The Encounter of Jerusalem With Athens

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What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?... Our instructions come from "the porch of Solomon".... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus...!

So said Tertullian in his *Prescription against Heretics* (VII). Tertullian's question, what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?, dramatically expresses one of the perennial issues in Christian thought—a problem which cannot be escaped by any Biblical interpreter, theologian, or apologist. We all operate on the basis of *some* answer to that question, whether we give it explicit and thoughtful attention or not. It is not a matter of *whether* we will answer the question, but only of *how well* we will do so.

What does Tertullian's question ask? It inquires into the proper relation between Athens, the prime example of secular learning, and Jerusalem, the symbol of Christian commitment and thought. How does the proclamation of the Church relate to the teaching of the philosophical Academy? In one way or another, this question has constantly been before the mind of the church. How should faith and philosophy interact? Which has controlling authority over the other? How should the believer respond to alleged conflicts between revealed truth and extrabiblical instruction (in history, science, or what have you)? What is the proper relation between reason and revelation, between secular opinion and faith, between what is taught outside the church and what is preached inside?

This issue is particularly acute for the Christian apologist. When a believer offers a reasoned defense of the Christian hope that is within him (in obedience to 1 Peter 3:15), it is more often than not set forth in the face of some conflicting perspective. As we evangelize unbelievers in our culture, they rarely hold to the authority of the Bible and submit to it from the outset. The very reason most of our friends and neighbors *need* an evangelistic witness is that they hold a different outlook on life, a different philosophy, a different authority for their thinking. How, then, does the apologist respond to the *conflicting* viewpoints and sources of truth given adherence by those to whom he witnesses? What should he think "Athens" has to do with "Jerusalem" just here?

Christians have long disagreed over the proper strategy to be assumed by a believer in the face of unbelieving opinions or scholarship. Some renounce extrabiblical learning altogether ("Jerusalem versus Athens"). Others reject Biblical teaching when it conflicts with secular thought ("Athens versus Jerusalem"). Some try to appease both sides, saying that the Bible and reason have their own separate domains ("Jerusalem segregated from Athens"). Others attempt a mingling of the two, holding that we can find isolated elements of supportive truth in extrabiblical learning ("Jerusalem integrated with Athens"). Still others maintain that extrabiblical reasoning can properly proceed only upon the foundation of Biblical truth ("Jerusalem the capital of Athens").

The Biblical Exemplar

Now it turns out that the Bible has not left us in the dark in answering Tertullian's important question. Luke's account of the early church, The Acts of the Apostles, offers a classic encounter between Biblical commitment and secular thought. And appropriately enough, this encounter takes place between a superb representative of "Jerusalem"—the apostle Paul—and the intellectuals of Athens. The exemplary meeting between the two is presented in Acts 17.

Throughout the book of Acts Luke shows us how the ascended Christ established His church through the apostles. We are given a selective recounting of main events and sermons which exhibit the powerful and model work of Christ's servants. They have left us a *pattern* to follow with respect to both our message *and* method today. Thus, it is highly instructive for contemporary apologists to study the way the apostles, like Paul, reasoned and supported their message of hope (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). Paul was an expert at suiting his approach to each unique challenge, and so the manner in which he confronted the Athenian unbelievers who did not profess submission to the Old Testament Scriptures—like most unbelievers in our own culture—will be noteworthy for us.

We know that Paul's approach to such pagans—for instance, those at Thessalonica, where he had been shortly before coming to Athens—was to call them to turn from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His resurrected Son who would judge the world at the consummation (cf. 1 Thess. 1:1-10). In preaching to those who were dedicated to *idols* Paul naturally had to engage in *apologetical* reasoning. Proclamation was inseparable from defense, as F. F. Bruce observes:

> The apostolic preaching was obliged to include an apologetic element if the stumbling-block of the cross was to be overcome; the *kerygma*... must in some degree be *apologia*.

And the *apologia* was not the invention of the apostles; they had all "received" it—received it from the Lord.1[1]

The currently popular tendency of distinguishing witness from defense, or theology from apologetics, would have been preposterous to the apostles. The two require each other and have a common principle and source: Christ's authority. Paul's Christ-directed and apologetical preaching to pagans, especially those who were philosophically inclined (as in Acts 17), then, is paradigmatic for apologists, theologians, and preachers alike today.

Although the report in Acts 17 is condensed, Luke has summarized the main points of Paul's message and method.

But is this Paul at His Best?

Some biblical interpreters have not granted that Acts 17 is an exemplar for the proper encounter of Jerusalem with Athens. Among them there are some who doubt that Paul was genuinely the author of the speech recorded in this chapter, while others think that Paul actually delivered this speech but repudiated its approach when he went on to minister at Corinth. Both groups, it turns out, rest their opinions on insufficient grounds.

A non-evangelical attitude toward the Scripture allows some scholars a supposed liberty to criticize the authenticity or accuracy of its contents, despite the Bible's own claim to flawless perfection as to the truth. In Acts 17:22 Luke identifies the speaker of the Areopagus address as the apostle Paul, and Luke's customary historical accuracy is by now well known among scholars of the New Testament. (Interestingly, classicists have been more generally satisfied with the Pauline authenticity of this speech than have modernist theologians.) Nevertheless, some writers claim to discern a radical difference between the Paul of Areopagus and the Paul of the New Testament epistles. According to the critical view, the Areopagus focuses on world-history rather than the salvation history of Paul's letters, and the speaker at Areopagus teaches that all men are in God by nature, in contrast to the Pauline emphasis on men being in Christ by grace.2[2]

1[1] F.F. Bruce, *The Defence of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), p.18.

2[2] E.g., H. Conzelmann, "The Address of Paul on the Areopagus," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), pp. 217ff. A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: H. Holt, 1931), pp. 6ff.

These judgments rest upon an excessively narrow perception of the writings and theology of Paul. The Apostle understood his audience at Athens: they would have needed to learn of God as the Creator and of His divine retribution against sin (even as the Jews knew these things from the Old Testament) before the message of grace could have meaning. Thus the scope of Paul's theological discussion would necessarily be broader than that normally found in his epistles to Christian churches. Moreover, as we will see as this study progresses, there are conspicuous similarities between the themes of the Areopagus address and what Paul wrote elsewhere in his letters (especially the opening chapters of Romans). Johannes Munch said of the sermon: "its doctrine is a reworking of thoughts in Romans transformed into missionary impulse."3[3] Finally, even given the broader perspective on history found in the address of Acts 17, we cannot overlook the fact that it, in perfect harmony with Paul's more restricted salvation-history elsewhere, is bracketed by creation and final judgment, and that it finds its climax in the resurrected Christ. The speech before the Areopagus was a "plea for the Jewish doctrine of God, and for the specifically Christian emphasis on a 'Son of Man' doctrine of judgment"4[4] (*not* an "idealized scene" printing a message about man's [alleged] "dialectical relation to God").5[5] The Paul on Areopagus is clearly the same Paul who writes in the New Testament epistles.

Did Paul suddenly shift his apologetical strategy after leaving Athens though? It has sometimes been thought that when Paul went on from Athens to Corinth and there determined to know nothing among the people except Christ crucified, repudiating the excellency of wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1-2), he confessed that his philosophical tactics in Athens had been unwise. Disillusioned with his small results in Athens, Paul prematurely departed the city, we are told, and then came to Corinth and became engrossed in the word of God (Acts 18:5), never to use philosophical style again.6[6] This outlook, while intriguing, consists of more speculation and jumping to conclusions than hard evidence.

In the first place, Paul is herein portrayed as a novice in Gentile evangelism at Athens, experimenting with this and that tactic in order to find an effective method. This does not square with the facts. For several years Paul had already been a successful

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3[3] Johannes Munck, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles*, revised by W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), p. 173; cf. Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 383.

4[4] Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 4 (Translation and Commentary) in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part 1, ed. F. J. Roakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965 [1932]), pp. 208-209.

5[5] Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles, a Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971 [German, 1965]), pp. 528, 529.

6[6] E.g., W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), p. 252; cf. P. Vielhauer, "On the 'Paulinism' of Acts," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Keck and Martyn, pp. 36-37.

evangelist in the world of pagan thought; moreover, he was not of an experimental mindset, and elsewhere he made plain that favorable results were not the barometer of faithful preaching. Besides, in Athens his results were *not* completely discouraging (17:34). And of a *premature* departure from Athens the text says nothing. After leaving Athens, Paul can hardly be said to have abandoned the disputing or "dialogue" for which he became known at Athens (cf 17:17); it continued in Corinth (18:4), Ephesus (18:19), and Troas (20:6-7)—being a daily exercise for two years in the school of Tyrannus (19:8-9). It is further inaccurate to project a *contrast* between post-Athens Paul, engrossed in the word, and Athenian Paul, absorbed in extrabiblical thought. Some Greek texts of Acts 17:24-29 (e.g., Nestle's) list up to 22 Old Testament allusions in the margin, thus showing *anything but* a neglect of the Scriptural word in Paul's Athenian preaching!

Mention can again be made of the enlightening harmony that exists between Paul's writings, say in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 1, and his speech in Acts 17. The passages in the epistles help us understand the apologetical thrust of the Areopagus address, rather than clashing with it—as the subsequent study will indicate. Finally, it is quite difficult to imagine that Paul, who had previously declared "Far be it from me to glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14), and who incisively taught the inter-significance of the death and resurrection of Christ (e.g., Rom. 4:25), would proclaim Christ as the resurrected one at Athens *without* explaining that He was also the crucified one—only later (in Corinth) to determine not to neglect the crucifixion again. We must conclude that solid evidence of a dramatic shift in Paul's apologetic mentality simply does not exist.

