

## **Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16–34)**

—  
**J. Daryl Charles\***

### **I. Introduction**

Acts 16 contains an account of an unusual directive in the life of Paul. While in the major Aegean port city of Troas in northwest Asia Minor, the Apostle is conscious in a dream of a Macedonian appealing for help.<sup>1</sup> Paul's subsequent entry into Europe, as it turns out, is crucial to the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Following his arrival at Neapolis, the port of Philippi and terminus of the Egnatian Way, Paul visits Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, before going on to what was considered the intellectual center of the ancient world, the "university" city of Athens. During Paul's visit to Athens, a rather remarkable opportunity presented itself. What, too, is remarkable is the amount of detail given in Luke's narrative both to the content of Paul's speech at the Areopagus and the social context in which it is delivered.

Adolph Deissmann claimed that Paul's Areopagus address was "the greatest missionary document in the New Testament."<sup>2</sup> Deissmann noted that the Apostle's aim was to "exhibit to pagans of a great city in the Mediterranean world what was characteristic of the new religion as concisely as possible."<sup>3</sup> Despite this enthusiastic assessment, it has not been unusual for commentators to view Paul's ministry in Athens as a failure, to the extent that Paul's technique in Athens is deemed ineffective. Writing a century ago, W. M. Ramsay gave credence to the view that Paul became "disillusioned" by his experience in Athens.<sup>4</sup> C. Munsinger has called the Areopagus speech an "unrealistic experiment."<sup>5</sup> A. Daniel-Rops also sees Athens

---

[p.48]

as an "unsuccessful" paradigm. A negative view of Paul's ministry in Athens has even found its way into the notes of the *New Jerusalem Bible*.<sup>6</sup>

---

\* J. Daryl Charles is Scholar-in-Residence at The Wilberforce Forum. This manuscript was presented at the 1994 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Chicago.

<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:9-10.

<sup>2</sup> *Light from the Ancient Near East* (New York: H. Doran, 1927) 384.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895) 252.

<sup>5</sup> *Paulus in Korinth* (Heidelberg: Knecht, 1908) 5. He writes: "Es musste fehlschlagen, denn es war ein Experiment, welches ausserhalb der gegebenen Ordnung lag" ("It [the experiment] had to fail, since it was conducted outside of the normal pattern [of preaching]").

<sup>6</sup> (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) 1829. Others who adopt a "negative" view of Paul in Athens are J. Renie, *Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Pirot-Clamer, 1949) 209; J. Dupont, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Duculot, 1953) 157; and M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1956) 63. Dibelius, it should be noted, questions the authenticity of 17:16-34, distinguishing between "the Paul of the Acts" and "the real Paul" on display in Romans (pp. 62-63).

In spite of obvious missiological interest in this narrative, the negative appraisal of Acts 17 raises several questions. Does Paul's preaching at the Areopagus involve compromise with contemporary pagan religious notions? Does it obscure in any way the distinctives of the Christian message? Does it in Luke's mind represent a capitulation to the cultural forces at work in cosmopolitan Athens? Is it possible that Luke is attempting, in veiled fashion, to mirror an "unsuccessful" ministry, or even more strongly, to show that Paul is side-tracked by a "natural theology" that fails to penetrate his audience because of its absence of Christian theological distinctives? Viewing Paul's preaching in Athens as either a success or failure fundamentally guides how one interprets the text of Acts 17. In Luke's mind, does the material in 17:16–34 play the role of the model or the foil?<sup>7</sup> Can Paul's encounter with Athenian culture serve as a model—positively or negatively—for the Christian community of any age?

In the book of Acts there are three speeches of Paul recorded—one to a Jewish audience (13:16–41), one to a Christian audience (20:17–35), and one to a pagan audience (17:16–34). This distribution surely is not by chance.<sup>8</sup> Like most of the preaching throughout Acts, the Areopagus speech is received with both hostility and faith; thus, the reader can assume 17:16–34 to be exemplary of first-century apostolic preaching. The text of Acts 17 itself does not suggest explicitly that Paul's speech at the Areopagus is misguided in a strategic sense. While vv. 16–34 are of obvious missionary interest, the reader must come to terms with why Luke is so concerned to present the "human side" of Paul's preaching. Why the preoccupation with detail?

It is in the interest of this concern that we wish to proceed. Acts 17:16–34 raises important questions concerning Christian proclamation and the church's relation to culture—specifically, to

---

[p.49]

"educated pagan" culture.<sup>9</sup> Some of what confronted Paul and the subsequent Christian community in Athens—the little that we know of it—confronts North American Christians as well. What are the lessons that can be drawn from Paul's encounter with "cultured paganism"?

