

The Areopagus Address

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THE TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT LECTURE, 1949

*The lecture was delivered in the Divinity School, Cambridge, on July 13, 1949,
at a meeting convened by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research.*

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INTRODUCTION

In venturing upon a discussion of the address of the apostle Paul at Athens, recorded in Acts xvii. 22-31, I am mindful that I am not entering upon a largely neglected field of investigation. The passage is so replete with exceptional and arresting features that the commentators and the historians of early Christianity have been stimulated to treat it at considerable length. Moreover, a remarkable number of learned monographs have been devoted to its interpretation.

Much as one may learn from what others have written, my impression is that the last word has by no means been spoken, and that the Areopagus address will continue to challenge the Biblical interpreter to press forward to his goal, both because of the variety and intricacy of problems which it presents and because of its far-reaching implications for the understanding of early Christianity. Many modern discussions, moreover, have been absorbed with certain restricted aspects of the narrative such as linguistic or archaeological features. Such studies are indispensable to a proper evaluation of the problems; at certain points account is taken of them here, at others they are presupposed. But they have, perhaps unavoidably, left rather undeveloped the broader questions of the historical and theological significance of the *Areopagitica*, and my purpose is to try, if only in small measure, to improve that situation.

A further impression is that many influential treatises

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proceed upon the basis of a wrong exegetical method. This appears to be particularly true of representatives of the *religions-geschichtliche methode*. While they have the merit of struggling with the basic questions of the place occupied by this address within the context of the history of religion in the Hellenistic Age, it is ironical that in seeking to integrate the narrative with contemporaneous thought and action they end up by displaying sharply divisive tendencies. For tensions and discrepancies are alleged to exist, not only between the Paul of the Athens story and the earliest Christianity, and between this Paul and the Paul of the Epistles, and between this Paul and the Paul of the rest of Acts, but even within the testimony of Acts xvii.

Albert Schweitzer gives brief but pungent expression to this general approach in his book, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*.¹ On the background of Norden's learned and challenging work, *Agnostos Theos* (1913), he regards certain features of the address, and especially the quotation, 'In Him we live and move and have our being' (xvii. 28), as expressing a God-mysticism which is Stoic rather than Christian, and as having in view an immanentistic and natural view of the world rather than one that conceives of God as transcendent and of history in supernatural terms. This pantheistic God-mysticism is declared to be utterly antithetical to the particularistic, predestinarian Christ-mysticism of the genuine Paul. For this basic reason, as well as for the reason that he judges that there 'can never have been such an inscription' as is reported in Acts xvii. 23, Schweitzer concludes that the speech is unhistorical.

Far more elaborate is the treatment of Martin Dibelius in a monograph published in 1939,² which is perhaps the most important study of its kind since Norden's monu-

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mental treatise. The body of the address Dibelius regards as distinctly Hellenistic; its general theme the true knowledge of God, a knowledge which is viewed as being accessible to every man inasmuch as his place within the world and the affinity of God must lead thereto. Three principal divisions of the address are distinguished: (a) God, Creator and Lord of the world, requires no temple because He is without needs (verses 24, 25); (b) God made man with the destiny that he should seek Him (verses 26, 27); (c) the affinity of man with God (for we are 'His offspring') should preclude all worship of images (verses 28, 29). All three divisions are thought to betray Hellenistic motifs and the address as a whole is viewed as representing a significant development of theology in the soil of Greek culture. The author of Acts is regarded as dealing so freely with the facts that he presents a largely imaginative picture of the manner in which, according to his conception, Paul would have sought to commend Christianity to the heathen. The only Christian feature of the address, according to Dibelius, is the concluding sentence which presents a call to repentance in connection with a declaration of the eschatological judgment, but even this conclusion is thought not to be wholly consistent with the teaching of Paul in the Epistles. The introduction to the address, moreover, is regarded as inconsistent with the mood of the address itself, although not sufficiently to disallow that it could be the work of the author of Acts.

Evaluations such as those of Schweitzer and Dibelius underscore the propriety of seeking to gauge anew what the account actually represents Paul as saying—what the disposition and

¹ *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (1930) L.T., 1931.

² *Paulus auf dem Areopag* (Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-hist. Klasse, 1938-39. 2. Abhandlung).

motif of the address really are. And in treating these matters one is compelled to explore to some extent the larger questions as to the place of this message within the total witness of the New Testament to the teaching of Paul and even within the compass of the still larger question as to the essence of Christianity.

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The question of the *Anknüpfungspunkt* is in the foreground of interest. Wherever there is a grappling with the Christian doctrine of revelation and the Christian doctrine of man it will necessarily have to be faced with all earnestness. How can the divine Word, without losing its divine character, be communicated to and apprehended by a finite creature, and especially a creature who, as the consequence of the noetic effects of sin, is viewed as darkened in his understanding to the point where he cannot know the things of the Spirit of God? This urgent theological problem confronts the reader of Acts xvii in a most arresting manner, and though the systematic discussion of the problem would take us far afield, the interpretation of the passage will require some reflection upon it.

The immediate reaction of Paul's hearers indeed does not suggest that *they* recognized that the respective religions had much in common or that the Pauline message found an echo in their own experience. Paul seemed to them to be a setter forth of *strange gods*, to be bringing certain *strange things* into their ears, to be speaking *a new teaching*; and their interest in hearing further concerning it is associated with their characteristic interest as Athenians in something *new* (verses 18-21). It is Paul rather than his pagan hearers who may appear to stress the element of religious commonness especially at the beginning of his address in his observations concerning the altar, and later in his quotations from the heathen poets. Plainly he is at these points doing far more than cleverly applying so-called practical psychology calculated 'to win friends and influence people.' Paul does show himself to be a masterful public speaker in his ability to arrest attention by linking his message with features of his listeners' own experience, but his apparently favourable judgments concerning their religious beliefs and practices obviously transcend barely formal aspects. The question remains, however, exactly how the element of commonness is conceived. Does the evidence

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support the conclusion that Paul tones down the antithesis between Christianity and paganism, or at least that the author of Acts represents him as doing so at Athens? Or is perhaps the situation rather that the intolerance of paganism is as unrelieved here as anywhere in the Scriptures, but that the point of contact is found basically to be concerned with judgments regarding the nature of man and his religious responses to the divine revelation?

I. HISTORICAL SETTING AND OCCASION

Although my interest in this study centres upon the Areopagus address itself and it is therefore beyond the scope of this paper to treat all the questions which emerge in connection with the examination of the fascinating context in which Luke presents the address, there are features of the context which are so basically significant for our understanding of the discourse that they must be evaluated, however briefly. The consequences of the address, including especially the intimation that it did not meet with general favour, bear pointedly upon one's final evaluation of it. But no less does the introduction to the discourse in the midst of the

Areopagus help towards the understanding of Paul's aim and method as preacher and apologist.

Paul had come to Athens with the purpose of finding a brief respite from the arduous experiences and the perils of his activity in Macedonia rather than to carry forward his apostolic mission. Almost from the beginning of his European ministry he had been harassed by hostile men; in Philippi he and Silas had been severely beaten and imprisoned; at Thessalonica the unbelieving Jews incited a tumult which made further activity impracticable and dangerous; in Berea the advantage of a favourable reception was offset when the Thessalonian Jews arrived once more to stir up the multitudes against Paul and imperilled his

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mission and person. To relieve this situation Paul was constrained to go to Athens, but evidently it was regarded as a mere stopping place on his way to Corinth. For Silas and Timothy were enjoined to catch up with him as speedily as possible, and, as Acts reports (xviii. 5), the reunion was realized in Corinth, where he remained for a year and a half.³ Paul accordingly was taking a brief holiday in Athens and did not anticipate the activity which he actually carried on in this brief interlude. An unforeseen circumstance constrained him to speak, and once having made himself heard he came soon to encounter the quite novel situation of giving an account of his Christian faith in the midst of the Areopagus.

Like many men of today on holiday in an historic and illustrious city, Paul had gone to see the sights of Athens. Though it was no longer in its golden age, the splendour of that age was still in evidence. The beautiful setting of the city in the midst of hills on a great bay of the Aegean was quite as stirring as ever, and the magnificent temples and public works added lustre to the munificence of nature. To conclude that Paul had no eye whatsoever for the beauty that surrounded him as he strode about the city would be rash and gratuitous. Nevertheless, his philosophy of life was not such as would permit him to evaluate nature and civilization in detachment from his religious faith. The gigantic gold and ivory statue of Athena in the Parthenon on the Acropolis, for example, could not be viewed by Paul simply as a thing of beauty. The fact that it was an idol stirred Paul far more profoundly than its aesthetic merits.