What Luke portrays for us by way of summary in Acts 17:16-34 can confidently be taken as a speech of the Apostle Paul, a speech which reflected his inspired approach to Gentiles without the Bible, a speech consistent with his earlier and later teachings in the epistles. His approach is indeed an exemplar to us. It was specially selected by Luke for inclusion in his summary history of the early apostolic church. "Apart from the brief summary of the discourse at Lystra..., the address at Athens provides our only evidence of the apostle's direct approach to a pagan audience."[7] With respect to the author's composition of Acts, Martin Dibelius argues: "In giving only one sermon addressed to Gentiles by the great apostle to the Gentiles, namely the Areopagus speech in Athens, his primary purpose is to give an example of how the Christian missionary should approach cultured Gentiles."[8] And in his lengthy study, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Gartner correctly asks this rhetorical question: "How are we to explain the many similarities between the Areopagus speech and the Epistles if the

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7[7] Ned B. Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Areopagus and Other New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 9-10.

8[8] Martin Dielius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 79.

speech did not exemplify Paul's customary sermons to the Gentiles?"[9] In the encounter of Jerusalem with Athens as found in Paul's Areopagus address, we thus find that it was genuinely Paul who was speaking, and that Paul was at his best. Scripture would have us, then, strive to emulate his method.

Intellectual Backgrounds

Before looking at Acts 17 itself, a short historical and philosophical background for the speaker of and listeners to, the Areopagus address would be helpful.

Paul was a citizen of Tarsus, which was not an obscure or insignificant city (Acts 21:39). It was the leading city of Cilicia and famed as a city of learning. In addition to general education, Tarsus was noted for its schools devoted to rhetoric and philosophy. Some of its philosophers gained significant reputations, especially the Stoic leaders Zeno of Tarsus (who cast doubt on the idea of a universal conflagration), Antipater of Tarsus (who addressed a famous argument against Carneade's skepticism), Heraclides of Tarsus (who abandoned the view that "all mistakes are equal"), and Athenodorus the Stoic (who was a teacher of Augustus); Nestor the Academic followed Athenodorus, evidencing thereby the *variety* of philosophic perspectives in Tarsus. The city surely exercised an academic influence on Paul, an influence which would have been broadened later in Paul's life when he came into contact with its culture again for some eight years or so, three years following his conversion. In his early years Paul was also educated by Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), where he excelled as a student (Gal. 1:14). His course of study would have included critical courses in Greek culture and philosophy (as evidence from the Talmud indicates). When we add to this the extensive knowledge of Greek literature and culture which is reflected in his letters, it is manifest that Paul was neither naive nor obscurantist when it came to a knowledge of philosophy and Gentile thought. Given his background, training, and expertise in Scriptural theology, Paul was the ideal representative for the classic confrontation of Jerusalem with Athens.

Athens, the philosophical center of the ancient world, was renowned for its four major schools: The Academy (founded ca. 287 B.C.) of Plato, the Lyceum (335 B.C.) of Aristotle, the Garden (306 B.C.) of Epicurus, and the Painted Porch (300 B.C.) of Zeno.

The outlook of the Academy was radically altered by Arcesilaus and Carneades in the third and second centuries before Christ; respectively, they moved the school into utter skepticism and then probabilism. Carneades relegated the notion of god to impenetrable mystery. When Antiochus of Ascalon claimed to restore the "old Academy" in the first century B.C., in actuality he introduced a syncretistic dogmatism which viewed Stoicism as the true successor to Plato. The Platonic tradition is

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9[9] Bertil Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1955), p. 52.

remembered for the view that man's soul is imprisoned in the body; at death man is healed, as his soul is released from its tomb.

This anti-materialist emphasis was somewhat challenged by Aristotle's Peripatetic school, which denied the possibility of immortality and invested much time in specialized empirical study and classification of the departments of knowledge. The influence of this school had greatly weakened by the time of the New Testament. However, its materialistic proclivity was paralleled in the atomism of Epicureanism.

Democritus had earlier taught that the universe consisted of eternal atoms of matter, ever falling through space; the changing of combinations and configurations of these falling atoms was explained by reference to chance (an irrational "swerve" in the fall of certain atoms). This metaphysic, in combination with an epistemology which maintained that all knowledge stemmed from sense perception, led the Epicurean followers of atomism to believe that a naturalistic explanation of all events could and should be given. By their doctrine of self-explanatory naturalism the Epicureans denied immortality thereby declaring that there was no need to fear death. Moreover, whatever gods there may be would make no difference to men and their affairs. Epicurus taught that long-lasting pleasure was the goal of human behavior and life. Since no after-life was expected (at death a person's atoms disperse into infinite space), human desires should focus on this life alone. And in this life the only genuine long-term pleasure was that of tranquility—being freed from disturbing passions, pains, or fears. To gain such tranquility one must become insulated from disturbances in his life (e.g., interpersonal strife, disease), concentrating on simple pleasures (e.g., a modicum of cheese and wine, conversations with friends) and achieving serenity through the belief that gods never intervene in the world to punish disobedient behavior. Indeed, whatever celestial beings there are, they were taken merely as dream-like images who—in deistic fashion—care nothing about the lives of men. Thus Philodemus wrote: "There is nothing to fear in god. There is nothing to be alarmed at in death." The Epicureans were, as is evident here, antagonistic to theology. Epicurus had taught them to appeal to right reason against superstition. Accordingly Lucretius denied any need for recourse to "unknown gods" in order to explain the plague at Athens or its alleviation.

Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, agreed that sensation was the sole origin of knowledge, and that the mind of man was a *tabula rasa* at birth. However, against Epicurean materialism, he taught that reason governs matter in both man and the world, thus making man a microcosm of the universal macrocosm. Man was viewed as integrated with nature—man's reason seen as being of a piece with the ever-living fire which permeates the world order. This was the "Logos" for the Stoics. As a kind of refined matter that actively permeates all things and determines what will happen, the Logos was the unchanging rational plan of historical change. Nature's highest expression, then, was reason or the world-soul, being personified eventually as god. In addition to this pantheistic thrust, Zeno expounded a cyclic view of history (moving through conflagration-regeneration sequences) which precluded individual immortality. Being subordinated to immanent forces (the divine world-soul and historical determinism) the individual was exhorted to "live in harmony with nature," not

concerning himself with matters which were beyond his control. If life was to be conducted "conformably to nature," and reason was nature's basic expression, then virtue for man was to live in harmony with reason. The rational element in man was to be superior to the emotional. Epictetus wrote that men cannot control events, but they can control their attitude toward events. So everything outside reason, whether it be pleasure, pain, or even death, was to be viewed as indifferent. Stoicism gave rise to a serious attitude, resignation in suffering, stern individualism, and social self-sufficiency. In turn, these achievements produced pride. Aratus and Cleanthes, two pantheistic Stoics of the mid-third century B.C., viewed Zeus as a personification of the unavoidable fate which governs man's life. Later Stoics either abandoned or modified much of Zeno's teaching. For instance, a century after Cleanthes, Panaetius essentially became a humanist who saw theology as idle chatter; and a century after Panaetius another Stoic leader, Posidonius (Cicero's instructor), opted for a Platonic view of the soul, the eternality of the world (contrary to the idea of conflagration), and the dynamic continuity of nature under fate. The famous Roman Stoic, Seneca, was a contemporary of Paul.

A final line of thinking which was influential in Athens in Paul's day (mid-first century A.D.) was that of the neopythagoreans. In the late sixth century B.C. Pythagoras had taught a mathematical basis for the cosmos, the transmigration of souls, and a regime of purity. Mixed with the thought of Plato, the Peripatetics, and Stoicism, his thought reappeared in the first century B.C. with the *neo*pythagoreans, who emphasized an exoteric and mystical theology which took a keen interest in numbers and the stars. The neophythagoreans influenced the Essene community as well as Philo—Paul's other philosophical contemporary.10[10]

In Paul's day Athenian intellectual life had come to be characterized by turmoil and uncertainty. Skepticism had made heavy inroads, which in turn fostered various reactions—notably: interaction between the major schools of thought, widespread eclecticism, nostalgic interest in the past founders of the schools, religious mysticism, and resignation to hedonism. Men were turning every which way in search for the truth and for security. On the other hand, over four hundred years of philosophical dispute with its conflicts, repetitions, and inadequacies had left many Athenians bored and thirsty for novel schemes of thought. Thus one can understand Luke's accurate and insightful aside to the reader in Acts 17:21, "Now all the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing." The curiosity of the Athenians was indeed proverbial. Earlier, Demosthenes had reproached the Athenians for being consumed with a craving for "fresh news". The Greek historian, Thucydides, tells us that Cleon once declared, "You are the best people for being deceived by something new which is said." With this background let us now examine Paul's apologetic to secular intellectuals.

10[10] For further details on the philosophical schools of the Hellenic and Roman periods the reader can consult with profit the standard historical studies of Guthrie, Brehier, and Copleston.

Paul's Encounter with the Philosophers

Acts 17:16-21 (American Standard Version)

(16) now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he beheld the city full of idols.

(17) so he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with them that met him.

(18) and certain also of the epicurean and stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, what would this babbler say? Others, he seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached Jesus and the resurrection.

(19) and they took hold of him, and brought him unto the Areopagus, saying, may we know what this new teaching is, which is spoken by thee?

(20) for thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

(21) (now all the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing.)

