Steven M. *Narrative Asides in Luke-Acts*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Sitinjak, Martongo. “Misionaris Di Ruang Publik: memberitakan Injil Dalam Dunia Yang Terus Berubah.” In *Konteks Berteologi: Pergumulan Teologis Dalam Kehidupan Bergereja Di Indonesia (Festschrift 65 Tahun Pdt. Dr. Darwin Lumbantobing)*.
- Sugiono, Panjhi. “Pendekatan Penginjilan Kontekstual Paulus Berdasarkan Kisah Para Rasul 17:16-34.” *Jurnal Ilmu Teologi dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 1, no. 2 (December 2020): 87.
- Sutejo, Bonaventura Priyo, and R.F. Bhanu Viktorahadi Pr. “The Relevance of Paul’s Preaching Activities in Athens to the Preaching of the Church Based on Acts 17:16-34.” *Khazanah Sosial* 4, no. 1 (March 2022): 145–160.
- Tarmedi, Petrus Alexander Didi. “ANALISIS NARATIF: SEBUAH METODE HERMENEUTIKA KRISTIANI KITAB SUCI”..
- Vickers, Brian J. *ESV Expository Commentary: Vol. IX. John - Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton, and Jay Sklar. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019.
- Witherington, Ben. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Nachdr. Grand Rapids, Michigan.: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Woga, Edmund. *Dasar-dasar misiologi*. Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 2002.
- Yandian, Bob. *Acts: A New Testament Commentary*. Tulsa, OK: Harrison House Publishers, 2016.