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Paul was struck, moreover, by the fact that Athens was 'full of idols' (verse 16). Luke can hardly mean to suggest that now for the first time Paul had come face to face with the prevalence of idolatry in a pagan city, for Luke had reported his residence in Syrian Antioch and he himself probably knew from first-hand knowledge how typically pagan was that city also. Still less can Luke intend to imply that Paul was ordinarily rather complacent towards idolatry. Perhaps the excessive zeal of Athens in this regard, which indeed had become proverbial in the ancient world—especially when considered in the perspective of the intellectual and cultural achievements and pretensions of Athens—contributed to the sharply

³ 1 Thes. iii. 1, 6 implies indeed that Timothy must have joined Paul in Athens and returned to Thessalonica before rejoining Paul, presumably at Corinth. Lake and Cadbury, in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part I, Vol. IV, in their note on Acts xviii. 5, among others, find a discrepancy here on the ground that 'we... alone' in 1 Thes. iii. 1 must include Silas whose name is joined with Paul's and Timothy's in the salutation. Although the Pauline language allows for this interpretation, it does not require it. As the usage in 1 Corinthians, for example, discloses, the inclusion of others besides Paul in the salutation does not govern the decision as to the use of the singular or plural in the Epistles themselves.

negative reaction of Paul. But Paul's irritation is referred to not so much that we should dwell upon the novelty or relative novelty of his psychological state as he was confronted with the idolatry of Athens, but in order to explain why Paul could not remain silent in Athens and felt compelled to preach the gospel in spite of his original intention to secure a brief period of relief from the tensions attendant upon his apostolic mission. The special circumstances in Athens merely provided the occasion for Paul's deep indignation; his fervent monotheism was the actual cause of it. And it is not without significance that the word which Luke employs to indicate Paul's feeling is frequently used in the LXX where the Lord is described as being provoked to anger at the idolatry of His people.⁴ The zeal of the Lord was eating up His servant Paul, and he was constrained to break his silence in the presence of the presumption of pagan worship.

Another significant feature of the Lucan introduction to the Areopagus address is the intimation that Paul's preaching in Athens was by no means confined to the address reported at some length. Even in Athens Paul did not fail to take advantage of the liberty of the synagogue.

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Evidently, in view of what is to come, Luke treats the ministry there quite summarily, but he can hardly have much less in view than what he has reported, also somewhat summarily, concerning Paul's activity in Thessalonica, when he states that 'as his custom was' he went into the synagogue of the Jews, 'and for three sabbath days reasoned with them from the scriptures, opening and alleging, that it behoved the Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom, said he, I proclaim unto you, is the Christ' (xvii. 2-4, R.V.).⁵ His reasoning with the Jews in Athens, as in Thessalonica, must have involved a fairly comprehensive presentation of his apostolic message.

Perhaps Luke deals so summarily with the ministry in the synagogue because of his interest in informing his readers of what developed as Paul, taking advantage of the liberty of the market-place, confronted the devotees of pagan religion with the Christian evangel. In contrast with the weekly contact with the Jews, Paul reasoned every day with those who encountered him in the *agora*. But the message during the week was the same as that on the sabbath, for Luke declares that, however novel or trifling the Stoics and Epicureans judged it to be, actually 'he preached Jesus and the resurrection' (verse 18). Although perhaps they so far misunderstood that message as to suppose that he was actually proclaiming two divinities,⁶ there can be no doubt that Luke himself regards this phrase as a summary characterization of the apostolic preaching. So indeed all of the sermons previously recorded in Acts might well be designated; so rather precisely Luke has spoken of the apostolic

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⁴ See the use of παραξίνομαι in Dt. ix., 18; Psalm (Vi. 29; Is. lxxv. 3; Ho. Viii. 5: cf. Dt. xxix. 25ff., 28).

⁵ It is of significance that the verb διαλέγομαι is used in both instances (Acts xvii. 2, 17). See also Acts xviii. 4, 19, xix. 8, 9, xx. 7, 9, xxiv. 12, 25. Of further interest is the fact that, while the aorist tense is employed in referring to the activity covering three sabbaths in Thessalonica, the imperfect tense is used in speaking of his ministry in the synagogue in Athens. While the imperfect form may not involve an extensive period, it underscores the impression that Luke by no means restricts his preaching in the synagogue to a single sabbath.

⁶ So most expositors suppose. Lake and Cadbury form an exception.

kerygma in Acts iv. 2 when, in telling of the opposition of the Sadducees to Peter and John, he declares that they were vexed because the apostles 'taught the people and proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.'

It was in the course of this preaching of 'Jesus and the resurrection' in the *agora* that the stage was set for the Areopagus address. The question whether Paul was led away from the market-place to the Hill of Ares (the 'Mars' Hill' of A.V.) near the Acropolis, or was haled before the supreme council of Athens, known as the Areopagus in view of its former custom of convening upon that hill, is not of decisive significance for the determination of the disposition and meaning of the address itself. For even in the latter case, a broader audience than the constituency of the council would appear to be in view. Nevertheless, the question is of such intrinsic interest and positive bearing upon one's understanding of the historical setting that it may not fairly be passed over in this discussion. My own judgment is that, although perhaps the view that the hill rather than the council is in mind cannot be finally discarded as being beyond the realm of possibility, there are preponderant reasons for concluding that Paul is represented as appearing before the council of the Areopagus. That indeed the philosophers should have desired to take Paul away from the busy market-place to the somewhat isolated hill with a view to a more quiet and leisurely inquiry may well be allowed. But this explanation is not compelling since no adequate reason appears why the inquiry should not have continued there in the *agora* where they were wont to carry on their disputations. If, however, Paul is taken before the Areopagus, probably in the *Stoa Basileios* in the market-place itself, all is intelligible. The absence of intimation of arrest and of distinctly judicial examination disallows the possibility of a formal trial, and if that were the sole prerogative of the supreme council of Athens, the position favoured here would have to be

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rejected. But since the council evidently enjoyed some general prerogatives, including the exercise of some control of lecturing in the market-place, full justice is done to the data of Acts if one understands that Paul was compelled to face the council to demonstrate that his appearance among the public lecturers of Athens was unobjectionable.

The most specific confirmation of this view is found, in my judgment, in the manner in which references to the Areopagus are introduced. Paul is said to have stood 'in the midst of the Areopagus' (verse 22), and following the conclusion of his address to have gone out 'from their midst' (verse 33). The prepositional phrase 'in the midst of' may be used with reference to places as well as persons: Lk. xxi. 28 refers to those who are in the midst of Judæa; Mk. vi. 47 to the boat of the disciples as being in the midst of the sea. But it is exceedingly doubtful that a person or group of persons would be described as being in the midst of a hill. On the other hand, Luke repeatedly speaks of persons as being in the midst of other persons (Acts i. 15, ii. 22, iv. 7, xxvii. 21; Lk. ii. 46, xxii. 27, 55, xxiv. 36). And the utmost continuity is preserved on this view since Paul is said to have gone forth from *their* midst.⁷

⁷ See especially Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* (1903), pp. 243ff.; *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1915), pp. 102ff.; Lake and Cadbury *ad hoc*. Dibelius, *op cit.*, p. 9, argues that the hill is favoured by the consideration that in Acts xvii. 19 a change of scene is indicated: and since Paul has been viewed as active in the *agora* he must now be thought of as being taken away from the *agora* to the hill, However, he may quite well be conceived of as being taken from a certain point within the *agora* to the particular place where, the Areopagus convened. Moreover, the preposition ἐπί may quite possibly mean before rather than 'to' at this point; cf. the usage in Acts xvi. 19, xvii. 6; and the designation

That Paul's address was delivered before the supreme council of Athens emphasizes accordingly the uniqueness of the occasion of its delivery and underscores the necessity of making due allowance for its distinctive contents. Apart from the brief summary of the discourse at Lystra (Acts

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xiv. 15 ff.) and such intimations as are provided in Paul's Epistles, the address at Athens provides our only evidence of the apostle's direct approach to a pagan audience. And even this address, though not presented as unrepresentative of his preaching to unconverted Gentiles, is likewise not included as completely typical of such preaching.⁸

II. THE ALTAR TO AN UNKNOWN GOD

At the commencement of Paul's address the attention is unmistakably centred upon the religious devotion of the Athenians. Recalling his tour of the city in which he had been aroused to indignation at the prevalence of idolatry, he singles out for special attention one altar among the many 'objects of worship' upon which was inscribed the words ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩ ΘΕΩ ('To an unknown God'). A basic problem facing the interpreter is that of Paul's evaluation of the worship of the unknown God. But a prior question is what such an altar discloses as to the religiosity of the Athenians in the context of their own religious history and outlook, a question which cannot be dissociated from that of the historicity of the book of Acts at this point.

Baur and Zeller as exponents of the Tübingen criticism of Acts, and Schweitzer and Dibelius as representatives of a contemporaneous point of view which retains certain basic evaluations of that school, may be mentioned among the many modern writers who have flatly rejected the testimony of Acts regarding the existence of such an altar. Schweitzer, whose position on this matter is fairly representative, sets forth his view as follows:

That the speech is unhistorical is at once portrayed by the

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fact that Paul takes for his starting-point an inscription dedicating an Athenian altar 'to an unknown God.' There can never have been such an inscription. There is evidence in current literature only for altars to 'unknown Gods' in the plural, not to *an* unknown God in the singular.⁹

Appealing to the often-quoted allusions in the writings of Pausanias and Philostratus, and recalling Jerome's judgment that Paul had altered the inscription to serve the purposes of his

of Dionysius as the Areopagite that is, as a member of the council, is most intelligible on the understanding that the council has been referred to in the preceding' context.