In the early 50's of the first century Paul was on something of a "missionary furlough," waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy. (Luke's rehearsal of this situation, Acts 17:14-16, is confirmed by Paul's own account in 1 Thess. 3: 1-2). However, his brief relief was broken when he became internally provoked at the idolatry of the city, being reminded anew of the perversity of the unbeliever who suppresses God's clear truth and worships the creature rather than the Creator (Acts 17:16; cf. Rom. 1:25). Paul's love for God and His standards meant he had a corresponding hatred for that which was offensive to the Lord. The idolatry of Athens produced a strong and sharp emotional disturbance within him, one of exasperated indignation. The Greek word for "provoked" is the same as that used in the Greek Old Testament for God's anger at Israel's idolatry (e.g., at Sinai). The Mosaic law's prohibition against idolatry was obviously *binding* outside of Old Testament Israel, judging from Paul's attitude toward the idolatrous society of Athens. Paul was thinking God's thoughts after Him, and strong emotion was generated by the fact that this "city full of idols" was "without excuse" for its rebellion (Rom. 1:20)—as also had been Israel of old.

The profligate Roman satirist, Petronius, once said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man; the city simply teemed with idols. Visitors to Athens and writers (e.g., Sophocles, Livy, Pausanius, Strabo, Josephus) frequently remarked upon the abundance of religious statues in Athens. According to one, Athens had more idols than all of the remainder of Greece combined. There was the altar of Eumenides (dark

goddesses who avenge murder) and the hermes (statues with phallic attributes, standing at every entrance to the city as protective talismans). There was the altar of the Twelve Gods, the Temple of Ares (or "Mars," god of war), the Temple of Apollo Patroos. Paul saw the image of Neptune on horseback, the sanctuary of Bacchus, the forty foot high statue of Athena, the mother goddess of the city. Sculptured forms of the Muses and the gods of Greek mythology presented themselves everywhere around Paul.[11] What is today taken by tourists as a fertile field of aesthetic appreciation—the artifacts left from the ancient Athenian worship of pagan deities—represented to Paul not art but despicable and crude religion. Religious loyalty and moral considerations precluded artistic compliments. These idols were not "merely an academic question" to Paul. They provoked him. As Paul gazed upon the Doric Temple of the patron goddess Athena, the Parthenon, standing atop the Acropolis, and as he scrutinized the Temple of Mars on the Areopagus, he was not only struck with the inalienable religious nature of man (v.22), but also outraged at how fallen man exchanges the glory of the incorruptible God for idols (Rom. 1:23).

Thus Paul could not keep silent. He began daily to reason with the Jews in the synagogue, and with anybody who would hear him in the agora, at the bottom of the Acropolis, the center of Athenian life and business (where years before, Socrates had met men with whom to discuss philosophical questions) (v.17). Paul's evangelistic method was always suited to the local conditions—and portrayed with historical accuracy by Luke. In Ephesus Paul taught in the "school of Tyrannus," but in Athens his direct approach to the heathen was made in the marketplace. Paul had already approached the unbelieving Jews and God-fearing Gentiles at the synagogue in Athens. Now he entered the marketplace of ideas to "reason with" those who met him there. The Greek word for Paul's activity recalls the "dialogues" of Plato wherein Socrates discusses issues of philosophical importance; it is the same word used by Plutarch for the teaching methods of a peripatetic philosopher. Paul did not simply announce his viewpoint; he discussed it openly and gave it a reasonable defense. He aimed to educate his audience, not to make common religious cause with their sinful ignorance.

Paul was well aware of the philosophical climate of his day. Accordingly he did *not* attempt to use premises agreed upon with the philosophers, and then pursue a "neutral" method of argumentation to move them from the circle of their beliefs into the circle of his own convictions. When he disputed with the philosophers *they* did not find any grounds for agreement with Paul at any level of their conversations. Rather, they utterly disdained him as a "seed-picker," a slang term (originally applied to gutter-sparrows) for a peddler of second-hand bits of pseudo-philosophy—an intellectual scavenger (v. 18). The word of the cross was to them foolish (1 Cor. 1:18), and in their pseudo-wisdom they knew not God (1 Cor. 1:20-21). Hence Paul would not consent to use their verbal "wisdom" in his apologetic, lest the cross of Christ be made void (1 Cor. 1:17).

11[11] Cf. Oscar Broneer, "Athens: City of Idol Worship," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 21 (February, 1958):4-6.

Paul rejected the assumptions of the philosophers in order that he might educate them in the truth of God. He did not attempt to find common beliefs which would serve as starting points for an uncommitted search for "whatever gods there may be." His hearers certainly did not recognize *commonness* with Paul's reasoning; *they* could not discern an echo of their own thinking in Paul's argumentation. Instead, they viewed Paul as bringing *strange*, *new* teaching to them (vv. 18-20). They apparently viewed Paul as proclaiming a new divine couple: "Jesus" (a masculine form that sounds like the greek *iasis*) and "Resurrection" (a feminine form), being the personified powers of "healing" and "restoration." These "strange deities" amounted to "new teaching" in the eyes of the Athenians. Accusing Paul of being a propagandist for new deities was an echo of the nearly identical charge brought against Socrates four and a half centuries earlier.12[12] It surely turned out to be a more menacing accusation than the name "seed-picker." As introducing foreign gods, Paul could not simply be disdained; he was also a threat to Athenian well-being. And that is precisely why Paul ended up before the Areopagus council.

In the marketplace Paul had apologetically proclaimed the fundamental, apostolic *kerygma* which entered on Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18; cf. Acts 4:2). This summed up God's decisive saving work in history for His people: Christ had been delivered up for their sins, but God raised Him for their *justification* (Rom. 4:25) and thereby constituted Him the Son of God *with power* (i.e. exalted Lord; Rom. 1:4). As mentioned previously, Paul's approach to those who were without the Scriptures was to challenge them to turn from their idolatry and serve the living God, whose *resurrected* Son would finally *judge* the world (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9-10). This was the burden of Paul's message at Athens.

Paul was determined to know nothing among men save Jesus Christ and Him crucified....in His resurrection through the power of the Creator there stood before men the clearest evidence that could be given that they who would still continue to serve and worship the creature would at last be condemned by the Creator then become their Judge (Acts 17:31)....No one can be confronted with the fact of Christ and of His resurrection and fail to have his own conscience tell him that he is face to face with his Judge.13[13]

It was specifically the aspect of Christ's resurrection in Paul's gospel that elicited a challenge from the philosophers. At this they hauled him before the Areopagus Council

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12[12] For a comparison of the apologetical methods of Socrates and Paul see G. L. Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1976).

13[13] Cornelius Van Til, *Paul at Athens* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: L. J. Grotenhuis, n.d.), pp. 2, 3.

for an explanation and reasoned defense of the hope that was in him (cf. 1 Peter 1:3; 3:15).

Luke tells us that Paul was "brought before the Areopagus" (v.19). The *Areios pagos* literally means "'the hill of Ares" (or "Mars' hill"); however, his referent is not likely a geographical feature in the local surrounding of the agora. The *Council of the Areopagus* was a venerable commission of the ex-magistrates which took its name from the hill where it originally convened. In popular parlance its title was shortened simply to "the Areopagus," and in the first century it had transferred its location to the Stoa Basileios (or "Royal Portico") in the city marketplace—where the Platonic dialogues tell us that Euthyphro went to try his father for impiety and where Socrates had been tried for corrupting the youth with foreign deities. Apparently the Council convened on Mars' hill in Paul's day only for trying cases of homicide. That Paul "stood in the midst of the Areopagus" (v.22) and "went out from their midst" (v. 33) is much easier understood in terms of his appearance before the Council than his standing on the hill (cf. Acts 4:7).14[14]

The Council was a small but powerful body (probably about thirty members) whose membership was taken from those who had formerly held offices in Athens which (due to the expenses involved) were open only to aristocratic Athenians. This Council was presently the dominating factor in Athenian politics, and it had a reputation far and wide. Cicero wrote that the Areopagus assembly governed the Athenian affairs of state. They exercised jurisdiction over matters of religion and morals, taking concern for teachers and public lecturers in Athens (and thus Cicero once induced the Areopagus to invite a peripatetic philosopher to lecture in Athens). A dispute exists over the question of whether the Areopagus had an educational subcommittee before which Paul likely would have appeared.15[15] But one way or another, the Council would have found it necessary to keep order and exercise some control over lecturers in the agora. Since Paul was creating something of a disturbance, he was "brought before the Areopagus" for an explanation (even if not for a specific examination toward the issuance of a teaching license). The mention of "the Areopagus" is one of many indicators of Luke's accuracy as a historian. "According to Acts, therefore, just as Paul is brought before the *strategoi* at Philippi, the *politarchai* at Thessalonica, the *anthupatos* at Corinth, so at Athens he faces the Areopagus. The local name for the supreme authority is in each case different and accurate."16[16]

Paul appeared before the Areopagus Council for a reason that probably lies somewhere between that of merely supplying requested information and that of answering to formal charges. After indicating the questions and requests addressed to Paul before the

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14[14] Contrary to Haenchen, *Acts Commentary*, pp. 518-519, 520.

15[15] For the affirmative position see Gartner, *Areopagus Speech*, pp. 64-65; for the negative see Haenchen, *Acts Commentary*, p. 519.

16[16] Lake and Cadbury, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 213.

Areopagus, Luke seems to offer the motivation for this line of interrogation in verse 21—the proverbial curiosity of the Athenians. And yet the language used when Luke says in verse 19 that "they took hold of him" is more often than not in Acts used in the sense of *arresting* someone (cf. 16:19; 18:17; 21:30—although not always, as in 9:27, 23:19). We must remember that Luke wrote the book of Acts while Paul had been awaiting trial in Rome for two years (Acts 28:30-31). His hope regarding the Roman verdict was surely given expression in the closing words of his book—that Paul continued to preach Christ, "none forbidding him." An important theme pursued by Luke in the book of Acts is that Paul was continually appearing before a court, but never with a guilty verdict against him. Quite likely, in Acts 17 Paul is portrayed by Luke as *again* appearing before a court without sentencing. Had there been the legal formality of charges against Paul, it is inconceivable that Luke would not have mentioned them or the formal verdict at the end of the trial. Therefore, Paul's appearance before the Areopagus Council is best understood as an informal exploratory hearing for the purpose of determining whether formal charges ought to be formulated and pressed against him. Eventually none were.

