



“A Bird in the Hand ...”

Pedro Ramos-Goycolea
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California

May 29, 2011
Acts 17:22–31 (NRSV)

Justo Gonzalez is a Hispanic scholar, internationally recognized from Argentina to Canada, and possibly in Europe, as one of the best contemporary Christian historians. He is also one of my favorite biblical commentators. Justo wrote a series of biblical studies, one of them called *Three Months with the Spirit*. In his commentary, Justo infers that the title of the book of Acts is wrong—well, not wrong, but inaccurate. Often, we refer to it as the Acts of the Apostles, and actually that’s the title of Acts in many bibles. What Justo suggests is that it should be called the Acts of the Spirit, because ultimately that’s what the story is about. The way he supports this argument is that the author of Acts puts an emphasis only on one of Jesus’ disciples, Peter. The other main apostle that appears in the book is Paul, but he wasn’t an apostle of Jesus’; he converted later. So, in the strict sense of the word “apostle,” as one who walked with Jesus, Acts really focuses on Peter and does it in only half of the narrative. It then focuses on Paul, who wasn’t an apostle and, once Paul reaches Rome, he is never mentioned again. Justo’s argument, then, is that the book of Acts is really about telling the story of the Spirit, not the story of the apostles. The protagonist in this story is the Spirit, how it works through the disciples and through God’s church¹.

Many scholars have written numerous studies on the Gospel of Luke and on the book of Acts, and a lot of them particularly focus on the relationship between both. It is generally known that the book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Because of various evidences found in both books, one can assume that Luke and Acts were written by the same author. I think that given these evidences, one can read Acts in light of the Gospel and the other way around. In general, the Gospel narrates the story of Jesus, and Acts narrates the beginnings of the early church. The book of Acts tells how the church became the embodiment of the resurrected Christ in the world but, more specifically, also talks about the work of the Spirit in those beginnings. That is where the title to Gonzalez’ commentary comes from.

¹ Justo L. González, *Tres Meses En La Escuela Del Espíritu* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 7-8.

I agree with Justo and think that the title of the book of Acts is somewhat inaccurate. My issue with the title is more because, as a seminarian, I like to feel encouraged and challenged to expand my perspective on something. My experience has been that when one is challenged by different contexts, cultures, languages, church settings, and others, one's understanding of God expands. One can no longer think the same way about God and about God's people.

When I read the title "The Acts of the Apostles," it felt like a person's attention was narrowed to read only the life and actions of the apostles, leaving out of focus the work of the Spirit in this entire story. The reason why I mention this issue with the title is not because I'm stressed about it, but because it is good to realize that I don't have to focus only on Paul's sermon. The way Paul is portrayed in this scripture is of a very intolerant person who believes that his God is better than any other god in the world. I don't have anything personal with Paul; moreover, the problem is with the readers of Paul, and a lot of the theology developed out of Pauline writings. Reading this passage over and over, I had a hard time empathizing with it. While I don't think that one necessarily needs to empathize with a biblical passage, I just could not relate to Paul's sermon.

The kind of language that we find in this scripture very often has been used to promote hate and intolerance towards other religious faiths. I think the scripture is trying to encourage a different feeling, though. To me, this episode in the life of Paul and of the early church is not about intolerance as much as it is of a challenge to open their mind to a different world.

If one reads the verses before the 22nd, one can see that Paul ended up in Athens more by chance than anything else. Paul was waiting in Athens for two other colleagues who were going to join him on their way to a different place. Paul was hanging around, waiting for his friends, and after witnessing the many gods and goddesses in that city, felt greatly distressed and started to preach.

What I find astonishing in this scripture is that the author is saying that Paul chose to preach based on the statue of the unknown god on the Aeropagus. Who can really claim to know God? I mean, if we go back to the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, YHWH is really an unknown, great mystery. For instance, Moses encounters God on a burning bush, but God never gives its name to Moses, God simply says, "I Am Who I Am." In the New Testament, in Ephesians, the writer says, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."² So in both Testaments, there is always this greater dimension of God that no one can totally comprehend.

I wonder if Paul is really a well-intentioned guy in this story. I know Paul is not popular in our churches, but I wonder if the author of Acts is really showing Paul more than an intolerant person, more as someone who was inaccurate in his words when encountering the unknown.

² NRSV

Let me go back a little bit to better understand Paul's sermon. In chapter 9, Paul encountered Jesus on his way to Damascus. A light from heaven flashed around him, and Paul fell to the ground. A voice is heard to say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (in Acts, Saul and Paul refer to the same person). Paul asks, "Who are you, Lord?" Paul doesn't know who Jesus is. Then in chapter 13, Paul is sent out as a missionary by the church in Antioch. Paul then is found preaching in Athens, in the Aeropagus, about the unknown god, but Paul doesn't mention Jesus' name in his sermon.

At the beginning of my sermon, I said that Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. In the last two stories we find in Luke, Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection and they didn't recognize him. In one of the stories, Jesus appears to two of the disciples and walks with them. While they walk, they talk about Jesus and all the things that Jesus did, but they don't recognize that it is Jesus walking with them. In fact, they don't know it is Jesus until they sit together at the table to share a meal, and then Jesus disappears from their sight. As we can see, more than once Jesus is unknown to the disciples, as he is unknown to Paul.

The situation that Paul faced in Athens was extremely awkward, a new experience for Paul and the early church. This new Christian movement was growing and growing; at first 2000 converted, then 5000. In fact, Paul himself was a great addition to the movement. They were experiencing miracle after miracle until this point. But in Athens the results were very poor. The church didn't expand, and there were only a few believers.

The issue in Paul's sermon really is not the diversity of divinities. Moreover, I think that he was struggling with an unknown culture. The God that Paul was preaching about was unknown to the Athenians, and the Athenians' gods were repulsive to Paul. Paul's conflict in Athens is totally understandable. He comes from a monotheist religion, and from a very strict school of Jewish law, and in Athens he was among a diversity of gods and goddesses. But this is not Paul's struggle only. This is the struggle of the early church trying to understand Jesus in a gentile world.

Before coming to PSR, besides starting a new Hispanic church I also served as representative to the National Hispanic Caucus in the Disciples of Christ, and as President of the Hispanic Council in the Southwest Conference with the UCC. My understanding of church has been marked by a new movement of Hispanic ministries in our denominations. My experience serving on these different ministries makes me understand also that most of our Hispanic pastors feel like Paul in our denominations. Most of them live struggling in the midst of an unknown culture, among unknown gods, and unknown Christian denominations.

This is not only true for Hispanic pastors, though. How many times have you felt like Paul, struggling with a different culture, a different language, perhaps surrounded by unknown people and unknown traditions, even within your "own" people?

To talk about a multicultural denomination is to talk about an unknown thing. I think that in trying to establish Hispanic ministries in our progressive churches, everyone feels like

Paul—trying to understand Jesus in an unknown world. I wish I had the formula to do this, but this still is an unknown path. However, the good news is that this is not our work. We are not protagonists in the changing story of the church. Ultimately, it is God's Spirit moving and transforming our world.

I do think, though, that this story is one of a challenge, an invitation to open the mind and the heart, an invitation to understand God in different and new ways. Because for every time we step out of our boxes and stretch ourselves a little bit more, God is revealed to us in a greater and unknown dimension.