⁸ In passing one may observe how Luke gives evidence of being 'completely at home in describing the Athenian scene, a fact which is left unaccounted for on certain evaluations of his competence. Lake and Cadbury remark on verse 19 According to Acts, therefore, just as Paul is brought before the στρατηγοί at Philippi, the πολιτάρχαι at Thessalonica, the ἀνθύπατος at Corinth, so at Athens he faces the Areopagus. The local name for the supreme authority is in each case different and accurate.'

⁹ *op. cit.*. E.T. p. 6.

address, he concludes that it was the author of Acts rather than Paul ‘who transposed the inscription from the plural to the singular, in order to provide Paul with a starting-point for his discourse on monotheism.’ ‘Such alterations of traditions and citations,’ he goes on to say, ‘were practised without scruple by the religious propaganda of antiquity in its literary forms.’¹⁰

Several critical observations are in order here:

(1) We must challenge the propriety of the assumption that Luke would have felt free to take liberties with historical fact simply because there are evidences that ancient historians sometimes accommodated their facts to their practical purposes. This unscientifically disallows of exceptions to what is said to be characteristic of that age; it begs the question whether the Christian Luke may not have had higher standards; it demands that his specific claim to write accurately and with a view to providing certainty concerning what had actually taken place be set aside as being merely conventional and rhetorical.

(2) This position is most rash, further, in its declaration that ‘there can never have been such an inscription’ on the basis of nothing more than an argument from silence. For even if there were many instead of a very few declarations extant concerning altars to unknown gods, they could never demonstrate that an altar to an unknown god never existed; silence concerning such an altar could prove only that, for one reason or another, allusion to it had not been

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preserved. Actually, of course, the consideration rests on even less than an argument from silence since the Acts itself, even if doubt were cast upon the Lucan authorship, remains a contemporaneous witness of the first rank. And as it is the testimony of Luke, an intimate associate of Paul, it would be rash to set it aside merely because no confirmation of its historicity has been discovered. Schweitzer’s dogmatism may be happily contrasted with the statement of Foakes-Jackson in the Moffatt Commentary that ‘Paul implies that on close inspection he found a single altar thus dedicated, which may have escaped the notice of those who had written about Athens.’

(3) It is not as conclusive as many modern critics of the Acts claim that no confirmatory evidence has been forthcoming. While I should certainly not challenge the conclusion that there were in Athens altars dedicated to unknown *gods*, it remains possible to construe the language of Pausanias and Philostratus so as to allow for knowledge of an altar to an unknown god as well, although certainly it was not pertinent to their purpose to distinguish between them. When Pausanias says, for example, that on this visit to Athens (about the middle of the second century of the Christian era) he noticed on the road from the Phaleron Bay harbour to the city ‘altars of the gods named unknown’ (βωμοὶ δὲ θεῶν τε ὀνομοξομένων ἀγνώστων), who can insist that there was not among them one inscribed Ἀγνώστω Θεῷ? Likewise the statement Philostratus ascribes to Apollonius, that it is the part of wisdom ‘to speak well of all the gods, especially in Athens where altars are set up in honour even of unknown gods’ (τὸ περὶ πάντων θεῶν εὖ λέγειν καὶ ταῦτα Ἀθήνησιν, οὗ καὶ ἀγνώστων δαιμόνων βωμοὶ ἴδρυνται), though no doubt applying to altars inscribed with the plural designation, is sufficiently general to comprehend one with the singular form.¹¹

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹¹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*. i. 1. 4 : Philostrius, *Life of Philostratus*, vi 3, 5.

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(4) Moreover, even if these historical allusions to the religious life of Greece and Athens were exclusive of the Lucan report, there would be powerful confirmation of the credibility of Acts from the well-known story of Diogenes Laertius concerning Epimenides the Cretan, who, when summoned during a plague, advised that white and black sheep should be driven from the Areopagus and that where they came to rest the Athenians should sacrifice 'to the appropriate god' (τῷ προσήκοντι θεῷ). As a result the plague was stayed, and Diogenes reports that even in his day (in the third century A.D.) 'anonymous altars' were found in the vicinity of Athens.¹²

Norden and Dibelius, to be sure, know this story and discuss it in relation to their view that the author of Acts must have altered the plural to the singular in the interest of presenting Paul as an exponent of monotheism, and thus actually invented the altar with the inscription Agnosto Theo. They point out that the story of Diogenes Laertius says nothing concerning an *inscription* upon the altars erected to the appropriate deity.¹³ It must indeed be admitted that no precise confirmation of the inscription as reported in Acts is provided by it. This conclusion fails, however, to face the issue in the sharpest terms. It fails to observe that the narrative sheds no light whatever upon the origin of an altar to unknown *gods*. Polytheists might fear that their pantheon was not complete and that there were *gods* who were being deprived of their rightful service because they remained unknown, and thus one may conceive of the erection of altars to unknown *gods*. But the story of Epimenides has in view an essentially different type of situation, in which on a particular historical

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occasion sacrifice was offered to a specific, though unknown, *god*. Accordingly, though this story does not establish the existence of an altar or altars with the precise inscription found in Acts xvii, it furnishes the very background which is required to make it intelligible and bears witness to the prevalence in Athens of the very kind of piety upon which Paul reflects.¹⁴

The question as to the religious motif which came to expression in the offering of sacrifices 'to the appropriate god,' and which could have taken the form of worship of an unknown god, needs to be analysed more specifically. Knowling is representative of the view that 'in such an inscription Paul wisely recognized that there was in the heart of Athens a witness to the deep unsatisfied yearning of humanity for a clearer and closer knowledge of the unseen power which men worshipped dimly and imperfectly, a yearning expression in the sacred Vedic hymns of an old world, or in the crude religions of a new.'¹⁵ Such a formulation reads much more of positive religious significance into the Athenian piety than is suggested either by the story of Epimenides or by Paul's allusion to the altar to the unknown god. Knowling seems to

¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, i, 110 ; cf. Wetsien, *Novum Testamentum*, II (1752), *ad hoc*. Among modern commentators who have utilized this story as a background for the understanding of the narrative mention may be made of Joseph Addison Alexander (1858), Knowling, auth Lake and Cadbury.

¹³ Norden, *Agnostos Theos*, p 57. n. 1'; Dibelius, *op. cit.*, pp. 16f.

¹⁴ Lake. *Beginnings*, V, p. 242, saw : There is no evidence for an altar to any one god who was specially called "the unknown," but the story in Diogenes Laertius suggests that the singular may have been used in the formula τῷ προσήκοντι θεῷ meaning "to the unknown god who is concerned in the matter"; ἀγνώστῳ Θεῷ would be a loose but not very inaccurate paraphrase.'

¹⁵ In the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 11. on v. 23. See also Dibelius, *op. it.*, p. 19 : 'Für den Areopagredner aber ist einzig der singularische Text der Inschrift brauchbar, denn ihm gilt sie als Zeugnis für das unbewusste Ahnen des wahren Gottes bei den Athenern.'

imply that Paul regarded the polytheistic religion of Athens as a kind of imperfect monotheism, a 'knowledge of the unseen power' which needed only to become clearer and more intimate. But how can the readiness to include still another god in their pantheon constitute an approach towards monotheism? The idea of an open pantheon, like that of an open universe in which anything can happen, points to an under-

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lying scepticism and irrationalism rather than to a movement towards the one living and true God.

On the other hand, it may not be overlooked that a measure of awareness of the inadequacy of their own religion is indicated. For the erection of the altar manifested an acknowledgment on a particular occasion that they had to do with a god not previously worshipped, one whom they had neglected and offended, and whose disfavour had to be appeased, and who, for all that, yet remained unknown.¹⁶ The worship of an unknown god, coming to expression within the framework of polytheism, remains the idolatrous worship of one god among many. But the singular expression of idolatry exhibited by the altar which attracted Paul's special attention, intimating as it did its own defectiveness, provided a starting point for Paul's proclamation of the living God who was unknown to them.

III. PAUL'S CHARACTERIZATION OF THEIR WORSHIP

Paul's own characterizations of the religion of the Athenians serve most immediately to introduce his positive proclamation. They bear pointedly upon one's evaluation of its disposition and thrust, since the question whether he assumes a relatively complacent attitude toward their idolatry, or maintains a mood of indignation, or adopts some other attitude towards it, is in the foreground of interest.