In the same city which had tried Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Socrates for introducing "new deities," Paul was under examination for setting forth "strange gods" (vv. 18-20). The kind of apologetic for the resurrection which he presented is a paradigm for all Christian apologists. It will soon be apparent that he recognized that the *fact* of the resurrection needed to be accepted and interpreted in a *wider philosophical* context, and that the unregenerate's *system* of thought had to be placed in *antithetic contrast* with that of the Christian. Although the philosophers had used disdainful name-calling while considering Paul in the marketplace (v. 18), verses 19-20 show them expressing themselves in more refined language before the Council. They politely requested *clarification* of a message which had been apparently incomprehensible to them. They asked to be made acquainted with Paul's strange new teaching and to have its meaning explained. Given their philosophical presuppositions and mindset, Paul's teaching could not even be integrated sufficiently into their thinking to be understood. This in itself reveals the underlying fact that a conceptual paradigm clash had been taking place between them and Paul. Given their own worldviews, the philosophers did not think that Paul's outlook *made sense*. As Paul stood in the midst of the prestigious Council of the Areopagus, with a large audience gathered around from the marketplace, he set himself for a defense of his faith. Let us turn to examine his address itself.

Paul's Presuppositional Procedure

Acts 17:22-31 (American Standard Version)

(22) and Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus, and said, ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are very religious (margin: somewhat superstitious).

(23) for as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, to an Unknown God. What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you.

(24) the God that made the world and all things therein, he, being lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

(25) neither is he served by men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he himself giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

(26) and he made of one every nation of men to dwell on the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation;

(27) that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us:

(28) for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, for we are also his offspring.

(29) being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man.

(30) the times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent:

(31) inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

It must first be noted that Paul's manner of addressing his audience was *respectful* and gentle. The boldness of his apologetic did not become arrogance. Paul "stood" in the midst of the Council, which would have been the customary attitude of an orator. And he began his address formally, with a polite manner of expression: "You men of Athens." The *magna carta* of Christian apologetics, 1 Peter 3:15, reminds us that when we offer a reasoned defense of the hope within us, we must do so "with meekness and respect." Ridicule, anger, sarcasm, and name-calling are inappropriate weapons of apologetical defense. A Spirit-filled apologist will evidence the fruits of the Spirit in his approach to others.

Next we see that Paul's approach was to speak in terms of *basic philosophical perspectives*. The Athenians had specifically asked about the resurrection, but we have no hint that Paul replied by examining various alternative theories (e.g., Jesus merely swooned on the cross, the disciples stole the body, etc.) and then by countering them with various evidences (e.g., a weak victim of crucifixion could not have moved the

stone; liars do not become martyrs; etc.) in order to conclude that "very probably" Jesus arose. No, nothing of the sort appears here. Instead, Paul laid the presuppositional groundwork for accepting the authoritative word from God, which was the source and context of the good news about Christ's resurrection. Van Til comments:

It takes the fact of the resurrection to see its proper framework and it takes the framework to see the fact of the resurrection; the two are accepted on the authority of Scripture alone and by the regenerating work of the Spirit.17[17]

Without the proper theological context, the resurrection would simply be a monstrosity or freak of nature, a surd resuscitation of a corpse. Such an *interpretation* would be the best that the Athenian philosophers could make of the fact. However, given the monism, or determinism, or materialism, or the philosophy of history entertained by the philosophers in Athens, they could intellectually find sufficient grounds, if they wished, for disputing even the *fact* of the resurrection. It would have been futile for Paul to argue about the facts, then, without challenging the unbelievers' *philosophy of fact*.18[18]

Verses 24-31 of Acts 17 indicate Paul's recognition that between his hearers and himself two complete *systems of thought* were in conflict. Any alleged fact or particular evidence which was introduced into the discussion would be variously seen in the light of the differing systems of thought. Consequently, the Apostle's apologetic had to be suited to a philosophical critique of the unbeliever's perspective and a philosophical defense of the believer's position. He was called upon to conduct his apologetic with respect to *worldviews* which were in collision. The Athenians had to be challenged, not simply to add a bit more information (say, about a historical event) to their previous thinking, but to renounce their previous thoughts and undergo a thorough change of mind. They needed to be converted in their total outlook on life, man, the world, and God. Hence Paul reasoned with them in a presuppositional fashion.

The basic contours of a Biblically guided, presuppositional approach to apologetical reasoning can be sketched from scriptures outside of Acts 17. Such a summary will give us sensitivity and insight into Paul's argumentation before the Areopagus.

(1) Paul understood that the unbeliever's mindset and philosophy would be systemically contrary to that of the believer—that the two represent *in principle a clash of total attitude and basic presuppositions*. He taught in Ephesians 4:17-24 that the Gentiles "walk in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding" because of their

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17[17] Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p. 14.

18[18] Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), p. 293.

“ignorance and hardened hearts,” while a completely different epistemic condition characterizes the Christian, one who has been “renewed in the spirit of your mind” and has “learned Christ” (for “the truth is in Jesus”). The “wisdom of the world” evaluates God’s wisdom as foolishness, while the believer understands that worldly wisdom “has been made foolish” (1 Cor. 1:17-25; 3:18-20). The basic commitments of the believer and unbeliever are fundamentally opposed to each other.

(2) Paul further understood that the basic commitments of the unbeliever produced only ignorance and foolishness, allowing an effective internal critique of his hostile worldview. The *ignorance of the non-Christian’s presuppositions* should be exposed. Thus Paul refers to thought which opposes the faith as “vain babblings of knowledge falsely so called” (1 Tim. 6:20), and he insists that the wise disputers of this age have been made foolish and put to shame by those called “foolish” (1 Cor. 1:20, 27). Unbelievers become “vain in their reasonings”; “professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:21, 22).

(3) By contrast, the Christian takes *revelational authority* as his *starting point and controlling factor* in all reasoning. In Colossians 2:3 Paul explains that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are deposited in Christ—in which case we must be on the alert against philosophy which is “not after Christ,” lest it rob us of this epistemic treasure (v. 8). The Old Testament proverb had put it this way: “The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). Accordingly, if the apologist is going to cast down “reasonings and every high thing exalted against the knowledge of God” he must first bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5), making Christ pre-eminent in *all* things (Col. 1:18). Upon the platform of God’s revealed truth, the believer can authoritatively declare the riches of knowledge unto believers.

(4) Paul’s writings also establish that, because all men have a clear knowledge of God from general revelation, the unbeliever’s *suppression of the truth* results in *culpable ignorance*. Men have a natural and inescapable knowledge of God, for He has made it manifest unto them, making his divine nature perceived through the created order, so that all men are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:19-20). This knowledge is “suppressed in unrighteousness” (v. 18), placing men under the wrath of God, for “knowing God, they glorified Him not as God” (v. 21). The ignorance which characterizes unbelieving thought is something for which the unbeliever is morally responsible.

(5) Given the preceding conditions, the appropriate thing for the apologist to do is to set his worldview with its *scriptural presuppositions* and authority in *antithetical contrast* to the worldview(s) of the unbeliever, explaining that in principle the latter destroys the possibility of knowledge (that is, doing an internal critique of the system to demonstrate its foolishness and ignorance) and indicating how the Biblical perspective alone accounts for the knowledge which the unbeliever sinfully uses. By placing the two perspectives in contrast and showing “the impossibility of the contrary” to the Christian outlook, the apologist seeks to expose the unbeliever’s suppression of his knowledge of God and thereby call him to *repentance*, a change in his mindset and convictions.

Reasoning in this presuppositional manner—refusing to become intellectually neutral and to argue on the unbeliever's autonomous grounds—prevents having our "minds corrupted from the simplicity and purity that is toward Christ" and counteracts the beguiling philosophy used by the serpent to ensnare Eve (2 Cor. 11:3). In the face of the fool's challenges to the Christian faith, Paul would have believers meekly "correct those who are opposing themselves"—setting Biblical instruction over against the self-vitiating perspective of unbelief—and showing the need for "repentance unto the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25).19[19]

As we look further now at Paul's address before the Areopagus philosophers, we will find that his line of thought incorporated the preceding elements of Biblically presuppositional reasoning. He pursued a pattern of argument which was completely congruous with his other relevant New Testament teachings. They virtually dictated his method to him.

The Unbeliever's Ignorance

As Paul began his Areopagus apologetic, he began by drawing attention to the *nature of man* as inherently a religious being (Acts 17:22; cf. Rom. 1:19; 2:15). The term used to describe the Athenians in verse 22 (literally "fearers of the supernatural spirits") is sometimes translated "very religious" and sometimes "somewhat superstitious." There is no satisfactory English equivalent. "Very religious" is too complimentary; Paul was not prone to flattery, and according to Lucian, it was forbidden to use compliments before the Areopagus in an effort to gain its goodwill. "Somewhat superstitious" is perhaps a bit too critical in thrust. Although the term could sometimes be used among pagans as a compliment, it usually denoted an excess of strange piety. Accordingly, in Acts 25:19 Festus refers to Judaism, using this term as a mild reproach for its religiosity. It is not beyond possibility that Paul cleverly chose this term precisely for the sake of its ambiguity. His readers would wonder whether the good or bad sense was being stressed by Paul, and Paul would be striking a double blow: men cannot eradicate a religious impulse within themselves (as the Athenians demonstrate), and yet this good impulse has been degraded by rebellion against the living and true God (as the Athenians also demonstrate). Although men do not acknowledge it, they are aware of their relation and accountability to the living and true God who created them. But rather than come to terms with Him and His wrath against their sin (cf. Rom. 1:18), they pervert the truth. And in this they become ignorant and foolish (Rom. 1:21-22).