## II. Paul, Apostle To The Cultured Pagan

"I am a Jew, from Tarsus [in the province] of Cilicia, a citizen of a very important city."<sup>10</sup> Thus Paul describes himself in one instance of interrogation. Although Saul was "brought up"<sup>11</sup> in Jerusalem, he returned to his home city of Tarsus after his conversion (Acts 9:30). Doubtless he was proud of his linkage to Tarsus,<sup>12</sup> a university city as well as center of government, banking, and commerce.<sup>13</sup> Paul was hence well acquainted with pagan "high

---

<sup>7</sup> H. Conzelmann holds the Areopagus speech to be inauthentic, a "free creation" of the author ("The Address of Paul on the Areopagus," in *Studies in Luke-Acts* [ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn; Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1966] 218).

<sup>8</sup> So L. Legrand, "The Areopagus Speech: Its Theological Kerygma and Its Missionary Significance," in *La Notion de Dieu* (ed. J. Coppens; Louvain: Gembloux, 1974) 338-41.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, I. H. Marshall, *Acts* (TNTC; Leicester/Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity/ Eerdmans, 1991) 281.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 21:39.

<sup>11</sup> The verb *ἀπατρέφω* can denote physical nurture as well as mental or spiritual training (*BAGD*, 62).

<sup>12</sup> To the ancients, "fatherland" related more to one's city than one's nation.

<sup>13</sup> Although banks were found in all commercial cities, Athens was always the leading banking center of the ancient world (H. Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, vol. 1 of *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia/ Berlin/New York: Fortress/W. de Gruyter, 1984) 90.

culture"—an acquaintance that, when sanctified, would thrust *him*, not Simon Peter, forward as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13). Roman citizenship and life in a university city, after all, did have its privileges. This background would aid him enormously during his apostolic ministry—particularly in a city like Athens.<sup>14</sup>

Why was Tarsus the city which should produce the apostle to the Gentiles? Uniting oriental and occidental cultural and intellectual life, the institutions of Tarsus were uniquely suited to mold Paul's intellectual development.<sup>15</sup> Cicero was governor of Tarsus in the mid-fifties BC. It was here that Mark Antony met Cleopatra in 41 BC. Tarsus was the native city of several famous Stoic philosophers—among them, Zeno, Antipater, Athenadorus, and Nestor. In the period of 27 BC-AD 14, during the reign of Augustus, Tarsus came to be renowned as a center of intellectual life. As a "university" city, Tarsus is said to have surpassed Athens and Alexandria in terms of zeal for learning.<sup>16</sup>

Prosperous and cosmopolitan, Tarsus would have prepared Paul well for engaging Hellenistic culture.

---

[p.50]

### III. Athens In Paul's Day

The cradle of democracy, Athens was the foremost of the city-states in the fifth century BC.<sup>17</sup> Following nearly thirty years of exhausting strife with totalitarian Sparta, Athens lay politically ruined. In terms of its rich cultural heritage, however, the city remained unsurpassed. Its contributions in sculpture, literature, philosophy, and oratory from the fifth and fourth centuries were unparalleled in the ancient world. In addition to being the native city of Socrates and Plato, it became the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. Demosthenes, an "unsuccessful Churchill"<sup>18</sup> of the mid-fourth century BC, strove in vain to rouse his fellow-Athenians once more to independence and political greatness. Athens was also home to the poet Menander, whose New Comedy as a form of entertainment eclipsed the classical Greek tragedy in the late fourth and early third century BC.<sup>19</sup> It is worthy of note that the Attic dialect, not its Ionic or Doric counterparts, formed the base of the later *Koine*.

By Paul's day, the city had lost much of the preeminence that it once possessed. Yet Cicero, writing one hundred years earlier, observed that in spite of its decline in political power, Athens still enjoyed "such renown that the now shattered and weakened name of Greece is supported by the reputation of this city."<sup>20</sup> People generally came to one of three "university" cities of renown—Athens, Alexandria, or Tarsus—to study philosophy, rhetoric, or general education.<sup>21</sup> Apart from its academic reputation,<sup>22</sup> Athens is depicted in the

---

<sup>14</sup> Paul's familiarity with Hellenistic culture in and of itself may account for the knowledge of Greek "poets" seen in his Areopagus address.

<sup>15</sup> See D. Gill and C. Gempf, eds., *Graeco-Roman Setting*, vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) esp. chaps. 9 and 12.

<sup>16</sup> Strabo, however, plays down the notion that Tarsus was an intellectual center (14.5.12-13).

<sup>17</sup> S. Berger ("Democracy in the Greek West and the Athenian Example," *Hermes* 117 [1989] 313) notes that even outside of Greece, Athens became a model of democracy in shedding tyranny from the *polis* during the fifth century BC.

<sup>18</sup> E. M. Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell, 1965) 52.

<sup>19</sup> Paul quotes from one of Menander's comedies in 1 Cor 15:33: "Bad company corrupts good morals."

<sup>20</sup> *Pro Flac.* 26.62.