One's attention centres, first of all, upon the fact that he classifies the altar in the focal point of interest among 'the objects of your worship' (τὰ σεβάσματα). This word is used on only one other occasion in the New Testament, namely in 2 Thes. ii. 4, where Paul speaks of the man of lawlessness

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as 'he that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or is an object of worship.' 'While the anti-religious and blasphemous pretensions of the one who sets himself forth as God are thought of as a most direct assault upon the worship of the living God, the use of the compound 'God or object of worship' is best explained as having in view the comprehensiveness and absoluteness of his religious claims. Accordingly, Paul appears to be using the term in 2 Thessalonians at best in a neutral sense and more probably in the

¹⁶ J. H. Bavinck, *Alzoo Wies het Woord* (Baarn, Holiand, n.d.), p. 175. presents basically this view when he says that the maker of this altar apparently, 'hetzij vanwege bijzonderen nood of vanwege bijzonderen zegen, genoopt gevoeld heeft een bepaalden god aan te roepen. inaar dat hij niet geweten heeft tot welken god hij zich wenden moest.' It is doubtful, however, that he is on equally solid ground in his conclusion that Paul viewed the altar as symptomatic of heathen religion generally.

unfavourable sense of the idolatrous worship of his day, and there is therefore no hint from the Biblical usage of the term that commendation in the slightest degree is in his mind.¹⁷

The single instance of the use of the cognate verb 'worship' (σεβάσμαι) in the New Testament does not lead to a different result. In fact it does quite the contrary, for in that instance Paul is characterizing the pagan religious outlook with the strongest tones of condemnation: 'they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped (ἔσεβάσθησαν) and served (ἐλάτρευσαν) the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever' (Rom. i. 25). Although the terms 'idol' and 'objects of worship' as used by Paul in Acts xvii. 23 would not necessarily have disclosed to the Athenians Paul's considered judgment concerning such worship, there is, on the other hand, no reason to suppose that his employment of these terms signifies any relaxation of the mood of indignation which Luke attributes to Paul.¹⁸

Nor is the situation altered by the consideration that Paul uses the verb εὐσεβεῖν to describe their worship of an unknown God when he says, 'That which ye worship... I declare unto you' (verse 23). For this verb with its cognate forms, while frequently employed to express the piety which

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merits divine approval, was widely used in the Hellenistic world as descriptive of religious loyalty demanded by or offered to the Roman emperors.¹⁹ In the context of Acts the εὐσεβεῖν is the worship of one idol among the many heathen objects of worship.

More significant for our understanding of Paul's evaluation of pagan religion is his general characterization of their cultic piety which resulted from his observations concerning their worship: 'I perceive that ye are very religious' (verse 22). The interpretation of the adjective δεισιδαιμονεστέρους reflected in the translation 'very religious' is widely accepted today. It is the translation of both the A.S.V. and the new R.S.V. McGiffert suggested the rendering 'uncommonly religious.' On the other hand, the rendering in the unfavourable sense 'superstitious' cannot be ruled out of court in advance. Although the translation of the A.V. 'too superstitious' is unacceptable from a linguistic and contextual viewpoint, the same cannot be as dogmatically asserted of the rendering of the R.V. 'somewhat superstitious,' which is also supported in the margin of the A.S.V. And the support which the *Commentary* of Lake and Cadbury gives to the rendering 'very superstitious' is indicative of the standing which this evaluation of the word still enjoys.

No good service would be rendered by embarking here upon a survey of the usage of this word with a view to determining its precise meaning, since this has been done in a thorough way, and it has become clear that the word is sufficiently ambiguous and comprehensive to bear both connotations.²⁰ That this might turn out to be the case is quite understandable when one keeps in view the difference of subjective evaluation of religions, according as a religion

¹⁷ Considering tile usage here and in certain apocryphal writings, Frame, *Thessalonians* (I.C.C.), p. 256, says that it 'indicates not a divinity (*numen*) but any sacred object of worship.'

¹⁸ The verb σεβόμεαι is used several times in the Acts. usually apparently of the worship of God-fearers, but in xix. 27 of the pagan worship of Diana.

¹⁹ Cf. Moulton and Milligan. *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*.

²⁰ See especially Foerster in *Theologisches Wörterbuch z. NT.* and Lake and Cadbury in *Beginnings*, IV, on v. 22, and their references to the literature.

may be one's own cherished faith or another's alleged aberration or defection from a standard of piety. The question

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whether Paul means that they were uncommonly religious or uncommonly superstitious (allowing for some ambiguity in the term and accordingly for differences of interpretation) will have to be determined, in so far as that is possible, by the evaluation of the context.

Although, in my judgment, there is no evidence within the address or outside of it to suggest that Paul is in the slightest degree complacent towards idolatry, and much that demonstrates his thoroughgoing repudiation of it, it does appear definitely more satisfactory in the present connection to conclude that Paul is underscoring their religiosity rather than their superstition. The observation that their worship of idols included even the veneration of an unknown god provides a ground for calling attention to their extraordinary religiousness, a religiousness which went so far as to include even worship of an unknown god. Such worship, however, would not plausibly 'be regarded, within the context of polytheism, as an evidence of unusual superstition. On the other hand, to affirm that their religiosity rather than their superstition is prominently in view in Paul's opening observation is not to imply commendation on Paul's part of their religiosity. As has been observed, the very flexibility and ambiguity of the word makes it ill-suited to designate a piety which is favourably regarded; and there is nothing in the present context to warrant the conclusion that Paul's purpose is to compliment them on their worship.

On this analysis of the Pauline language, his marked interest in the religion and worship of the Athenians may be of profound significance for the understanding of Paul's approach to the heathen. So far as the analysis has proceeded, there is nothing to suggest that Paul acted on the assumption that he needed only to supplement what the heathen already knew or to build upon a common foundation. However, the occupation with the religiosity of the Athenians can plausibly be explained as due to reflection upon the nature of man as created in the image of God and

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as therefore made to respond religiously to the Creator. However inadequate and even false the religion of the pagan might be judged to be as a consequence of sin, it would still be a fact of profound significance for the proclamation of the gospel that man retained his fundamental character as a religious being, that, as Calvin taught, he possesses as man, inseparable from his very constitution, an indelible *sensus divinitatis*, which the wicked seek to extinguish, but which is still strong and frequently discovers itself.²¹

That the apostle Paul actually held such a view regarding the constitution and nature of men, and therefore of wicked men too, is demonstrated in Romans i. 19 and its immediate context where he teaches that, in addition to and evidently actually prior to the revelation of God with which all men are confronted in nature round about them, there is a revelation of God 'in them.' In profound agreement with this thought is his further teaching that the heathen have the law of God 'written in their 'hearts' (Rom. ii. 15). The explicit teaching of Paul therefore provides a background which, rather than setting up tensions or contradictions with the

²¹ *Institutes*, I, iii, 1-3.

address at Athens, sheds welcome light upon his interest in the religion and worship of the natural man.

IV. THE CHARGE OF IGNORANCE

Although, therefore, the reflections upon the worship of the heathen Athenians in Acts xvii. 22, 23 contain observations concerning the religious state and activity of the natural man rather than evidences of positive agreement as to, or of common ground concerning, what true religion is and requires, one nevertheless encounters in this very context one feature which expresses a basic judgment as to the

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character of their religion. This is found in the indictment that their religion was one of ignorance.

The full impact of the charge is easily obscured in translation. The rendering of the King James' Version: 'Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you' is particularly unhappy. For besides presupposing an inferior text in the masculine forms 'whom' and 'him' (for 'what' and 'this'), it is quite unsatisfactory in translating the participle ἀγνοοῦντες by the adverb 'ignorantly,' a rendering which lacks precision and, moreover, seems to reflect an emotional reaction not definitely established by the language employed. These defects are overcome in the R.V. and A.S.V. which read: 'What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you.' Nevertheless, one feature that is still missed is the clear allusion of the participle ἀγνοοῦντες to the adjective ἀγνώστῳ in the inscription which gives real point to the Pauline evaluation. Paul makes the most of their public profession of lack of knowledge concerning the objects of worship by virtually reading it back to them as a characterization of their religion. He says in effect, 'That which ye worship *acknowledging openly your ignorance*, I proclaim unto you.' The ignorance rather than the worship is thus underscored, and Paul is indicating that he will inform them with regard to that concerning which they acknowledge ignorance. The R.S.V. perhaps reflects the point made here when it translates: 'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.' The words, 'as unknown,' at any rate serve to reflect the inscription 'To an unknown god.' But even this translation fails to make clear that Paul is characterizing the *worshippers* as without knowledge rather than the object of worship as being, from his own point of view, as such unknown. The original, in any case, demonstrates that Paul, though not censorious, takes advantage of their confession to pronounce censure upon the Athenians and describes their religion bluntly as one of ignorance.

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But how seriously and absolutely is this indictment of ignorance to be taken? Does Paul maintain a sharp antithesis between the Christian religion and pagan idolatry? Or is he represented here as softening his polemic, accommodating his point of view to the Hellenistic religiosity of his day, and even acknowledging significant common aspects in Christianity and paganism? The latter viewpoint is widely maintained. Dibelius, for example, argues that an attitude towards idol worship quite different from that in Rom. i appears in Acts xvii. Whereas in Rom. i. 23, 25 Paul is recognized as condemning the pagan entanglement in idolatry with indignation ('*in empörtem Ton*') he is thought in Acts xvii to be represented as correcting

their idolatry in a merely admonishing and reproving tone.²² On this approach the indictment of ignorance could not be regarded as intended very earnestly.