Thus Paul could present his point by making an illustration of the altar dedicated "To an Unknown God." Paul testified that as he "observed" the Athenian "objects of worship" he found an altar with an appropriate inscription. The verb used of Paul's activity does not connote a mere looking at things, but a systematic inspection and purposeful scrutiny (the English term 'theorize' is cognate). Among their "objects of religious

19[19] For further discussion of the presuppositional method, refer to the earlier chapters of this book.

devotion"' (language referring to idol worship without any approbation) Paul finally found one which contained "a text for what he had to say."[20] Building upon the admission of the Athenians themselves, Paul could easily indict them for the ignorance of their worship—that is, any worship which is contrary to the word of God (cf. John 4:22). The Athenians had brought Paul before the Areopagus with a desire to "know" what they were missing in religious philosophy (vv. 19, 20), and Paul immediately points out that heretofore their worship was admittedly of the "unknown" (v. 23). Paul did not attempt to supplement or build upon a common foundation of natural theology with the Greek philosophers here. He began, rather, with their own expression of theological inadequacy and defectiveness. He underscored their *ignorance* and proceeded from that significant epistemological point.

The presence of altars "to unknown gods" in Athens was attested by writers such as Pausanias and Philostratus. According to Diogenes Laertius, such altars were erected to an anonymous source of blessing. For instance, once (ca. 550 B.C.), when a plague afflicted Athens without warning and could not be mitigated by medicine or sacrifice, Epimenides counseled the Athenians to set white and black sheep loose on the Areopagus, and then to erect altars wherever the sheep came to rest. Not knowing the specific source of the plague's elimination, the Athenians built various altars to *unknown* gods. This sort of thing was apparently common in the ancient world. The 1910 excavation at Pergamum unearthed evidence that a torchbearer who felt under some obligation to gods whose names were unknown to him expressed his gratitude by erecting an anonymous altar for them. Deissmann's conclusion bears repeating:

In Greek antiquity cases were not altogether rare in which "anonymous" altars "to unknown gods" or "to the god whom it may concern" were erected when people were convinced, for example after experiencing some deliverance, that a deity had been gracious to them, but were not certain of the deity's name.[21]

The Athenians had a number of such altars on Mars' hill alone. This was testimony to the Athenian conviction that they were lorded over by mysterious, *unknown* forces.

Yet these altars were also evidence that they assumed enough *knowledge* of these forces to worship them, and worship them in a particular manner. There was thus an element of subtle, internal critique in Paul's mention of the Athenian worship of that which they acknowledged as unknown (v. 23). Moreover, Paul was noting the basic

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20[20] F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, in the New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), p. 356.

21[21] Adolf Deissman, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1926), pp. 287-291.

schizophrenia in unbelieving thought when he described in the Athenians *both* an awareness of God (v. 22) and an ignorance of God (v. 23). The same condition is expounded in Romans 1:18-25. Berkouwer notes, "There is full agreement between Paul's characterization of heathendom as ignorant of God and his speech on the Areopagus. Ever with Paul, the call to faith is a matter of radical conversion from ignorance of God."[22] Knowing God, the unregenerate nevertheless suppresses the truth and follows a lie instead, thereby gaining a darkened mind. Commenting on our passage in Acts 17, Munck said:

What follows reveals that God was unknown only because the Athenians had not wanted to know him. So Paul was not introducing foreign gods, but God who was both known, as this altar shows, and yet unknown.[23]

The unbeliever is fully responsible for his mental state, and this is a state of *culpable ignorance*. That explains why Paul issued a call for *repentance* to the Athenians (v. 30); their ignorant mindset was immoral.

The Authority of Revelational Knowledge

Having alluded to an altar to an unknown god, Paul said, "That which you worship, acknowledging openly your ignorance, *I proclaim* unto you." There are two crucial elements of his apologetic approach to be discerned here. Paul started with an emphasis upon his hearers' ignorance and from there went on to declare with authority the truth of God. Their *ignorance* was made to stand over against his unique *authority* and ability to expound the truth. Paul set forth Christianity as *alone* reasonable and true, and his *ultimate starting point* was the authority of Christ's revelation. It was not uncommon for Paul to stress that the Gentiles were ignorant, knowing not God. (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:20; Gal. 4:8; Eph. 4:18; 1 Thess. 4:5; 2 Thess. 1:8). In diametric contrast to them was the believer who possessed a knowledge of God (e.g., Gal. 4:9; Eph. 4:20). This antithesis was fundamental to Paul's thought, and it was clearly elaborated at Athens.

The Greek word for "proclaim" ("set forth") in verse 23 refers to a solemn declaration which is made with authority. For instance, in the Greek papyri it is used for an

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22[22] G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), p. 145.

23[23] Munck, *Anchor Bible: Acts*, p. 171.

announcement of the appointment of one's legal representative.24[24] It might seem that such an authoritative declaration by Paul would be appropriate only when he dealt with Jews who already accepted the scriptures; however, whether dealing with Jews or secular philosophers, Paul's epistemological platform remained the same, so that even in Athens he "proclaimed" the word of God. The verb is frequently used in Acts and the Pauline epistles for the apostolic proclamation of the gospel, which had direct divine authority (e.g., Acts 3:18; 1 Cor. 9:14; cf. Gal. 1:11-12). Therefore, we see that Paul, although ridiculed as a philosophical charlatan, presumed unique authority to provide the Athenian philosophers with that knowledge which they lacked about God. This was far from stressing common ideas and beliefs. How offensive the Pauline antithesis between their ignorance and his God-given authority must have been to them!

They were sure that such a God as Paul preached did not and could not exist. They were therefore sure that Paul could not "declare" this God to them. No one could know such a God as Paul believed in.25[25]

Paul aimed to show his audience that their *ignorance* would no longer be tolerated; instead, God *commanded* all men to undergo a radical *change of mind* (v. 30). From beginning to end the unbeliever's ignorance was stressed in Paul's apologetic, being set over against the revelational knowledge of God.

Culpable Suppression of the Truth

Paul reasoned on the basis of antithetical presuppositions, a different starting point and authority. He also stressed the *culpability* of his hearers for that ignorance which resulted from their unbelief. Natural *revelation* certainly played a part in his convicting them of this truth. However, there is no hint in Paul's words that this revelation had been handled properly or that it established a common *interpretation* between the believer and unbeliever. Rather, Paul's references to natural revelation were made for the very purpose of *indicting* the espoused beliefs of his audience.

24[24] J. H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), p. 324.

25[25] Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p. 5.

His allusion to their religious nature has already been discussed. In addition, verses 26-27 show that Paul taught that God's providential government of history was calculated to bring men to Him; they should have known Him from His works. Paul's appeal to providence was conspicuous at Lystra as well (Acts 14:17). The goodness of God *should* lead men to repentance (cf. Rom. 2:4). Acts 17:27 indicates that God's providential governance of history should bring men to seek God, "if perhaps" they might feel after Him. The subordinate clause here expresses an unlikely contingency[26][26] The natural man's seeking and finding God cannot be taken for granted. Citing Psalm 14:2-3 in Romans 3:11-12, Paul clearly said: "There is none that seeks after God; they have all turned aside and together become unprofitable." Returning to Acts 17:27, even if the unregenerate should attempt to find God, he would at best "feel after" Him. This verb is the same as that used by Homer for the groping about of the blinded Cyclops. Plato used the word for amateur guess at the truth. Far from showing what Lightfoot thought was "a clear appreciation of the elements of truth contained in their philosophy"[27][27] at Athens, Paul taught that the eyes of the unbeliever had been blinded to the light of God's revelation. Pagans do not interpret natural revelation correctly, coming to the light of the truth here and there; they grope about in darkness. Hence Paul viewed men as blameworthy for not holding fast to the knowledge of God which came to them in creation and providence. The rebellious are left without an excuse due to God's general revelation (Rom. 1:19-23).

Paul's perspective in Acts 17 is quite evidently identical with that in Romans 1. In both places he teaches that unbelievers have a knowledge of God which they suppress, thereby meriting condemnation; their salvation requires a radical conversion from the ignorance of heathendom. G. C. Berkouwer puts it this way:

The antithesis looms large in every encounter with heathendom. It is directed, however, against the maligning that heathendom does to the revealed truth of God in nature and it calls for conversion to the revelation of God in Christ.[28][28]

So it is that Paul's appeals to general revelation function to point out the guilt of the unbeliever as he mishandles the truth of God. He is *responsible* because he possesses the truth, but he is *guilty* for what he does to the truth. *Both* aspects of the unbeliever's relation to natural revelation must be kept in mind. When evidence is found of the unbeliever's awareness of the truth of God's revelation around and within him, Paul

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26[26] Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament* (Boston: Lee and Shepherd Publishers, 1872), 2:198.

27[27] J. B. Lightfoot, "St. Paul and Seneca," *St. Paul's Epistle to the Phillipians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1953), p. 304.

28[28] Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, p. 145.

uses it as an indicator of the unbeliever's culpability, and the apostle shows that it needs to be understood and interpreted in terms of the special revelation which is brought by Christ's commissioned representative. Where natural revelation plays a part in Christian apologetics, that revelation must be "read through the glasses" of special revelation.