<sup>21</sup> Strabo 14.5.13.

writings of Strabo and Ovid as a tourist center and the site of great festivals, attracting as well various itinerant philosophers and mystics. One such traveling teacher-mystic, Apollonius of Tyana, is described by Philostratus (third century) as having arrived at Athens about the same time as Paul.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, the account mentions that Apollonius was struck by the altars "to unknown gods." It is to such a city that the Apostle Paul would come, adapting himself in astonishing fashion to the

---

[p.51]

dialectical habits of its inhabitants.<sup>24</sup> Simply put, for Luke Athens represents the height of pagan culture. Hence, he infuses the description of Paul's ministry here with notable detail. It should not be lost on the reader that Athens in Paul's day was still the cultural capital of the world.

The intellectual atmosphere of first-century Athens might be characterized as mildly promiscuous, both in a religious and non-religious sense. A large proportion of the city's population had been initiated into the Eleusian mysteries.<sup>25</sup> Religiously speaking, the city had no discernible knowledge of OT revelation. It basked in the glory of past intellectual strength, yet by Paul's day exhibited a somewhat indiscriminate, almost casual approach to life issues, lacking the seriousness of intellectual pursuit that had typified the classical era. Several of the church fathers allude to Athens as a city of talkers, a people possessed of curiosity.<sup>26</sup> According to one ancient source, Athenians were particularly fond of lawsuits.<sup>27</sup> With hermaphrodites commonplace at house doors and innumerable symbols of phallic worship and sex obsession on public display throughout the city (some of which were attached religious significance), one can envisage the dislocation in the Apostle's spirit as he engages a culture in moderate decline (17:16).<sup>28</sup>

With the passing of the centuries a canonical twelve gods were thought to hold power on Mt. Olympus.<sup>29</sup> Athens was the site of an altar dedicated to this twelve-member pantheon, which included Athena, daughter to Zeus.<sup>30</sup> Religion and politics appear to have been ineluctably intertwined in Athenian culture, as evidenced by surviving literature. One such example is a somewhat turgid speech dating c. AD 155 by Aelius Aristides at the Panathenaic festival. In this speech, the author recounts a legal battle of the gods that is significant for an understanding of Athenian history. In his pursuit of justice, Poseidon sued Ares over the murder of his son, ultimately winning his case in the presence of all the gods.<sup>31</sup> As a record of the event, the purported site of disputation took on Ares' name. Hence, throughout Athen's rich history the Areopagus constituted for some the pinnacle of Athenian respect. It was here

---

<sup>22</sup> In addition to the Stoic and Epicurean schools, Athens was home to Plato's "academy," the Lyceum, where Aristotle taught, and thousands of initiates into the mystery religions. Koester observes that as late as the early Byzantine era, philosophy students flocked to Athens from all parts of the ancient world (*History*, 99).

<sup>23</sup> See E. Mayer, "Apollonius von Tyana und die Biographie des Philostratos," *Hermes* 52 (1917) 371-424.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth pointing out that Paul knew two of the three university cities scattered around the Mediterranean region - Tarsus and Athens. Stoic influence in both cities was strong (see M. Pohlenz, "Paulus und die Stoa," *ZNW* 42 [1949] 69-104).

<sup>25</sup> Koester, *History*, 180. Phyla, located near Athens, was the site of a mystery sanctuary.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Luke's description in Acts 17:18 and 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Charito* 1.2.6 (cited in H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 139).

<sup>28</sup> Thus, P. Parente, "St. Paul's Address before the Areopagus," *CBQ* 11 (1949) 144.

<sup>29</sup> See J. Ferguson, *Greek and Roman Religion* (Park Ridge: Noyes, 1980) 3-16.

<sup>30</sup> Pausanias 1.28.5.

<sup>31</sup> A. Aristides 1.40-48. See also Pausanias 1.28.5.

J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16–34)," *Trinity Journal*, 16:1 (Spring 1995) p. 47–62.

that the gods were understood to have convened and disputed. And it was here that justice was to be eternally manifest—even among mortal Athenians.

---

[p.52]

Thus it was that Athenians looked to the Areopagus as a source of knowledge, wisdom, reason, and justice.<sup>32</sup>

Since the mid-third century BC the Council of the Areopagus functioned as authoritative in civil-legal<sup>33</sup> and educational matters. The Council consisted of about thirty members and was presided over by a κήρυξ, the president of the assembly who conducted official business. In the Roman era the Areopagus was constituted by several commissions, one of which was educational.<sup>34</sup> This "university" commission, known to us through pseudo-Platonic literature and Plutarch and on which Cicero is said to have served, was still functioning in the 60's when Paul visited Athens. Acts 17:22–23 may well be Luke's report of the Apostle being led before this elite educational commission for an informal inquiry.<sup>35</sup>

## IV. Literary-Rhetorical Strategy In Acts 17:16–34

### A. The Narrative Framework of Paul's Areopagus Speech

Acts 14:8–18 and 17:16–34 contain notable similarities. In both Lystra and Athens, the Apostle adapts his preaching to his audience by assimilating a more or less Greek view of the universe, with its human quest for God. Luke's narrative in chap. 17 is far more extended, incorporating detail that tantalizingly suggests eye-witness testimony.<sup>36</sup> Supporting his argument by quotations from Epimenides and Aratus of Soli, Paul employs a line of reasoning not unlike that of classical Greek orators. Luke depicts the Athenians' response to Paul in the agora as moderately bemused. Significantly, it is the introduction of the notion of a bodily resurrection that evokes a strong reaction (vv. 18 and 32). To the Greek intelligentsia, the idea of somatic resurrection is patently absurd, for it flies in the face of the Platonic-Stoic view of psycho-immortality.