To advance the clarification of this point it seems advisable to take account immediately of a statement near the close of the address which uses similar language. In verse 30 Paul says that 'the times of ignorance God therefore overlooked, but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent.' This declaration appears to some, especially in view of the use of the verb 'overlook,' to express an exceedingly moderate conception of the culpability of the heathen. Thus Percy Gardner states that, while idolatry was for Paul 'an utter abomination,' to the author of this address 'it is only an unworthy way of regarding their Heavenly Father, for men who are the offspring of God who however in past time tolerated such materialism, until a fresh revelation came in the fulness of time.'²³ But has the thrust of Paul's language in Acts xvii. 30 been correctly understood when he is said to have declared merely that God tolerated their materialism?²⁴

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Is what Paul states here any different from his utterance concerning 'the passing over of the sins done aforesaid, in the forbearance of God' (Rom. iii. 25)? The overlooking of ignorance, like the passing over of sins, properly signifies an attitude of forbearance, a failure to enter into final judgment with the guilty, but is by no means to be identified with complacency towards, or tolerance of, idolatry.

Those who find a discrepancy between the Paul of the Acts and the Paul of the Epistles at this point should have been forewarned against their divisive conclusions by a consideration of the tone of the Lystra episode where Paul's reproof of paganism is plainly not moderate or restrained! Paul was hardly undisturbed when with Barnabas, following the effort of the people to sacrifice to them, he rent his garments, and sprang forth among the multitude, crying out, 'Sirs, why do ye these things?' (Acts xiv. 14f.). In this narrative there is a close parallel to Rom. iii. 25 as well as to Acts xvii. 30, for in verse 16 he says that God 'in past generations permitted all the nations to walk in their own ways,' words which likewise are associated with a call to repentance, that they 'should turn from these vain things unto the living God who made the heaven and the earth...' (verse 15). Here clearly there is no tolerance of idolatry; the idols are 'vain things' which are to be repudiated. Paul does not condemn idolatry more emphatically when he writes that the Galatians had been 'in bondage to them that by nature are no gods' (Gal. iv. 8; cf. Rom. i. 21, viii. 20; 1 Cor. xii. 2).²⁵

His permitting the nations to walk in their ways, while perhaps not quite the equivalent of saying, as W. L. Knox has recently stated, that God 'handed them over to a repro-

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²² *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

²³ 'The Speeches of St. Paul in Acts' in *Cambridge Biblical Essays* (London, 1909), p. 400.

²⁴ A. C. McGiffert expresses a quite different view: "The "overlooking" of ignorance which is here referred to does not imply that in pre-Christian days God regarded the idolatry of the heathen with indifference or saved them from the consequences of their sins, denounced so vigorously in Romans i, but simply that the time for the final judgment had not come until now, and that they were, therefore, summoned now to prepare for it as they had not been before' (*The Apostolic Age* [New York, 1903], p. 260, n. 1).

²⁵ K. J. Popma, *De Oudheid en Wij* (Kampen, 1948), pp. 96ff., has effectively pointed out the significance of the Lystra address.

bate mind,²⁶ gives expression to the long-suffering of God who postpones decisive judgment upon sin although men have been deserving of His wrath. In the light of this plain disclosure of how Paul, the Paul of Acts if any one pleases, contemplated the state of the heathen prior to the dawn of the Gentile mission in the new dispensation, it is indefensible to force upon his declaration that God overlooked the times of ignorance the interpretation that God was relatively complacent towards idolatry.

The heathen in Athens were accordingly held responsible, according to Paul, for their state of ignorance as they were for their worship of vain things in Lystra. Their ignorance was a sinful ignorance which if persevered in could lead only to imminent judgment; hence the urgency of the call to repentance both at Lystra and at Athens.

The connection established between Paul's characterizations of the state of the heathen in verses 23 and 30 raises the question of the broad disposition and thrust of the address, for that also bears upon the more specific question of the attitude taken towards idolatry. Dibelius' analysis of the address, which has been mentioned, appears to fail in particular to do justice to its coherence. In dissociating Paul's mood of indignation as described in Acts xvii. 16 from the rest of the address, in isolating likewise the conclusion of Acts xvii. 30, 31 as a Christian appendage to a basically Hellenistic address (as is supposed), and in formulating the theme of the address proper as concerned with the true knowledge of God accessible to the natural man, the antithesis drawn throughout between the idolatrous religion of the heathen and the true worship of God represented by Christianity is not recognized. The facts are, however, that idolatry was the occasion of Paul's activity in Athens, a particular form of idolatry formed the starting point for his address before the Areopagus, and the proclamation of God as the sovereign Creator and Ruler of all was

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directed against idolatry. It established the impropriety of the worship which makes its gods dependent upon men's handiwork, and showed rather that man, owing his life, breath and all things to God, 'ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man.' All of this then forms the background for the call to repentance in view of the coming judgment. There are indeed certain features of the address which remain unaccounted for on this analysis, especially the introduction of quotations from the heathen poets in an apparently sympathetic manner. The problems raised by this feature are weighty and they will need to be faced with all earnestness. But it may be observed at once that even these quotations are obviously introduced by Paul to support his principal argument as to the untenability of idolatry, and therefore do not impinge upon the judgment as to the disposition of the address. Paul roundly condemns what he observed as a religion of ignorance.

V. THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

Another fact of fundamental import for the understanding of Paul's approach to the heathen is that he claims that he alone is immediately able to supply their real need, that he alone is able to provide them with a knowledge of the true and living God: 'That which ye worship acknowledging your ignorance, I declare unto you' (ἐγὼ καταγγέλλω ὑμῖν). How bold, if

²⁶ *Time Acts of time Apostles* (Cambridge, 1948), p. 70.

not presumptuous and bigoted, his claim must have appeared to his hearers who had already found occasion to ridicule him as a babbler, or at best conceived of him as proclaiming a deity or deities besides those already worshipped among them. But the note of authority to proclaim the true God, however strange and offensive it may have been to his Athenian hearers, is not a novelty. The Christian proclamation throughout the New Testament is never viewed as mere human observations concerning the message

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of the Old Testament and least of all as human reflections upon the religions of the age, but rather as a divine message, true and authoritative as coming from God Himself. Paul declares that the gospel which he preached 'is not after man; for neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ' (Gal. i. 1 ff.). Faith, Paul taught, is of hearing, and hearing 'through the Word of Christ,' and this Word of faith in Christ and His resurrection was proclaimed by Paul and others commissioned by God (Rom. x. 8ff.). And throughout the Acts attention is centred upon the apostolic preaching as carried on by those who were appointed to, and qualified from above for, this task (i. 15ff., ii. 42, vi. 2, 4 and *passim*). Paul in particular is singled out as having received his apostolic commission by an extraordinary divine intervention: he was a chosen vessel to whom the exalted Christ had appeared to appoint him as a minister and witness both of the things wherein he had seen Christ and of the things wherein Christ would appear to him.²⁷

Special interest in this connection attaches to the verb which Paul employs in verse 23 in introducing his proclamation. The verb καταγγέλλειν is used frequently in the Acts and the Pauline Epistles of the official apostolic proclamation of the gospel. 'The word of God' is proclaimed by Paul and Barnabas (Acts xiii. 5, xv. 36, xvii. 13); 'the testimony of God' was proclaimed to the Corinthians (1 Cor. ii. 1); 'the gospel' is that which is proclaimed by divine appointment (1 Cor. ix. 14); 'Jesus' (Acts iv. 2, xvii. 3) and 'Christ' (Phil. i. 17, 18; Col. i. 28) likewise sum up the divine message (cf. also Acts iii. 8; 1 Cor. xi. 26). That the publication of the apostolic message was viewed as claiming direct divine authority is furthermore confirmed by the use of the same verb in describing the proclamation beforehand of Christ by the prophets (Acts iii. 24; cf. iii. 18, 52).

When therefore Paul undertakes to inform the Athenians

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concerning the sovereign Creator and Judge, and declares that he is proclaiming to them that with regard to which they had in a measure acknowledged ignorance, he sounds the characteristic apostolic note of divine authority. How far he is therefore from stressing supposedly common ground between himself and his pagan hearers! When he says that the state of the heathen was characterized by ignorance of the true God, and he himself boldly asserts his qualifications to provide them with true knowledge, he is accenting, rather than toning down, the antithesis between the pagan religiosity and the Christian religion. When Paul's claim to inform them truly and authoritatively concerning God is taken earnestly, there is no place for the judgment that the thrust of the address is concerned with the knowledge of God and the affinity with God of the natural man, as Dibelius contends, and especially for his asseveration that nothing is said of the claim of the Christian message that the true knowledge

²⁷ Cf. Acts ix. 15, 16, xx. 24, xxii. 141., xxvi. 16ff.

of God can be possessed and communicated only by way of revelation.²⁸ Although the word 'revelation does not appear, Paul's claim does not fall short of that of the Christian message generally, whether published by the prophets or apostles or by Jesus Christ Himself.

VI. THE SOVEREIGN CREATOR AND LORD

Perhaps the most controversial terrain in the entire narrative lies before us in the study of verses 24-29. The proclamation of God as Creator and Ruler of the world, as has been observed, is often viewed as an affirmation of monotheism, which is thought of as being not distinctively Christian and even as occupying to a large extent common ground with the religious outlook of non-Christians in the

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Hellenistic age. Although it will not be practicable to consider all the data in detail, certain observations can be made with regard to the main problem. I wish here especially to raise the question as to whether Paul remains on distinctly Christian ground in his positive affirmations and to gauge the implications of his utilization of quotations from heathen poets.