In Acts 17:27, heathen philosophers are said at best to grope in darkness after God. This inept groping is not due to any deficiency in God or His revelation. The philosophers grope, "even though God is not far from each one of us." Verse 28 begins with the word, "for," and thereby offers a clarification or illustration of the statement that God is quite near at hand even for blinded pagan thinkers. The unbeliever's failure to find God and his acknowledged ignorance is not an innocent matter, and Paul demonstrates this by quoting two pagan poets. The strange idea that these quotations stand "as proof in the same way as biblical quotations in the other speeches of Acts"[29] is not only contrary to Paul's decided emphasis in his theology upon the unique authority of God's word, but it simply will not comport with the context of the Areopagus address wherein the groping, unrepentant ignorance of pagan religiosity is declared forcefully. Paul quotes the pagan writers to manifest their guilt. Since God is near at hand to all men, since His revelation impinges on them continually, they *cannot escape* a knowledge of their Creator and Sustainer. They are without excuse for their perversion of the truth. Paul makes the point that *even* pagans, contrary to their spiritual disposition (1 Cor. 2:14), possess a knowledge of God which, though suppressed, renders them guilty before the Lord (Rom. 1:18ff.).

Paul supports this point before the Areopagus by showing that even pantheistic Stoics are aware of, and obliquely express, God's nearness and man's dependence upon Him. Epimenides the Cretan is quoted from a quatrain in an address to Zeus: "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28a; interestingly, Paul quotes another line from this same quatrain in Titus 1:12). The phrase "in him" would have denoted in idiomatic Greek of the first century (especially in Jewish circles) the thought of "in his power" or "by him." This declaration—"By him we live..."—is not at all parallel to Paul's theology of the believer's mystical union with Christ, often expressed in terms of our being "in Christ." Rather, Acts 17:28 is closer to the teaching of Colossians 1:15-17, "in him were all things created...and in him all things consist." The stress falls on "man's absolute dependence on God for his existence,"[30] even though the original writing which Paul quoted had aimed to prove that Zeus was not dead from the fact that *men* live—the *order* of which thought is fully reversed in Paul's thinking (viz., men live because *God* lives). Paul's second quotation is introduced with the words, "as certain of your own poets have said." His use of the plural is further evidence of his educated familiarity with Greek thought, for as a matter of fact the statement which is quoted can be found in more than one writer. Paul quotes his fellow Cilician, Aratus, as saying "for we are also his offspring" (from the poem on "Natural Phenomena," which is also echoed in

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29[29] Haenchen, *Acts Commentary*, p. 525.

30[30] Gartner, *Areopagus Speech*, p. 188.

Cleanthes' "Hymn to Zeus"). Paul could agree to the formal statement that we are God's "offspring". However, he would certainly have said by way of qualification what the Stoics did not say, namely that we are children of God merely in a natural sense and not a supernatural sense (John 1:12), and even at that we are quite naturally "children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Yes, we can be called the offspring of God, but certainly *not* in the intended pantheistic sense of Aratus or Cleanthes! Knowing the historical and philosophical context in which Paul spoke, and noting the polemical thrusts of the Areopagus address, we cannot accept any interpreter's hasty pronouncement to the effect that Paul "cites these teachings with approval unqualified by allusion to a 'totally different frame of reference.'"[31] Those who make such remarks eventually are forced to acknowledge the qualification anyway: e.g., "Paul is not commending their Stoic doctrine," and he "did not reduce his categories to theirs."[32]

Berkouwer is correct when he says "There is no hint here of a point of contact in the sense of a preparation for grace, as though the Athenians were already on the way to true knowledge of God."[33] Paul was well enough informed to know, and able enough to read statements in context to see, that he did *not* agree with the *intended* meaning of these poets. He was certainly not saying that these philosophers had somehow arrived at unqualified, isolated, elements of the truth—that the Zeus of Stoic pantheism was a conceptual step toward the true God!

This is to be explained only in connection with the fact that the heathen poets have distorted the truth of God.... Without this truth there would be no false religiousness. This should not be confused with the idea that false religion contains *elements* of the truth and gets its strength from those elements. This kind of quantitative analysis neglects the nature of the distortion carried on by false religion. Pseudo-religion witnesses to the truth of God in its apostasy.[34]

Within the ideological context of Stoicism and pantheism, of course, the declarations of the pagan philosophers about God were not true. And Paul was surely not committing the logical fallacy of equivocation by using pantheistically conceived premises to support a Biblically theistic conclusion. Rather, Paul appealed to the distorted teachings of the pagan authors as evidence that the process of theological distortion cannot fully

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31[31] Gordon R. Lewis, "Mission to the Athenians" part IV, Seminary Study Series (Denver: Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, November, 1964), p. 7; cf. pp. 1, 6, 8, and part III, p. 5.

32[32] Ibid., part III, p. 2; part IV, p. 6.

33[33] Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, p. 143.

34[34] Ibid., p. 144.

rid men of their natural knowledge of God. Certain expressions of the pagans manifest this knowledge *as suppressed*. Within the philosophical context *espoused* by the ungodly writer, the expressions were put to a false use. Within the framework of God's revelation—a revelation clearly *received* by all men *but hindered* in unrighteousness, a revelation renewed in writing in the Scriptures possessed by Paul—these expressions properly expressed a truth of God. Paul did not utilize pagan ideas in his Areopagus address. He used pagan expressions to demonstrate that ungodly thinkers have not eradicated all idea, albeit suppressed and distorted, of the living and true God. F. F. Bruce remarks:

Epimenides and Aratus are not invoked as authorities in their own right; certain things which they said, however, can be understood as pointing to the knowledge of God. But the knowledge of God presented in the speech is not rationalistically conceived or established; it is the knowledge of God taught by Hebrew prophets and sages. It is rooted in the fear of God; it belongs to the same order as truth, goodness, and covenant-love; for lack of it men and women perish; in the coming day of God it will fill the earth 'as the waters cover the sea' (Is. 11:9). The 'delicately suited allusions' to Stoic and Epicurean tenets which have been discerned in the speech, like the quotations from pagan poets, have their place as points of contact with the audience, but they do not commit the speaker to acquiescence in the realm of ideas to which they originally belong.35[35]

Paul demonstrated that even in their abuse of the truth pagans cannot avoid the truth of God; they must first *have* it in order that they might then distort it. As Ned B. Stonehouse observed,

The apostle Paul, reflecting upon their creaturehood, and upon their religious faith and practice, could discover within their pagan religiosity evidences that the pagan poets in the very act of suppressing and perverting the truth presupposed a measure of awareness of it.36[36]

Their own statements unwittingly convicted the pagans of their knowledge of God, suppressed in unrighteousness. About the pagan quotations Van Til observes:

35[35] F. F. Bruce, "Paul and the Athenians," *The Expository Times* 88 (October, 1976): 11.

36[36] Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Areopagus*, p. 30.

They could say this adventitiously only. That is, it would be in accord with what they deep down in their hearts knew to be true in spite of their systems. It was that truth which they sought to cover up by means of their professed systems, which enabled them to discover truth as philosophers and scientists.37[37]

Men are engulfed by God's clear revelation; try as they may, the truth which they possess in their heart of hearts cannot be escaped, and inadvertently it comes to expression. They do not explicitly understand it properly; yet these expressions are a witness to their inward conviction and culpability. Consequently Paul could take advantage of pagan quotations, not as an agreed upon ground for erecting the message of the gospel, but as a basis for calling unbelievers to repentance for their flight from God. "Paul appealed to the heart of the natural man, whatever mask he might wear."38[38]

Scriptural Presuppositions

In Acts 17:24-31 Paul's language is principally based on the Old Testament. There is little justification for the remark of Lake and Cadbury that this discourse used a secular style of speech, omitting quotations from the Old Testament.39[39] Paul's utilization of Old Testament materials is rather conspicuous. For instance, we can clearly see Isaiah 42:5 coming to expression in Acts 17:24-25, as this comparison indicates:

Thus saith God Jehovah, he that created the heavens and stretched them forth; he that spread abroad the earth and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it...(Isaiah 42:5). The God that made the world and all thing therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth...giveth to all life, and breath, and all things (Acts 17:24, 25).

In the Isaiah pericope, the prophet goes on to indicate that the Gentiles can be likened to men with eyes blinded by a dark dungeon (42:7), and in the Areopagus address Paul

37[37] Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p. 12.

38[38] Ibid., p. 2.

39[39] Lake and Cadbury, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 209.

goes on to say that if men seek after God, it is as though they are groping in darkness (i.e., the sense for the Greek phrase "feel after Him," 17:27). Isaiah's development of thought continues on to the declaration that God's praise ought not to be given to graven images (42:8), while Paul's address advances to the statement that "we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by the art and device of men (17:29). It surely seems as though the prophetic pattern of thought is in the back of the apostle's mind. F. F. Bruce correctly comments on Paul's method of argumentation before the Areopagus:

He does not argue from the sort of "first principles" which formed the basis of the various schools of Greek philosophy; his exposition and defense of his message are founded on the biblical revelation of God.... Unlike some later apologists who followed in his steps, Paul does not cease to be fundamentally biblical in his approach to the Greeks, even when (as on this occasion) his biblical emphasis might appear to destroy his chances of success.[40]