Perhaps Luke has in mind the tradition regarding Socrates, who also was accused in Athens of introducing "new gods" (cf. v. 18). For this we are dependent on the testimony of Xenophon: "Socrates does wrongly, for he does not acknowledge the gods which the state acknowledges; rather, he introduces other new-fashioned gods."<sup>37</sup>

---

[p.53]

Indeed, not only Socrates but also Anaxagoras (500–428 BC) and Protagoras (480–410 BC) were accused in Athens of introducing foreign gods. In the more recent past, Cicero had criticized the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus for embracing "unknown gods" (*ignotorum*

---

<sup>32</sup> The Council of the Areopagus, ἡ βουλὴ ἡ ἐξ Ἀρείου Πάγου, in time had come to be known simply as ὁ Ἄρειος πάγος" (K. Lake and H. J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part 1: *The Acts of the Apostles* [Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965] 212).

<sup>33</sup> Cicero (*De nat. deo*. 2.29.74) indicates that in the Roman period the Areopagus also had jurisdiction over criminal matters.

<sup>34</sup> B. Keil, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Areopags* (BZAW 71/8; Leipzig: Teubner, 1920) 59–80.

<sup>35</sup> B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (ASNU 21; Uppsala: Almqvist, 1955) 64, 59. B. Keils 1920 publication, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Areopags* (see n. 34), remains the most extensive survey of the history of the Areopagus. See also K. Wachsmuth and T. Thalheim, "Areios pagos," PW 2.627–33.

<sup>36</sup> D. Broneer, "Athens, City of Idol Worship," *BA* 21/1 (1958) 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Mem.* 1.1.1.

*deorum*).<sup>38</sup> Hence, it is possible that Luke is attempting to portray Paul in the "Socratic" mold.<sup>39</sup> After all, Luke had noted that in the agora Paul had "disputed ... daily with those who happened to be there" (17:17). Showing the apostle to the Gentiles in the marketplace, engaging in dialogue like Socrates and the great philosophers of the past, and then addressing a select audience (perhaps the educational commission of the Council of the Areopagus), Luke has hit an apologetic homerun. Paul is seen operating at his apologetic best, engaged in moral discourse with the intellectual and cultural elite of his day. The striking significance of Acts 17:16–34 is the ability of Paul to clothe biblical revelation in a cultured and relevant argument to his pagan contemporaries.

H. Flender has summed up Luke's intention in this way: (1) to communicate the Christian message to his readers in the language of the audience, utilizing pagan categories to express the reality of divine revelation;<sup>40</sup> (2) to build on pagan concepts through illustration, both philosophical and literary; (3) to adjust pagan assumptions in the light of biblical revelation (viz., via creation, transcendence, and self-disclosure); (4) to give evidence of God's self-disclosure (through the resurrection); and (5) to move toward the goal of repentance on the part of the reader through rhetorical persuasion.<sup>41</sup>

Luke's historiography in Acts 17 has been compared to that of Greek classical writers.<sup>42</sup> A certain kinship to Hellenistic tradition is evidenced both by Luke's express didactic-apologetic intent<sup>43</sup> and by numerous evidences of a secular style of speech.<sup>44</sup> Luke may only be reproducing a distilled essence of Paul's Areopagus address; nevertheless, the Areopagus narrative includes three central apologetic components: natural revelation, conception and character of

---

[p.54]

God, and Christian exclusivity over against pagan inclusivity.<sup>45</sup> A closer look at these three components will aid us in penetrating Paul's rhetorical strategy at the Areopagus. The results commend themselves to the Christian community of any era as it interacts with pagan society.

## B. Paul's Rhetorical Strategy

In his speech before the Council of the Areopagus, Paul uses numerous strategic elements to address his social context. Given the fact that Athens was home to several prominent schools of philosophical thought, it is not incidental that Paul's address touches core philosophical assumptions of both Stoics and Epicureans. Forging an apologetic bridge requires that the Apostle be conversant with contemporary philosophical constructs, even when sophistry, more than intellectual strength, characterized the Athens of Paul's day.

---

<sup>38</sup> *De nat. deor.* 1.15.39.

<sup>39</sup> E. Plümacher, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller. Studien zur Apostelgeschichte* (SUNT 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972) 19.

