

## Non-Church Religious Collectivities: An Examination of the “Areopagus” Argument

By Tim Haile

Some brethren cite Paul’s use of the Areopagus (Acts 17:19) as proof that human religious institutions and business organizations may be formed and funded to conduct Bible lectureships and engage in other types of evangelistic work. The word “Areopagus” is a transliteration of the Greek words *Areios Pagos*, or **Hill of Ares**. “Ares” was the Greek *god of war*. The Areopagus was a *hill* that was named after the Greek god of war. And though the Bible nowhere describes it, secular sources tell us that there was also a *court* after the same name. This court was like a town council, but with additional *judicial* and *executive* functions.

In order for brethren to make the Areopagus argument, the Areopagus *organization* must be substituted for the Areopagus *place*. They argue that the Areopagus *organization* invited Paul to speak and provided for him a facility. They describe the Areopagus as an *organized collective*. One brother wrote concerning Paul’s preaching at the Areopagus:

“Dear readers, Paul had this day become involved with a human institution in the city of Athens, Greece. There is no doubt about it, in fact any way you interpret it, he was involved with a human institution. Not only so, but it was a collectivity of human origin of the secular variety, which on this particular day was to become a ‘religious collectivity’ on account of the particular speaker and the special topic of consideration. Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ, was to address his distinguished group of Athenians at ‘Athens University’ on a topic of spiritual interest and of religious concern” (“We Have a Right: Studies in religious Collectivities,” Pg. 69).

Secular historical accounts **do** describe the Areopagus *court* or *council*, but no Scripture ever describes the Areopagus as an “organization.” One cannot use the language of Scripture to make such a claim. Luke described the Areopagus only as a **place** that Paul preached, not as an organization. The only thing that can be proven by the Areopagus preaching narrative is that gospel preachers are authorized to preach *against* the errors and religious misconceptions that are propagated by men. No authority can be found in the Areopagus narrative for the establishment of man-made religious organizations to preach the gospel and conduct worship services.

Let us assume that Luke does use the word “Areopagus” to describe the Areopagus *court*, so that Paul’s standing “in the midst of the Areopagus” means that he stood in the midst of the Areopagus *court* members. We are told that the

Epicureans and Stoics “took hold of Paul and brought Him to the Areopagus” (vs. 19). Does this really sound like what we would call an “invitation?” Was this a *joint* evangelistic venture? Or was Paul being *required* to explain himself? Albert Barnes says of the Areopagus court,

“This court took cognizance of murders, impieties, and immoralities; they punished vices of all kinds, including idleness; they rewarded the virtuous; they were especially attentive to blasphemies against the gods, and to the performance of the sacred mysteries of religion. It was, therefore, with the greatest propriety that Paul was brought before this tribunal, as being regarded as a setter forth of strange gods, and as being supposed to wish to introduce a new mode of worship.”

Assuming it to be a convention of the Areopagus *court* before whom Paul spoke, had his doctrine been judged as blasphemous “against the gods,” the Areopagus court could have killed him in the same way that it had killed others for blaspheming the gods (polytheism, see Acts 17:16).

The conclusion is simple. If Luke did have reference to the Areopagus *court* in this passage, then the Epicureans and Stoics who took Paul to the Areopagus served as agents of the court. If so, this passage does not describe a mutually agreed preaching arrangement, where the topic was selected by the preaching organization and assigned to the preacher. It would actually amount to a *trial*, at which Paul gave his defense before the court and they consequently judged him to be either *guilty* or *innocent* of treasonous doctrine and philosophy.

Some suggest that the Bible does *indirectly* reference the Areopagus organization by its stating that Dionysius was an “Areopagite” (Acts 17:34). It is argued that “Areopagite” describes this man’s occupation, not his place of origin. Since I do not deny the records of secular historians, I, like others, would *assume* that this means that Dionysius was a member of the Areopagus council, but this cannot be conclusively demonstrated from Scripture. If the suffix “ite” in “Areopagite” necessarily means occupation, then what was the *occupation* of a Canaanite (Matt. 10:4), Ninevite (Lk. 11:30), Israelite (Jn. 1:47) or Elamite (Acts 2:9)? The only thing that is suggested by the “ite” in these words is the particular geographical location or genealogy of those so identified. The suffix does not necessarily imply *work description, vocation, or organizational affiliations*. To argue that it does is to do so upon the basis of pure conjecture.