Those who have been trained to think that the apologist must adjust his epistemological authority or method in terms of the mindset of his hearers as he finds them will find the Areopagus address quite surprising in this respect. Although Paul is addressing an audience which is not committed or even predisposed to the revealed Scriptures, namely educated Gentiles, his speech is nevertheless a *typically Jewish* polemic regarding God, idolatry, and judgment! Using Old Testament language and concepts, Paul declared that God is the Creator, a Spirit who does not reside in man-made houses (v. 24). God is self-sufficient, and all men are dependent upon Him (v. 25). He created all men from a common ancestor and is the Lord of history (v. 26). Paul continued to teach God's disapprobation for idolatry (v. 29), His demand for repentance (v. 30), and His appointment of a final day of judgment (v. 31). In these respects Paul did not say anything that an Old Testament prophet could not have addressed to the Jews. As the Lord Creator (cf. Isa. 42:5), God does not dwell in temples made by hand—the very same point spoken before the Jews by Stephen in his defense regarding statements about the Jerusalem temple which God himself commanded to be built (Acts 7:48). Both Paul and Stephen harkened back to the Old Testament, where it was taught that the heavens cannot contain God, and so neither could a man-made house (1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 66:l). And if God is not limited by a house erected by men, neither is He served by the sacrifices brought to such temples (Acts 17:25). Paul undoubtedly recalled the words of God through the Psalmist, "If I were hungry, I would not tell thee; For the world is mine, and the fullness thereof. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" (Ps. 50:12-13). The Areopagus address stresses the fact that "life"' comes from God (v. 25), in whom "we live" (v. 28); such statements may have been subtle allusions to the etymology of the name of Zeus (*zao* in Greek, meaning 'to

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40[40] F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, pp. 38, 46-47.

live')—the god exalted in the poetry of Aratus and Epimenides. The genuine Lord of life was Jehovah, the Creator, who in many ways was self-sufficient and very different from the Zeus of popular mythology or of pantheistic speculation. God has appointed the various seasons (or epochs) and boundaries of men (Acts 17:26)—even as the Psalmist wrote, "Thou hast set all the borders of the earth; Thou hast made summer and winter" (Ps. 74:17). Paul's mention of "appointed seasons" referred either to the regular seasons of the year (as in Acts 14:17, "fruitful seasons") or to the appointed periods for each nation's existence and prominence.41[41] Either way, his doctrine was rooted in the Old Testament—the Noahic covenant (Gen. 8:22) or Daniel's interpretation of dreams (Dan. 2:36-45). Another point of contact between the Areopagus apologetic and the Old Testament is obvious in Acts 17:29. Paul indicated that nothing which is produced *by* man (i.e., any work of art) can be thought of as the producer *of* man. Here Paul's polemic is taken right out of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Isa. 40:18-20). No idol can be likened to God or thought of as His image. God's image is found elsewhere, in the work of His own hands (cf. Gen. 1:27), and He thus prohibited the making of other pseudo-images of Himself ("Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image...," Ex. 20:4). Paul's reasoning was steeped in God's special revelation.

Consistent with his teaching in the epistles, then, Paul remained on solid Christian ground when he disputed with the philosophers. He reasoned from the Scripture, thereby refuting any supposed dichotomy in his apologetic method between his approach to the Jews and his approach to the Gentiles. In any and all apologetic encounters Paul began and ended with God. "He was himself for no instant neutral."42[42] "Like the biblical revelation itself, his speech begins with God the creator of all, continues with God the sustainer of all, and concludes with God the judge of all."43[43] He had previously established his hearers' ignorance; so they were in no position to generate knowledgeable refutations of Paul's position. He had also indicated his authority to declare the truth; this was now reinforced by his appeal to the self-evidencing authority of God's revelation in the Old Testament Scriptures. Finally, he had established his audience's awareness and accountability to the truth of God in natural revelation. Paul now provides the interpretive context of special revelation to rectify the distorted handling of previous natural revelation and to supplement its teaching with the way of redemption.

Pressing the Antithesis

The themes of Paul's address in Acts 17 parallel those of Romans 1: creation, providence, man's dependence, man's sin, future judgment. Paul boldly sets the

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41[41] Compare Gartner, *Areopagus Speech*, pp. 147-152, with Haenchen, *Acts Commentary*, p. 523.

42[42] Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, pp. 142-143.

43[43] F. F. Bruce, "*Paul and the Athenians*," p. 9.

revelational perspective over against the themes of Athenian philosophy. The statements of Paul's Areopagus address could hardly have been better calculated to reflect Biblical theology while contradicting the doctrines of pagan philosophy. Paul did not appeal to Stoic doctrines in order to divide his audience (a ploy used in Acts 23:6).44[44] Rather he philosophically offended both the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in his audience, pressing teaching which was directly antithetical to their distinctives.

Against the monism of the philosophers, Paul taught that God had created all things (v. 24; cf. Ex. 20:11; Ps. 146:6; Isa 37:16; 42:5). This precluded the materialism of the Epicureans and the pantheism of the Stoics. Against naturalistic and immanentistic views Paul proclaimed supernatural transcendence. As his listeners looked upon the Parthenon, Paul declared that God does not dwell in temples made with hands (1 Kings 8:27; Isa 66:1-2).

God needs nothing from man; on the contrary man depends on God for everything (v. 25; cf. Ps. 50:9-12; Isa 42:5). The philosophers of Athens should thus do all things to God's glory—which is inclusive of bringing every thought captive to Him, and thereby renouncing their putative autonomy. Paul's teaching of the unity of the human race (v. 26a) was quite a blow to the Athenians' pride in their being indigenous to the soil of Attica, and it assaulted their felt superiority over "barbarians." Paul's insistence that God was not far from any would deflate the Stoic's pride in his elitist knowledge of God (v. 27b). Over against a uniform commitment to the concept of fate Paul set forth the Biblical doctrine of God's providence (v. 26b; cf. Deut. 32:8); God is not remote from or indifferent to the world of men.

Upon the legendary founding by Athena of the Areopagus court, Apollo had declared (according to Aeschylus): "When the dust drinks up a man's blood, Once he has died, there is no resurrection." However, the apostle Paul forcefully announced the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a fact which assures all men that He will judge the world at the consummation (Ps. 9:8; 96:13; 98:9; Dan. 7:13; John 5:27; Rom. 2:16)—a doctrine which contravened the Greek views of both cyclic and eternal history. The Epicureans were deceived to think that at death man's body simply decomposed, and that thus there was no fear of judgment; the resurrection refuted their ideas, just as it disproved the notion that the body is a disdainful prison. Throughout Paul's address the common skepticism about theological knowledge found in the philosophic schools was obviously challenged by Paul's pronounced authority and ability to openly proclaim the final truth about God.

44[44] Contrary to E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts of the Apostles, An Historical Commentary*, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 140-141.

Calling for Repentance and Change of Mindset

One can hardly avoid the conclusion that Paul was *not* seeking areas of agreement or common notions with his hearers. At every point he set his Biblical position in *antithetical contrast* to their philosophical beliefs, undermining their assumptions and exposing their ignorance. He did not seek to add further truths to a pagan foundation of elementary truth. Paul rather challenged the foundations of pagan philosophy and called the philosophers to full *repentance* (v. 30).

The new era which has commenced with the advent and ministry of Jesus Christ has put an end to God's historical overlooking of nations which lived in unbelief. At Lystra Paul declared that in past generations God "allowed all nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16), although now He was calling them to turn from their vanities to the living God (14:15). Previously, God had shown forbearance toward the sins of the Jews as well (cf. Rom. 3:25). However, with the advent of Christ, there has been a new beginning. Sins once committed in culpable ignorance have been made even *less* excusable by the redemptive realities of the gospel. Even in the past God's forbearance ought to have led men to repentance (Rom. 2:4). How much more, then, should men *now* respond to their guilt by repenting before God for their sins. The lenience of God demonstrates that His concentration of effort is toward the salvation rather than judgment of men (cf. John 3:17). This mercy and patience must not be spurned. Men everywhere are now *required* to repent. In Paul's perspective on redemptive history, he can simply say by way of summary: "*Now* is the acceptable time" (2 Cor. 6:2). As guilty as men had been in the past, God had passed over confrontation with them. Unlike in Israel, messengers had not come to upbraid the Gentiles and declare the punishment they deserved. God had "overlooked" (not "winked at"' with its inappropriate connotations) the former times of ignorance (Acts 17:30). Whereas in the past He had allowed the pagans to walk in their own ways, *now* with the perfect revelation which has come in Jesus Christ, God commands repentance (a "change of mind") of all men and sends messengers to them toward that end. Paul wanted the philosophers at Athens to not simply refine their thinking a bit further and add some missing information to it; but rather to abandon their presuppositions and have a complete change of mind, submitting to the clear and authoritative revelation of God. If they would not repent, it would be an indication of their love for *ignorance* and hatred of genuine knowledge.

Paul's appeal to them to repent was grounded not in autonomous argumentation but the presupposed authority of God's Son (v. 31), an authority for which there was none more ultimate in Paul's reasoning. Paul's hearers were told that they must repent, for God had appointed a day of final judgment; if the philosophers did not undergo a radical shift in their mindset and confess their sinfulness before God, they would have to face the wrath of God on the day of final accounting.

To whom would they have to give account? At this point Paul introduced the "Son of Man eschatology" of the gospels. The judgment would take place by a man (literally, a 'male') who had been ordained to this function by God. This man is the "Son of Man" mentioned in Daniel 7:13. In John 5:27, Christ spoke of himself, saying that the Father

"gave him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man." After His resurrection Christ charged the apostles "to preach unto the people and to testify that this is He who is ordained of God to be the Judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). Paul declared this truth in his Areopagus apologetic, going on to indicate that God had given "assurance"' or proof of the fact that Christ would be mankind's final Judge. This proof was provided by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

To be accurate, it is important for us to note that the resurrection was evidence in Paul's argumentation, it was *not* the conclusion of his argumentation. He was arguing, *not* for the resurrection, but for final judgment by Christ. The misleading *assumption* made by many popular evangelical apologists is that Paul here engaged in an attempted proof of the resurrection—although nothing of the sort is mentioned by Luke. Proof *by means* of the resurrection is mistakenly seen in verse 31 as proof *of* the resurrection.45[45] Others know better than to read such an argument *into* the text and hold that detailed proof of the resurrection was *cut short* in Paul's address.46[46] He *would* have proceeded to this line of reasoning, we are told, if he had not been interrupted by his mocking hearers. Once again, however, such an interpretation gains whatever plausibility it has with an interpreter in terms of preconceived notions, rather than in terms of textual support. F. F. Bruce remarks, "There is no ground for supposing that the ridicule with which some of his hearers received his reference to Jesus' rising from the dead seriously curtailed the speech he intended to make."47[47] Haenchen says, "There is no hint that Paul is interrupted"; the speech as it appears in Acts 17 "is inherently quite complete."48[48] Paul proclaimed that Christ had been appointed the final Judge of mankind, as His resurrection from the dead evidenced. The Apostle did not supply an empirical argument for the resurrection, but argued theologically from the fact of the resurrection to the final judgment. For Paul, even in apologetical disputes before unbelieving philosophers, there was no authority more ultimate than that of Christ. This epistemological attitude was most appropriate in light of the fact that Christ would be the ultimate Judge of man's every thought and belief.