The first observation is that the God whom Paul proclaims the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, who is self-sufficient, and therefore ought not to be thought of as dependent upon man and worshipped as an idol, is not presented as a matter of fact *in this address* as one whose knowledge may be taken for granted or presupposed or even inferred from a study of the world and history. As has been stressed, Paul proclaims this God as one who is basically unknown to his hearers. Moreover, the appeal is not, at least not in verses 24-26, to natural revelation which would yield these conclusions if properly interpreted. There is nothing, for example, even parallel to the teaching of Paul in Romans i. 20 that 'the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity, that they may be without excuse.' Rather the mood is the quite dogmatic one of special revelation associated with Paul's own authoritative claims and reinforced by a direct dependence upon the teaching of the Old Testament. Paul may have thought it inappropriate to appeal specifically to the authority of the Old Testament, but the reflection of its language and thought is none the less in evidence throughout. For example, he is on thoroughly Biblical ground in speaking of God as the one that made the world and all things therein,' for this language is a virtual quotation from Ex. xx. 11 and has found expression repeatedly in both the Old and New Testaments (cf. Ps. cxlvi. 6; Is. xxxvii. 16; Acts iv. 24, xiv. 15). Likewise the declaration that God is 'Lord' of heaven and earth

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and 'dwelleth not in temples made with hands is an echo of 1 Ki. viii. 27 and was previously affirmed in the address of Stephen (Acts vii. 48; cf. Is. xlvi. 1f.).²⁹ The entire statement

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 36ff. and passim. He says: 'Von dem Anspruch der christlichen Botschaft die wahre Gotteserkenntnis erst durch Offenbarung zu besitzen und mitteilen zu können wird nichts gesagt' (p. 36). The revelational note appears also with particular force in verses 30. 31.

²⁹ Other evidences of agreement with Biblical perspectives concerning the divine self-sufficiency, sovereign ordering of events, and the impropriety of idol worship have often been pointed out. Cf. especially Dt. xxxii. 8 Is. xlii. 5; Ps. 1. 12. Even Norden, *op. cit.*, pp. 8ff., admits the influence of such passages as these and declares that the Grundmotiv is 'jüdisch-christlich.'

concerning God as Creator and Ruler is so obviously a reflection of Biblical perspectives that the argument as to supposedly Hellenistic motifs at most establishes points of contact with the contemporaneous religious vocabulary. Only in the Bible does the doctrine of the sovereign Creator and Ruler, without compromise with immanentistic ideas, come to expression, and this is conspicuously in evidence in verses 24-26.

Paul may perhaps have in the background of his thought his teaching regarding the revelation through nature concerning which he spoke at Lystra in affirming that they had not been left without witness (Acts xiv. 17), and in Rom. i. 20, where he writes concerning the witness to the everlasting power and divinity in the things that are clearly seen. In so far as the testimony of nature may be in mind, however, Paul would have to be understood as concerned to interpret the natural revelation in terms of special revelation.

Nor is the supposedly common ground of natural religion reached when Paul intimates that God had created the world and ordained its affairs that men 'should seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him' (verse 27). For there is no hint that the heathen are conceived of as having found God as the result of a groping after Him or as yearning after Him in a manner which had gained the divine approbation. There is no suggestion of a recognition of a kind of 'unconscious Christianity.' Paul is nor describing contemporaneous pagan religion but rather is disclosing the divine purpose regarding man's religious

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response which was grounded in the creation of man and the divine rule over him. To man was appointed the privilege of religious fellowship with his Creator, and this was to be attained by way of a conscious seeking after God in response to the divine revelation. That goal had always remained, but in 'the times of ignorance' it evidently remained distant and had not been reached.

When now Paul adds the concession, 'though he is not far from each one of us,' he appears to present a new perspective. The concessive character of this statement indeed confirms the conclusion that the goal of finding God had not been attained, but it also reflects positively on an actual relationship of God to all men in the present situation. And what Paul has in mind in characterizing God as being near to all men is apparently regarded as illumined and supported by the more specific affirmations that 'in him we live and move and have our being' and that 'we are also his offspring.' Since the latter quotation is derived from a work of the Stoic Aratus, and the former is almost certainly from Epimenides the Cretan,³⁰ there emerges most acutely the problem of the propriety of appealing to pagan teaching with the apparent intent of confirming Christian doctrine.

The problem is formidable because the quotations in their proper pagan contexts express points of view which were undoubtedly quite repugnant to Paul. How far re-moved from the Christian theism of Paul, with its doctrine of the sovereignty of the Creator and Lord and of man as created and fallen, were the heathen deification of man or the humanizing of a god, and the pantheistic mysticism of the Stoics, not to dwell on the irreligious scepticism of the Epicureans! Moreover, Paul would appear to be contradicting his evaluation of the Gentiles,

³⁰ On these questions see Lake and Cadbury *ad loc.*; Lake, *Beginnings*, V. pp. 246ff. and F. F. Bruce, *Time Speeches in Acts* (London. 1942), pp 16ff,

which must have included the poets who are quoted as belonging to the ‘times of ignorance,’ and his judgment upon the

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religion of Athens as one of ignorance. In spite of the antithesis which in fact existed, and which Paul insists upon, can there be a finding of common ground between him and his pagan audience?

A tempting and rather facile solution might be found if Paul could be regarded as virtually Christianizing the quotations in incorporating them into his proclamation. Their language as such indeed would not necessarily compromise the Christian theism enunciated by Paul. In the context of the thought of the preceding verses, the immanence of God expressed in the former quotation could be viewed as deriving its significance from the fact that God is acknowledged by the apostle with full earnestness as the Creator and Lord of all men. That we live and move and have our being’ in God would then be a corollary of the doctrine of the absolute dependence of the creature upon the Creator for life and breath and all things. Similarly, the recognition that man is the offspring of God might enunciate a doctrine which lies at the basis of Paul’s reflections in the narrative upon the original constitution of man and his retention of his creaturehood in the midst of his present idolatrous and blameworthy state and acts. Paul then might be regarded as arguing that, if only man had taken due account of his creation in the divine image, he might have recognized the error of his idolatry which conceived of God in terms of dependence upon man’s reflection and handiwork.

But is not this approach much too simple? To maintain that Paul has Christianized pagan ideas suggests that propositions which subjectively considered are the antithesis of Christianity might be viewed as being objectively true. K. J. Popma has effectively shown that such a distinction between thought and word, as well as an approach which would allow that the quotations are materially untrue but formally true, sets up dualisms in mind and in history which are intolerable.

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When, however, the same writer, on the background of a salutary recognition of the antithesis of Christianity and paganism, argues that the quotations are introduced only with a view to shaking his hearers loose from the apostate religious convictions which the quotations express, it appears that he has not done full justice to all the evidence.³¹ This viewpoint overlooks, in particular, the manner in which Paul introduces one quotation, and perhaps both, with the words, ‘as certain even of your own poets have said’ (verse 28). In arguing from the quotations to his Christian conclusions Paul appears unmistakably to be attaching validity to them even while he is taking serious account of their presence within the structure of pagan thought. The formula confirms indeed an observation made previously: it intimates that the quotations are not offered as foundation features of the Pauline proclamation, but only quite subordinately and even incidentally to the main thrust of his address, which stands on strong Biblical ground. The fact remains, however, that, at least momentarily, he appears to occupy common ground with his pagan hearers to the extent of admitting a measure of validity to their observations concerning religion.

³¹ *Evangelie contra Evangelic* (Franeker, Holland. n.d.), pp. 47ff.

This question remains a pressing one, therefore: how can the argument supported by appeal to the quotations of pagan poets be valid even while their pagan origin and character were fully recognized? One will be in an impasse here, I believe, unless account is taken of other teaching of Paul, teaching in the Epistles as well as in the Acts, which provides a broader and richer content of truth. Paul maintained that even pagans remained confronted with the revelation of God in nature, and that this contact with revelation rendered them inexcusable (Acts xiv. 17; Rom. i. 19ff.). This confrontation with the divine revelation had not been without effect upon their minds since it brought them into contact with the truth, but their basic antipathy

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to the truth was such that they suppressed it in unrighteousness (Rom. i. 18).³² Thus while maintaining the antithesis between the knowledge of God enjoyed by His redeemed children and the state of ignorance which characterized all others, Paul could allow consistently and fully for the thought that pagan men, in spite of themselves and contrary to the controlling disposition of their minds, as creatures of God confronted with the divine revelation were capable of responses which were valid so long as and to the extent that they stood in isolation from their pagan systems. Thus, thoughts which in their pagan contexts were quite un-Christian and anti-Christian, could be acknowledged as up to a point involving an actual apprehension of revealed truth. As creatures of God, retaining a *sensus divinitatis* in spite of their sin, their ignorance of God and their suppression of the truth, they were not without a certain awareness of God and of their creaturehood. Their ignorance of, and hostility to, the truth was such that their awareness of God and of creaturehood could not come into its own to give direction to their thought and life or to serve as a principle of interpretation of the world of which they were a part. But 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. Thus while conceiving of his task as basically a proclamation of One of whom they were in ignorance, he could appeal even to the reflections of pagans as pointing to the true relation between the sovereign Creator and His creatures.³³

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One aspect of the criticism of the message attributed to Paul in Acts xvii. 24-29 remains to be considered. The charge that Paul is represented as introducing an expression of pantheistic mysticism in verse 28 in contrast to a particularistic conception of sonship in his Epistles is presented on the background of the judgment that the body of the address is occupied with a presentation of monotheism which has little or nothing to do with specific Christianity. Assuredly a monotheism which knows nothing of the particularism of divine grace forfeits its right to the name Christian, and hence if living in God and being the offspring of God were intended by Paul in Acts to indicate the sufficiency and validity of a religion of nature, there would be the most violent antithesis to the Christian gospel. However, as has been observed, there is no good reason to conclude that Paul means to characterize true religion in these terms. And to come to my main point in this connection, in my judgment a basic fault of

³² Cf. γνόντες τὸν Θεὸν in Rom. 1.21 with οὐ δύνανται γνῶναι in 1 Cos. ii. 14.