<sup>40</sup> See also G. Bornkamm, *Studien zu Antike und Christentum* (Munich: Kaiser, 1963) 93-118.

<sup>41</sup> *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 71-72.

<sup>42</sup> Gärtner, "Areopagus Speech," 29-44; also E. Norden, *Agnōsto Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig/Berlin: Teubner, 1913) 330-32.

<sup>43</sup> See 1:1-2.

<sup>44</sup> Lake-Cadbury (*Acts*, 209) observe the following peculiarities in Paul's style before the Areopagus: (1) the neuters ὅ ... τοῦτο and τὸ θεῖον in vv. 23 and 29; (2) the frequent use of the particle γε; (3) frequent alliteration; (4) frequent use of πᾶς with derivatives; (5) repetition of the participle ὑπαρχων (vv. 24, 27, and 29); and (6) the idiomatic expression πιστιν παρασχών (v. 31).

<sup>45</sup> Most helpful in examining the narrative framework of 17:16-34 is Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 732-41.

Moreover, Paul demonstrates an acquaintance with and understanding of Athenian culture. Evidence of this can be found not only in his fluency in the idiom of his day but familiarity with literary and historical traditions meaningful to his Athenian audience.

In addition to the Apostle's ability to contextualize, strategic elements in the content of his message are worthy of note as well. Against the materialist-rationalist world view of his listeners, Paul demonstrates the folly of the gods of material creation. In his disputation the Apostle presumes a monotheistic outlook, adjusting presuppositions in reigning world view. Paul verifies the claims of divine revelation by introducing the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and bodily resurrection, the core of the Christian kerygma. Both concepts, inextricably related, are untenable to the Hellenistic mindset, due to contemporary views of the universe, the body, and the soul.<sup>46</sup>

Paul's speech is a masterpiece of eloquence. His mode of addressing his audience with "Men" (ἄνδρες) followed by the designation "Athenians" (17:22)<sup>47</sup> is thoroughly Greek, allowing the audience immediately to feel at home. This is in keeping with Greek custom, yet at the same time it reflects the official character of the address.<sup>48</sup> Paul's message, too, is pregnant with irony. A prominent theme is human "ignorance" (ἄγνοστος, ἀγνοέω v. 23; ἀγνοία v. 30), and this not only in a city of great learning but before the Areopagus Court, which was composed of thirty of the most literate men of

---

[p.55]

Paul's day. With the skill of a surgeon, the Apostle exploits the language and ideas of his contemporaries. It is indeed fitting that before he is led in front of the Areopagus, Paul is depicted by Luke as engaging in "dialogue"<sup>49</sup> with Athenians in the agora.

Acts 17:16–34 conforms to a pattern of Hellenistic discourse, with its epistemological and teleological emphases. Paul's preaching thus cannot be confined narrowly to a normative OT pattern, as some commentators have sought to do. Rather, it wraps universal truth in the language and idiom of the day, culminating in a uniquely Christian expression of biblical revelation, and inviting the listeners to a higher metaphysical ground.

In sum, Acts 17:16–34 mirrors apostolic Christian contact with pagan culture. It begins with the epistemological assumptions of its hearers, it builds on a common understanding of the cosmos, yet it climaxes in the fullest self-disclosure of the Creator—the resurrection of the God-man.

The modern reader is apt to sense a dichotomy that the ancients would not have understood: is Paul's speech mainly philosophical or theological? Some commentators, in their attempts to explain the derivation of Pauline categories, look chiefly to Jewish and OT sources for the Apostle's Areopagus speech. Others argue that Jewish/OT notions are absent altogether. An Athenian world view, it should be remembered, was probably an amalgam of Olympian religion, magic, and some philosophical commonalities, all of which was overlaid with heavy doses of fatalism. Given the exigencies of the social situation, part of which is dictated by Athenian intellectual culture and the limitations of audience comprehension, Paul can be viewed as dealing with "ultimate issues" that are simultaneously philosophical and theological. Touch points with Stoic and Epicurean world views (with prominence given to the former) run throughout Paul's message, while the biblical doctrines of creation, God, man,

---

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of apostolic preaching among the Gentiles, see H. Gebhardt, "Die an die Heiden Missionsrede der Apostel und das Johannesevangelium," *ZNW* 6 (1905) 240-47.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. also 19:35.

<sup>48</sup> C. F. Evans, "Speeches in Acts," in *Melanges biblique* (ed. A. R. Charne; Paris: Duculot, 1969) 29192.