## The Areopagus as an “Organization”

When we do *leave the Bible* and look to secular history we discover that the Areopagus did exist as an *organization*, but that it was actually a *civic* body, not a spiritual one. Consider the following from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:

“This court exercised the right of capital punishment. In 594 bc the jurisdiction in criminal cases was given to the archons who had discharged the duties of their office well and honorably, consequently to the noblest, richest and most distinguished citizens of Athens. The Areopagus saw that the laws in force were observed and executed by the properly constituted authorities; it could bring officials to trial for their acts while in office, even raise objections to all resolutions of the Council and of the General Assembly, if the court perceived a danger to the state, or subversion of the constitution. The Areopagus also protected the worship of the gods, the sanctuaries and sacred festivals, and the olive trees of Athens; and it supervised the religious sentiments of the people, the moral conduct of the citizens, as well as the education of the youth. Without waiting for a formal accusation the Areopagus could summon any citizen to court, examine, convict and punish him. Under unusual circumstances full powers could be granted by the people to this body for the conduct of various affairs of state; when the safety of the city was menaced, the court acted even without waiting for full power to be conferred upon it.”

The Areopagus was a legal and judicial body. It was not a religious body. Based upon the above (reliable) description, the functions of the Areopagus council fell under the auspices of Romans 13:1-4, not Matthew 28:19 or Ephesians 4:12-16. The court may have either *allowed* or even *required* Paul to speak, but Paul preached *to* the council, not *through* the council. Paul did not *jointly participate* in any Areopagus-*organization* (2 Cor. 6:14-16); he merely used their *facility* and *forum*. He did not *worship, sing* or *pray* with these heathens, he preached directly *against* their religious, philosophical and ideological concepts. This can be easily seen by comparing the beliefs of the Epicureans and Stoics with Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus. It is utterly inconceivable that good brethren would cite Paul’s use of the “Hill of Ares” as proof that men are divinely authorized to form and fund worship and evangelistic societies today.

### Usage of “Areopagus” in the Bible

Acts 17 specifies 3 places that Paul used as preaching venues in the city of Athens: the *synagogue*, the *agora* and the *Areopagus*. Let us consider the passages:

**The Synagogue - Acts 17:17a** – “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and devout persons...” Synagogues were *built* (Lk. 7:5) for the purpose of allowing the Jews a place to read and comment on the Scriptures (Lk. 4:15-ff). Paul customarily used synagogues as teaching venues because religious Jews could be

found in synagogues. Paul would open the Jewish Scriptures and prove from them that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 17:2, 3).

**The Agora - Acts 17:17b** – “*So he reasoned... in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.*” As shown by the English translations, the Greek word “agora” means marketplace. As Paul did with the Jews in the synagogue, he did with Greeks in the marketplace – he reasoned with them concerning Christ. The Athenian marketplace was a place of great public concourse. Athenians used this place as a place for selling and trading provisions and for the exchange of philosophical ideas. Paul used the marketplace to proclaim and discuss Christ.

**The Areopagus - Acts 17:18, 19** – Among those who conversed with Paul in the marketplace were certain Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. These men were intrigued by Paul’s “new” message of Jesus and the resurrection, so they “*took hold of him*” and brought him to the Areopagus. They wanted Paul to explain the *meaning* of his “new” and “strange” doctrine (vs. 20). The Areopagus (*Mars’ Hill*, KJV) provided a place and a forum for Paul to “*stand*” and address the “*men of Athens*” (vs. 22). Dionysius, Damaris and others were converted by Paul’s anti-idolatry sermon. Others scoffed at the notion of the resurrection.

## Conclusion

The actual word “Areopagus” describes one of the literal *places* where Paul preached while he was in Athens. If Luke did use the word in its *figurative* sense to describe the *court* that convened at the place of the Areopagus, then Paul’s Mars’ hill sermon amounted to his defense before that court. Since Paul later “*went out from their midst,*” seemingly of his own accord, then we conclude that he failed to be indicted for any crimes against the state and was free to go (Acts 17:33). Nothing is said in Acts 17 about some Areopagus *organization* planning and advertising a gospel meeting, inviting Paul to speak and assigning him a topic. The Areopagus “*institution*” did not preach the gospel *through* the apostle Paul! Paul preached against the beliefs of those who brought him to the Areopagus. Nothing about this narrative provides *authority* for brethren to form, organize, fund and operate non-church evangelistic, edification and worship collectivities. There is no parallel between what happened at the Areopagus and what some are trying to defend today. These brethren must look elsewhere for their authority.

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