³³ Cornelius Van Til has recently stressed, in connection with a salutary emphasis upon the significance and meaning of history, that the wicked within history, for all of their ignorance of and hostility to God, are kept from being fully satanic. See his 'Introduction' to B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1948), especially pp. 24, 32, 38f. Cf. also his *Common Grace* (Philadelphia, 1947).

modern criticism of Acts xvii is that it supposes that Christianity may exist as a message of grace and judgment apart from monotheism, or from what I should prefer to call a Christian theistic view of the world. This raises a profoundly controversial issue of the modern day which the limits of this paper do not permit me to discuss, an issue so basic as to involve the total question of what Christianity really is. I must be satisfied here with the observation that the message of Paul at Athens, taken in its grand sweep as a message which integrates creation and providence with the teaching concerning Jesus, sin, repentance, the resurrection and the day of judgment, is not confined to this chapter or to the Acts. It certainly may not fairly be ruled out of the thought of Paul of the Epistles.

It is astonishing that Dibelius and Schweitzer apparently fail to take into account the far-reaching implications of 1 Thes. i. 8, 9, a most precious record of Paul's early preaching in Thessalonica, in which as at Lystra and at

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Athens he regards as essential to conversion to Christianity turning unto God from idols to serve the living and true God. However this silence may be explained, one fears that there is at work here, and in much of the modern exegesis, an arbitrary and divisive approach which has disastrous consequences. The modern effort to detach the specific Christian message from the Biblical theism of the Scriptures involves a radical transformation of the Christian doctrines of creation, sin, salvation and consummation, and also the substitution of a modern world view for the one that has been rejected. Hence it represents a thorough-going modernization of Christianity rather than a scientific interpretation of it.

VII. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ADDRESS

The conclusion that the apostle Paul remains on solid Christian ground, in complete consistency with his teaching in his Epistles, and yet effectively takes advantage of the religious faith and practice of his pagan hearers in calling upon men to turn from idols to serve the living and true God, is challenged from still another point of view. One might maintain that the narrative is quite trustworthy as a record of Paul's ministry in Athens, but if the apostle himself, as the consequence of the paucity of converts, or because of a reevaluation of the propriety or wisdom of his particular approach before the Areopagus, became disillusioned and later determined to follow a different evangelistic method, the address would possess virtually as little relevance for the understanding of the authoritative apostolic proclamation of the New Testament as it would if we held the view that the address is largely imaginative. Such an evaluation of the consequences of the address has enjoyed considerable vogue in recent decades, perhaps as a

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result of the influence of Sir William M. Ramsay, who summed up his judgment as follows:

It would appear that Paul was disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by his experience in Athens. He felt that he had gone at least as far as was right in the way of presenting his doctrine in a form suited to the current philosophy; and the result had been little more than naught. When he went on from Athens to Corinth, he no longer spoke in the philosophic style. In replying afterwards to the unfavourable comparison between his

preaching and the more philosophical style of Apollos, he told the Corinthians that, when he came among them, he 'determined not to know anything save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified' (1 Cor. ii. 2); and nowhere throughout his writings is he so hard on the wise, the philosophers, and the dialecticians, as when he defends the way in which he had presented Christianity at Corinth. Apparently the greater concentration of purpose and simplicity of method in his preaching at Corinth is referred to by Luke, when he says, xviii. 5, that when Silas and Timothy rejoined him there, they found him wholly possessed by and engrossed in the word. This strong expression, so unlike anything else in Acts, must, on our hypothesis, be taken to indicate some specifically marked character in the Corinthian preaching.³⁴

The argument no doubt is plausible, and enjoys a measure of popular appeal because of its apparent readiness to be content with the simple gospel rather than with philosophical argument. But my own judgment is that it is quite untenable when the pertinent data are evaluated at their true worth.

In the first place, it is essential to take due account of the Lucan methods and aims in the Acts as the proper background for the estimate of his purpose in introducing this

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address. In pursuance of his goal to exhibit the manner in which the ascended Lord brought His word to men and established His Church in the face of many obstacles, Luke presents many examples of the apostolic preaching and especially that of Peter and Paul. Without specific evidence to support such a conclusion it is incredible that he should have reported apostolic preaching, which was intended to demonstrate how the gospel was *not* to be preached, and it is particularly incomprehensible that the Areopagus address should be regarded in that light when one contemplates the pains which Luke takes to portray the exceptional historical situation in which Paul found himself and the impressiveness with which the address itself is reported. Luke gives every impression of presenting Paul as a masterful orator who knew exactly how to suit his message to a distinctive and challenging situation. That Paul can have been thought of as in reality a failure can be accepted only if the most decisive proofs can be mustered in support of that hypothesis.

When one measures the consequences of the preaching, one must admit that they may not appear impressive. There was the repetition of the ridicule which had been expressed earlier; others continued to show the curiosity that had led to his being taken before the Areopagus (verse 32; cf. verse 18), and thus there is no change in the general situation. There is added, however, the report that certain men joined him and believed, and that among these converts there was a Dionysius who was a member of the supreme council, and a woman named Damaris. Though the number of believers was evidently not great, Luke does not underscore their paucity. It is even possible to suppose that he regarded it as remarkable in the circumstances, with all of the unfavourable religious and philosophical commitments which characterized the Athenians, that there should have been some who were prepared to make a break with views which were in good standing in Athens

³⁴ *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*, p. 252. Recent expressions of this viewpoint are found in Foakes-Jackson *ad loc.* and Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (Princeton, 1946), p. 247. Even G. T. Purves, *Christianity in the Apostolic Age* (New York, 1900), p. 193, though regarding the contents of the address as being of the highest value, because it presented aspects of truth which were to be of fundamental importance in the coming conflict between Christianity and paganism, 'speaks of the results as disappointing' and says that 'Paul finally moved on to Corinth resolved to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. ii. 1, 2).'

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and to share the ignominy or disdain attached to Paul's faith.

Moreover, even if the results were actually more meagre than Luke shows them to have been, and even if Luke had directed special attention to the paucity of converts, it still would not follow that any blame would be attached to the message of Paul for the failure of a larger company of Athenians to turn to belief in Christ. To the extent that historical factors may have influenced the results, one is on far sounder ground if note is taken of the original purpose of Paul to enjoy a period of rest rather than to preach in Athens, and of the apparent brevity of his activity there.³⁵ Actually, however, it is most precarious to engage in rationalizing from the number of converts to the correctness of the message. That there were converts at all should be sufficient proof, within the context of the Acts, that the message was regarded as the Christian message. Luke did not share the pragmatism of our day which judges the truth of the message by the criterion of outward success.

Another decisive reason for rejecting the judgment that a casual connection exists between the character of Paul's message at Athens and the meagre results is that the Areopagus address by no means constitutes the only preaching Paul undertook there. As I have previously observed, his activity there included preaching in the Jewish synagogue and in the market-place, and his apostolic message was summed up in the terms 'Jesus and the resurrection,' a most apt and succinct characterization of the preaching of Paul and Peter as reported in Acts.³⁶ It is quite unjustifiable, accordingly, to insist that there were few converts in Athens because Paul preached somewhat distinctively before the Areopagus. Even if this address were quite at

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variance with Paul's usual message, one would still have to reckon with the fact that in his general approach to the Athenians he had evidently followed a fairly stereotyped pattern.

Although, accordingly, the narrative affords no hint that Paul was on the wrong track at Athens, it is averred that a contrary impression is given by other data in the Acts and in 1 Corinthians. Paul himself is thought in 1 Cor. ii. 2 to reflect upon his ministry in Athens and to be expressing a new determination to know only 'Christ and him crucified' in contrast to a philosophically oriented message. And in Acts xviii. 5 Luke is viewed as likewise indicating that at Corinth Paul adopted a different, simpler approach. In the latter passage Luke indeed characterizes the early phase of Paul's preaching in Corinth in a somewhat unusual manner when he says that 'when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul was engrossed in the word, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.'³⁷ And it is possible that a contrast of some kind is being drawn with the description of his activity in the preceding verse where, following a reference to his labour with Aquila and Priscilla at his trade as a

³⁵ Ramsay, *St. Paul*, p. 239, himself says that the lack of results at this stage is... fully explained by the shortness of time. Paul's stay in Athens can hardly have been longer than six weeks, and was probably less than four; and the process described in verse 17 was brought to a premature close by *the* great event of his visit, which the historian describes very fully.'