<sup>49</sup> The verb διαλέγομαι occurs ten times in Acts, and as one would fully expect, in Acts 17:17.

and the resurrection are key aspects of his proclamation. The movement in his address from creation to resurrection, calculated with great precision, engages the philosophical assumptions of the hearer at the most fundamental level.<sup>50</sup>

---

[p.56]

### 1. *The Appeal to Natural Revelation.*<sup>51</sup>

Because Acts 17:16–34 follows a different rhetorical pattern than Romans 1, the theological character of Paul's Areopagus speech has been doubted both by traditional critical scholarship as well as by religious conservatives. In spite of the differences between Acts 17 and Romans 1, a common apologetic bridge to the pagan mind is employed: nature itself.<sup>52</sup> It is impossible to miss the inseparable connection between creation, the moral order, and human accountability. This movement, articulated in the idiom of his day, is present in Paul's Areopagus speech as well. Pagans "know" because of creation and conscience; their "ignorance," ultimately, is "without excuse."<sup>53</sup>

"Natural theology" in Romans 1 and Acts 17 has the function of pointing to human accountability. To the extent that the Athenians—and the men of the Areopagus—have no Christological understanding, Paul's discourse on creation and the cosmos serves as a necessary "pedagogical-missionary preamble."<sup>54</sup> In both Romans 1 and Acts 17 the phenomena of creation are accessible to all.<sup>55</sup> For Paul, this knowledge of the Creator-God is innate. Even pagans without knowledge of Christ have a fundamental awareness of moral accountability. Pagans "by nature" do the moral law of God, even though they do not have the law (Rom 2:14). Thus, the Apostle can speak of universal norms.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, whether he is writing to Christians living in the Imperial seat of Rome or addressing academics sitting on the Council of the Areopagus in Athens, Paul's purpose is to stress that *all people* are morally accountable. All, though "ignorant," are without excuse.

---

[p.57]

### 2. *Conception and Character of God*

What are the spheres of natural revelation delineated by Paul in his Areopagus speech? Three realms can be detected: creation and maintenance of the cosmos, history and the nations' boundaries, and human dependence on God.<sup>57</sup> All three touch commonly recognized

---

<sup>50</sup> In assessing the pagan mindset of first-century Athens, I am indebted to conversations with Dr. Glen Thompson, a classicist who teaches at Saginaw State University and Michigan Lutheran Seminary.

<sup>51</sup> Gärtner (*Areopagus Speech*), Dibelius (*Studies*), and Pohlenz ("Paulus") have treated this subject, writing in terms of "natural theology." In this regard, the term "natural revelation" is to be preferred, in order to make the necessary distinction between the Creator's initiation and human attempts at religiosity.

<sup>52</sup> See W. Eltester, "Gott und die Nature in der Areopagrede," in *Neutestamentliche Studien für R. Bultmann* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1954) 202–27. Consider the fact that much of the Jewish view of creation in the OT is formed against the backdrop of a heathen view of cosmic "chaos"; the biblical writer is frequently polemical: e.g., Ps 73:12–14; 88:9–11; Job 38:8–11; Prov 8:28–29; Jer 5:22; 31:35; 38:36.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Rom 1:18–20. In this connection, see also G. Bornkamm, "Gesetz und Natur: Röm. 2.14–16," in *Studien zu Antike und Urchristentum* (Munich: Kaiser, 1963) 93–118.

<sup>54</sup> P. Vielhauer, "Zum 'Paulinismus' der Apostelgeschichte," in *Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament* (Munich: Kaiser, 1956) 13.

<sup>55</sup> In Rom 1:20, τὰ ποιήματα are visible for all to see.

<sup>56</sup> Note a critical distinction made by Paul, namely that pagans *possess* this knowledge, not that they can *attain* it.

<sup>57</sup> Thus Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 80–82.

Stoic assumptions. (To be sure, a vast chasm separates the OT and the Stoic view of God, about which Paul is not naive.)

For the Stoic, the divine essence is *logos*, reason. "Right reason" (*logos orthos*), as taught by Zeno, "is the same as Zeus."<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, in the structure of the physical universe lie the seeds of knowledge, the *logos spermatikos* of Stoic thought,<sup>59</sup> which gave rise to the universe. Reason, hence, was viewed as the highest expression of nature.<sup>60</sup> Paul bridges the chasm between Stoic and Christian thought by appropriating common philosophical ground, asserting that the use of reason can lead to the knowledge of God. Observing the universe (17:24–25) rouses the individual to seek after God; in truth, this Creator-God is not far removed from humankind (17:27).

Allusion to God's immanence and human kinship with God, both of which immediately follow, places Paul squarely within the Stoic understanding of the divine.<sup>61</sup> Paul does not remain, however, at the level of human reason, even though he will go as far as Greek assumptions will allow him. Creation *ex nihilo* and divine self-disclosure require more from the philosopher.<sup>62</sup> The apostolic message achieves continuity (kinship with God) as well as radical discontinuity (transcendence) with the Hellenistic world view.<sup>63</sup> While the materialistic pantheism of Stoic belief corrupts Stoic "theology," Paul first utilizes the "common ground" shared by all. Athenian "ignorance" is initially related in a positive sense ("You are very religious ... you worship ..."), then negatively (with the admonition to repent).<sup>64</sup>

---

[p.58]

At this point it is useful to consider Paul's acquaintance both with Athenian historical tradition and literary sources meaningful to his audience. That there were many "unknown gods"<sup>65</sup> in Athens is a well established fact. With an atmosphere of religious inclusivity

---

<sup>58</sup> Zeno, *Frg.* 162, cited in C. K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row, 1961) 62.