The Outcome of Paul's Apologetic

Acts 17:32-34 (American Standard Version)

45[45] E.g., R. C. Sproul, tape "Paul at Mars' Hill," in the series Exegetical Bible Studies: Acts (Pennsylvania: Ligonier Valley Study Center), tape AX-13.

46[46] E.g., Blaiklock, *Acts, Historical Commentary*, p. 142; Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 272.

47[47] F. F. Bruce, *Book of Acts*, p. 362.

48[48] Haenchen, *Acts Commentary*, p. 526.

(32) now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, we will hear thee concerning this yet again.

(33) thus Paul went out from among them.

(34) but certain men clave unto him, and believed: among whom also was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Had Paul spoken of the immortality of the soul, his message might have appeared plausible to at least some of the philosophers in his audience. However all disdained the idea of the resuscitation of a corpse. When Paul concluded his discourse with reference to the resurrection of Christ, such an apparent absurdity led some hearers to "sneer" in open mockery of Paul. There is some question as to what should be made of another reaction mentioned by Luke—namely, that some said they would hear Paul again on this matter. This may have been a polite procrastination serving as a brush-off,[49] an indication that this segment of the audience was confused or bewildered with the message,[50] or evidence that some wistfully hoped that Paul's proclamation might prove to be true.[51] One way or another, it should not have been thought impossible by anybody in Paul's audience that God could raise the dead (cf. Acts 26:8), but as long as this philosophical assumption controlled their thinking, the philosophers would never be induced to accept the fact of the resurrection or allow it to make a difference in their outlook.

Until the Holy Spirit regenerates the sinner and brings him to repentance, his presuppositions will remain unaltered. And as long as the unbeliever's presuppositions are unchanged a proper acceptance and understanding of the good news of Christ's historical resurrection will be impossible. The Athenian philosophers had originally asked Paul for an account of his doctrine of resurrection. After his reasoned defense of the hope within him and his challenge to the philosopher's presuppositions, a few were turned around in their thinking. But many refused to correct their presuppositions, so that when Paul concluded with Christ's resurrection they ridiculed and mocked.

Acceptance of the facts is governed by one's most ultimate assumptions, as Paul was well aware. Paul began his apologetic with God and His revelation; he concluded his apologetic with God and His revelation. The Athenian philosophers began their dispute with Paul in an attitude of cynical unbelief about Christ's resurrection; they concluded the dispute in cynical unbelief about Christ's resurrection. However, Paul knew and demonstrated that the "closed system" of the philosophers was a matter of dialectical

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49[49] Harrison, *Acts*, p. 273.

50[50] Lake and Cadbury, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 219.

51[51] J. S. Steward, *A Faith to Proclaim* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 117.

pseudo-wisdom and ignorance. Their view that God dwelt in impenetrable mystery undermined their detailed teaching about Him. Their view that historical eventuation was a matter of irrational fate was contravened by their conviction that all things are mechanistically determined, and so on. In their "wisdom" they had become utterly ignorant of the ultimate truth.

Paul knew that the explanation of their hostility to God's revelation (even though they evidenced an inability to escape its forcefulness) was to be found in their desire to exercise control over God (e.g., v. 29) and to avoid facing up to the fact of their deserved punishment before the judgment seat of God (v. 30). They secretly hoped that ignorance would be bliss, and so preferred darkness to light (John 3:19-20). So Paul "went out from among them" (v. 33)—a statement which expresses nothing about his apologetic being cut short, and which gives no evidence that Paul was somehow disappointed with his effort. Such thoughts must be read into the verse.

The minds of the Athenian philosophers could not be changed simply by appealing to a few disputed, particular facts, for their philosophical presuppositions determined what they would make of the facts. Nor could their minds be altered by reasoning with them on the basis of their own fundamental assumptions; to make common cause with their philosophy would simply have been to confirm their commitment to it. Their minds could be changed only by challenging their whole way of thought with the completely different worldview of the gospel, calling them to renounce the inherent foolishness of their own philosophical perspectives and to repent for their suppression of the truth about God.

Such a complete mental revolution, allowing for a well-grounded and philosophically defensible knowledge of the truth, can be accomplished by the grace of God (cf. 2 Tim. 2:25). Thus Luke informs us that as Paul left the Areopagus meeting, "certain men clave unto him and believed" (v. 34). There is a note of triumph in Luke's observation that some within Paul's audience became believers as a result of his apologetic presentation. He mentions conspicuously that a member of the Areopagus Counsel, Dionysius, became a Christian, as well as a woman who was well enough known to be mentioned by name, Damaris. These were but some converts "among others." Ecclesiastical tradition dating from around 170 A.D. says that Dionysius was appointed by Paul as the first elder in Athens. (In the fifth century certain pseudepigraphical works of a neoplatonic character made use of his name.) However Luke himself mentions no church having been planted in Athens, as we would have expected an educated Gentile to mention if a church had been started in Athens. Indeed, a family residing in Corinth was taken by Paul as the ecclesiastical "firstfruits of Achaia" (1 Cor. 16:15). Apparently no church was immediately developed in the city of Athens, even though patristic writers (especially Origen) mention a church being in Athens—eventually getting under way sometime after Paul's ministry there, so it seems. The earliest post-apostolic apologists, Quadratus and Aristides, wrote during the time of Emperor Hadrian, and both were from Athens. However we choose to reconstruct the ecclesiastical history of the city, it is plain that Paul's work there was not futile. By God's grace it did see success, and his apologetic method can be a guide and goad for us today. Would that we had the boldness in a proud university setting, enjoying the highest level of culture of

the day, to proclaim clearly to the learned philosophers, with their great minds, that they are in fact ignorant idolaters who must repent in light of the coming judgment by God's resurrected Son.

Observations in Retrospect

(1) Paul's Areopagus address in Acts 17 has been found to set forth a classic and exemplary encounter between Christian commitment and secular thinking—between "Jerusalem and Athens." The Apostle's apologetical method for reasoning with educated unbelievers who did not acknowledge scriptural authority turns out to be a suitable pattern for our defending the faith today.

(2) Judging from Paul's treatment of the Athenian philosophers, he was not prepared to dismiss their learning, but neither would he let it exercise corrective control over his Christian perspective. The two realms of thought were obviously dealing with common questions, but Paul did not work to integrate apparently supportive elements from pagan philosophy into his system of Christian thought. Because of the truth-distorting and ignorance-engendering character of unbelieving thought, Paul's challenge was that *all reasoning* be placed within the presuppositional context of revelational truth and Christian commitment. The relation "Athens" should sustain to "Jerusalem" was one of necessary dependence.

(3) Rather than trying to construct a natural theology upon the philosophical platform of his opponents—assimilating autonomous thought wherever possible—Paul's approach was to accentuate the antithesis between himself and the philosophers. He never assumed a neutral stance, knowing that the natural theology of the Athenian philosophers was inherently a natural idolatry. He could not argue from their unbelieving premises to Biblical conclusions without equivocation in understanding. Thus his own distinctive outlook was throughout placed over against the philosophical commitments of his hearers.

(4) Nothing remotely similar to what is called in our day the historical argument for Christ's resurrection plays a part in Paul's reasoning with the philosophers. The declaration of Christ's historical resurrection was crucial, of course, to his presentation. However he did not argue for it independently on empirical grounds as a brute historical—yet miraculous—event, given then an apostolic interpretation. Argumentation about a particular fact would not force a shift in the unbeliever's presuppositional framework of thought. Paul's concern was with this basic and controlling perspective or web of central convictions by which the particulars of history would be weighed and interpreted.

(5) In pursuing the presuppositional antithesis between Christian commitment and secular philosophy, Paul consistently took as his ultimate authority Christ and God's word—not independent speculation and reasoning, not allegedly indisputable eyeball

facts of experience, not the satisfaction or peace felt within his heart. God's revelational truth—learned through his senses, understood with his mind, comforting his heart, and providing the context for all life and thought—was his self-evidencing starting point. It was the presuppositional platform for authoritatively declaring the truth, and it was presented as the sole reasonable option for men to choose.

(6) Paul's appeal was to the inescapable knowledge of God which all men have in virtue of being God's image and in virtue of His revelation through nature and history. A point of contact could be found even in pagan philosophers due to their inalienable religious nature. Paul indicated that unbelievers are conspicuously guilty for distorting and suppressing the truth of God.

(7) In motivation and direction Paul's argumentation with the Athenian philosophers was presuppositional. He set two fundamental worldviews in contrast, exhibiting the ignorance which results from the unbeliever's commitments, and presenting the precondition of all knowledge—God's revelation—as the only reasonable alternative. His aim was to effect an *overall* change in outlook and mindset, to call the unbeliever to repentance, by following the two-fold procedure of internally critiquing the unbeliever's position and presenting the necessity of the Scripture's truth. Through it all, it should also be observed, Paul remained yet earnest. His manner was one of humble boldness.