³⁶ See pp. 11f, above.

³⁷ The R.V. and A.S.V. translate the phrase 'was constrained by the word,' but most commentators more satisfactorily render it substantially as given above. The new R.S.V. reads 'was occupied with preaching'. The A.V. was pressed in the spirit 'is based upon an inferior text.'

tentmaker, the narrative reports that 'he was reasoning in the synagogue every sabbath and persuading Jews and Greeks.' If a contrast between two phases of his preaching to the Jews is actually in view, it would be completely gratuitous to explain this development in terms of a simpler, less philosophical approach in the second phase. There is not a trace of a suggestion that this was in mind, and it would furthermore imply that at Corinth, in the beginning, Paul was preaching to the Jews in a form suited to the current philosophy! It would be far more in point to suppose, as Lake and Cadbury do, for example, that the coming of Silas and Timothy somehow

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relieved Paul of the necessity of engaging in earning his living and that he began to be engrossed in the word in the sense that he gave all of his time to preaching. Even the latter view, however, is largely inferential and rather forced, since Luke does not qualify his reference to the preaching activity by stating that he could now engage in it *every day*. Inasmuch as Luke says that Paul was occupied with preaching to the Jews when Silas and Timothy came to Corinth, and thus may be understood as virtually repeating the description of Paul's activity among the Jews in xviii. 5, it is more satisfactory to conclude that xviii. 5 is a résumé of xviii. 4 introduced in order to indicate that, as xviii. 6 immediately goes on to disclose, soon after the arrival of these men, the Jews turned so sharply against his mission that he turned to the Gentiles (cf. Acts xiv. 44ff.). At any rate, there is no foundation whatsoever for the interpretation that Paul's being engrossed in preaching to the Jews reflects a rejection or modification of his message and method in preaching to the pagans in Athens.

Nor does the appeal to 1 Cor. ii. 2 rest upon a firm basis. Paul does not say that, when he came to Corinth, he adopted a new evangelistic approach, and there is no suggestion that he had accommodated his message of 'Christ and Him crucified' to his hearers at Athens and now regretted it. There is no hint even that he ever preached any differently than he did at Corinth, but Paul takes pains to remind the Corinthians that he had not come with 'excellency of speech or of wisdom'; his gospel was not one that commended itself to the wise in Corinth, but was foolishness unto them. And so indeed his message had largely proved to be to the Athenians.³⁸

There remains the consideration, however, that the

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message says nothing concerning Christ crucified or of salvation by faith in Him. Does not the address, therefore, even if its content is quite unobjectionable, appear to stop short of being a well-rounded Christian proclamation of the gospel? In considering this question, one may reckon with the distinct possibility that Luke intends to intimate that Paul was interrupted before he had reached his real conclusion. When his hearers heard mention of the resurrection, some mocked while others indicated an interest in hearing Paul at a later time, and Paul thereupon departed out of their midst (xvii. 23f.). Moreover, when a comparison is made between the address and Paul's summary of his message to the Gentile world in 1 Thes. i. 9, 10, it may plausibly be argued that there is agreement in the declarations concerning

³⁸ This interpretation is even more emphatically supported by the original, for Paul does not say, 'I determined not to know...' (A.V., R.V.), or 'I decided to know nothing...' (R.S.V.), but 'I did not determine to know...'. See also Lightfoot, *Notes on Epistles of St. Paul* (1895), p. 171, who renders it. 'I had no intent, no mind to know anything.'

conversion from idols to the true God, the return of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ but that the feature of deliverance by Christ from the wrath to come alone fails of mention at Athens. On this approach one might well maintain that Paul had preached Christ and Him crucified, and deliverance through Him from the wrath to come, in his earlier preaching in Athens, but that in the instance of the Areopagus address the offence taken at the doctrine of the resurrection, disclosing as it did the chasm that separated their thinking from Paul's, was so profound that they precipitately and impatiently closed their ears, as it were, to the proclamation of salvation through Christ.³⁹

There are weighty reasons, however, for judging that this evaluation of the conclusion of the address, for all of its plausibility and attractiveness, is not firmly established. In the first place, Luke clearly does not say that Paul's hearers interrupted his address before he had finished.

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The reactions of his audience may be fully understood as being expressed following the completion of his message, just as similar reactions developed after Paul's earlier proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection (xvii. 18). Secondly, one is not on incontestable ground in assuming that all of Paul's preaching would have conformed to a stereotyped pattern, and especially that the address on the extraordinary occasion of his appearance before the Areopagus would not have expressed a certain formal and material individuality.⁴⁰

Another approach to the problem which escapes these particular difficulties appears to be definitely tenable, one which, rather than inferring that the address was abruptly terminated by his hearers, takes account of the exceedingly compressed character of the reports of the speeches in Acts.⁴¹ If one once recognizes that the addresses must be regarded as condensed accounts of speeches that lasted considerably longer than the time it takes us to read them through, one may be prepared to face the question whether the several reports, while indicating accurately the disposition and contents of the addresses in summary form, do not imply as much as they actually state. As applied to the situation confronting us here, this observation suggests that Luke means to imply that the message of salvation through Christ is being intimated in epitome in Paul's proclamation of the divine command that all men everywhere should repent. 'The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent; inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by

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the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead' (verses 30, 31).

³⁹ On this point and the argument that the Athenian audience definitely broke off his address before it was completed, see Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp. 126ff., 139f., 122ff., 183. Bavinck goes so far as to say, 'Als Paulus over de opstanding der doodcn begint te handelen, roepen de intellectueele fijnproevers van Athene hem tot orde en breken zijn rede af' (p. 183).

⁴⁰ It is necessary to guard against exaggerating the stereotyped character of Paul's preaching in general. 'To await his son from heaven' (1 Thes. i. 10) strikes the eschatological note, but it has a somewhat different orientation from that in Acts xvii. 31 which centres upon the coming judgment. The preaching of Paul in Pisidian Antioch (xiii. 16ff.), while stressing the resurrection of Christ and declaring remission of sins through Him, appears to omit the distinctively eschatological feature.

⁴¹ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 27, takes note of this characteristic of the speeches of Acts in its bearing upon their trustworthiness.

There can surely be no doubt that Paul is proclaiming here the wrath to come. The day of judgment is announced on the authority of an apostle of Christ as a day when God will judge the world in righteousness. The One through whom the divine judgment will be executed has already been designated. And not only has the commission to execute judgment been bestowed upon One especially chosen, but there has also already been a sign of the coming of that day and of that Judge. For in raising Christ from the dead God had revealed with sufficient clearness that the age to come had begun to be realized and that the One who had gained pre-eminence by the divine power which raised Him from the dead was One with whom men were compelled to reckon as a unique servant of God.

But the proclamation of the *dies irae* also brings to Paul's hearers a message of grace. Favour had been expressed in overlooking their ignorance; now there was manifested the goodness of God which confronted the Gentiles with the revelation of the day of judgment and urgently warned them—'all men everywhere'—of the necessity of repentance. But this command to repent expresses more than the thought of the inevitability of divine judgment upon men who fail to repent. It discloses also that the days before the dread day of judgment would come are days of grace and salvation, when men may still repent for their sins and escape the wrath to come.

That the proclamation of the divine command to repent may be understood as a preaching of the glad tidings of salvation is confirmed by the manner in which it is introduced in the apostolic preaching generally. Peter, for example, declares: 'Repent ye therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out...' (iii. 19; cf. ii. 38). And Paul informs Agrippa that he was not disobedient to

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the heavenly vision, but declared to Jews 'and to Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God, doing works worthy of repentance' (xxvi. 20; cf. xiv. 15). Repentance is described not only as a turning unto God, but also as a 'repentance unto life' which God granted to the Gentiles (Acts xi. 18), and also as giving assurance of the forgiveness of sins (v. 31; cf. xxiv. 47).

And since Paul points to Christ as the One whose resurrection establishes His credentials to judge among men as to their acceptance with God, one may at least read between the lines that those who are to share with Christ the blessedness of the world to come are faced with the necessity of being assured of a favourable relationship to Him who guards the portals of eternal life.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Luke, as disclosed in both his Gospel and the Acts, is the gospel of the crucified One. But since the divine action of salvation is viewed as reaching its consummation in the exaltation of Christ, there is a profound occupation with the resurrection of Christ as serving to sum up even more pointedly than the cross the decisive saving work of God. This accounts for the prominence given to the resurrection in Luke's record of that which Jesus did before His ascension; it also explains the emphasis which falls upon it in the records of the apostolic preaching. In the Areopagus address the declaration concerning the profound significance of the resurrection of Christ appropriately subsumes the fact of the cross. Thus also in the Epistles Paul, who wished to know only Christ and Him

crucified, preaches Christ as the one 'that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead' (Rom. viii. 34).

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Prepared for the web in July 2005 by Robert I Bradshaw

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