<sup>59</sup> The use of the derogatory term ὁ σπερμολόγος by some in the agora (17:18) may be a Lukan play on words with the Stoic λόγος σπερματικός.

<sup>60</sup> A fuller discussion can be found in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *Translations of Principle Sources with Philosophical Commentary*, vol. 1 of *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987) 158-437; E. Zeller, *The Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962) 126-66; and Pohlenz, "Paulus," 69-104.

<sup>61</sup> G. Schneider, "Anknüpfung, Kontinuität und Widerspruch" in der Areopagrede. Apg 17, 22-31, in *Kontinuität und Einheit* (ed. P. G. Mueller and W. Stenger; Freiburg: Herder, 1981) 173-78; also, Pohlenz, "Paulus," 69-104.

<sup>62</sup> H. P. Owen, "The Scope of Natural Revelation in Romans i and Acts xvii," *NTS* 5 (1958/59) 142-43.

<sup>63</sup> G. Nauck, "Die Tradition und Komposition der Areopagrede," *ZThK* 53 (1956) 4546; also, F. Mussner, "Anknüpfung und Kerygma in der Areopagrede" (Apg 17, 22b-31), in *Praesentia Salutis. Gesammelte Studien zu Fragen und Themen des Neuen Testaments* (Patmos: Duesseldorf, 1967) 235-43.

<sup>64</sup> Ignorance, not worship, is Paul's emphasis (thus, N. Stonehouse, *Paul before the Areopagus: And Other New Testament Studies* [London: Tyndale, 1957] 19).

<sup>65</sup> A vast amount of literature has been devoted to the "unknown god" of Athens. A variety of explanations seeks to harmonize Paul's reference to ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ with ancient sources. Pausanias (1.1.4) and Philostratus (*Vit. Apol.* 6.3) describe Athens as the scene of innumerable gods, heroes, and corresponding altars. Tertullian (*Ad nat.* 2.9) writes that Paul chose the singular description – "unknown god" – over the plural, even though the latter is understood. In his commentary on Titus 1:12, Jerome (*PL* 26.572-73) speaks of "all the gods," not the one unknown god. Theodore of Mopsuestia (cited in Lake-Cadbury, *Acts*, 244) relates an Athenian legend in which a demon appeared following defeat in battle. Out of fear, not wishing to exclude any deity, the Athenians erected an altar "to the unknown god." Among the more extensive investigations of the altar inscription are R. Reitzenstein, "Agnostos Theos," *NJKA* 31 (1913) 146-55; T. Birt, "Agnōstoi theo und die Areopagrede des Apostels Paulus," *RheinMus* 69 (1914) 342-92; Norden, *Agnōstos Theo*, 56ff; and Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 242-47.

reaching to a "lowest common denominator," no theological distinctives are discernible in Athenian culture. Paul's strategy hence is to take this "given" and build upon it for the purposes of expressing Christian exclusivity. Paul may well be infusing the altar "to the unknown god" with a "monotheistic" adaptation in order to exploit it for his own purposes.<sup>66</sup> To be sure, Athenians would not have understood Paul's monotheism as Jews would have.

Paul's qualification of God's nature also involves the enlistment of conventional literary sources. Theological "common ground" is sustained by two citations from well-known "poets." The statement "in him we live, move, and have our being" expresses the Stoic belief in closeness to/kinship with God. No pagan philosopher could reject this assertion, since any Stoic worth his salt readily conceded that God "fills" the universe, that a union exists. (This quotation is generally attributed to a sixth-century BC poet, Epimenides of Crete.)

The second citation, "We are his offspring," stems from the third-century BC Stoic philosopher Aratus, who, significantly, hailed from Paul's native Cilicia. Aratus penned these words in a poem in honor of Zeus. Titled *Phaenomena*, the poem is an interpretation of constellations and weather signs. It reads that "in all things each of us needs Zeus, for we are also his offspring." Without question, "his offspring" is sure to resonate with any Stoic present in the audience.<sup>67</sup>

---

[p.59]

### 3. *Pagan Inclusivity and Christian Exclusivity*

We have already observed the religiously "inclusive" environment pervading Athenian culture. The universalist and pantheist stamp of the Areopagus speech is a clear reflection of Luke's intention. Although religious "ignorance" in Athens of the one true God is universal and absolute, the times of *agnoia* are nevertheless pronounced by the Apostle to be past: "Now God commands all men everywhere to repent" (v. 30). As evidence that epistemological ignorance is not bliss, the "one true God" has ordained "a day" on which "the man" Jesus "will judge the world in righteousness" (v. 31). Whereas Adam was the starting point of all humanity, Jesus, the counterpart to Adam, is the culmination of all things, by virtue of having mediated all history. Paul has thus dismantled the Stoic view of universal continuum. The Judeo-Christian understanding of history, which begins and ends with divine fiat, marks a "radical discontinuity" with the world view of Paul's audience. At this point, one can assume that polite tolerance by the Council members turned into indignation. Paul's declaration, an intellectual stumbling-block for his audience, is that "one man" will judge the cosmos, that it will not be perpetual in the Stoic sense. Assurance of the proposition that God *has disclosed* himself is the linchpin of Christian revelation; hence, Paul's emphasis on the resurrection.

Three times in the Lukan narrative the resurrection is mentioned—vv. 18, 31, and 32. While 17:16–34 contains no explicit Christology, the seal of divine truth—and thus, a key to an effective apologetic in pagan culture—is the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is by no means incidental that at this point in Paul's speech the mood of his audience shifts. Scorn and derision surface both in the agora, where Paul had earlier been "dialoguing," and at the Areopagus. While Paul utilizes the utmost in skill and erudition to ensure that the packaging

---

<sup>66</sup> Paul is here engaged in what some might call "pre-evangelism."

<sup>67</sup> *Phaen* 5. It is difficult to confine with precision these words to Aratus of Soli alone, given the fact that this language appears in numerous ancient sources. For example, the words of Cleanthes, another third-century BC Stoic, are comparable: "You, O Zeus, are praised above all gods... Unto you may all flesh speak, for we are your offspring" (the text is reproduced in M. Pohlenz, "Kleanthes Zeushymnus," *Hermes* 75 [1940] 117-23). Similarly, the third-century BC poet Callimachus, in a hymn "To Zeus," speaks of humankind as "offspring of the earth" (*Hymns, Epigrams, Select Fragments* [Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University, 1988] 3).

J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16–34)," *Trinity Journal*, 16:1 (Spring 1995) p. 47–62.

of his message does not offend his audience, the content of the Christian apostolic kerygma inevitably is scandalous.

Summing up Paul's rhetorical strategy in Athens, we may note that the Apostle was knowledgeable, dialectical, well-read, relevant, and rhetorically skillful. What particularly strikes the reader is his ability to accommodate himself to the knowledge-base of most Athenians. Viewing Paul's encounter with Athenian culture as such, we may conclude that his ministry was not a "failure." Nor is it necessary to assume that his not-too-distant reflections about the power of the cross, recorded in 1 Corinthians 1–2, were penned with a wrong apologetic model (i.e., Athens) in mind.

To the contrary, a more accurate assessment of Paul's ministry in Athens may be summed up by his own testimony to the Corinthians: "I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more. To the Jews I became a Jew ... ; to those without the law [pagans], [I

---

[p.60]

became] like those without the law ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:19–22).

## V. The Apologetic Task Of The Late Twentieth-Century Church

It is worth remembering that Paul, not Peter, was called to be the "Apostle to the Gentiles." It was Paul who could dispute with philosophers in Athens, argue from the Scriptures with the Jews in the synagogue, persuade Imperial magistrates—indeed even procure an audience with the Caesar himself. Everything that God took away from Saul of Tarsus following his conversion—his pride, his zeal, his cultural pedigree, his learning, his knowledge, his rhetorical ability—was restored to the Apostle after he lay broken in the presence of Almighty God. Having been sanctified, Paul's past was now to serve the greater purposes of God as the Holy Spirit would see fit.

In many ways, western culture in general—and North American culture in particular—resembles that of Athens in Paul's day. Like the Athenians, to whom belonged an illustrious cultural past, ours is what Alexander Solzhenitsyn has called a "culture of novelty." We are obsessed with that which is novel; truth and its consequences are of little value.

For this reason, Paul's ministry model in Athens beckons to us. It invites us to learn on two plains: (1) how to relate biblical truth in culturally relevant ways (i.e., contextualization), and (2) how to formulate a cultural apologetic that retains its theological integrity in the midst of a culture of compromise.

Consider the amount of attention given to detail in Acts 17:16–34. By Luke's account, Paul has "earned the right" to an audience in Athens; he demonstrates an apprehension of Athenian culture and thus is able to accommodate theological truth to the prevailing cultural *Zeitgeist*. This should be paradigmatic for the church of any era. The Christian community must understand the culture in which it has been placed by the Sovereign Lord. By demonstrating an understanding of culture, it is then able to engage culture with a measure of credibility. Finally, having humbly sought to be a student of and active participant in culture, the church is able to confront the false values that are lodged within culture. Perception, engagement, and confrontation necessarily follow—in this order.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Paul's cultural accommodation in Athens should not be misconstrued as syncretization. Paul accommodated himself, not the message, to the level and philosophical assumptions of his audience. See W. J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 319-21.

Paul's model also has profound implications for the church's message in a pagan cultural environment. Three theological "non-negotiables" on display in the Areopagus address guide the Apostle

---

[p.61]

in his ability to address reigning philosophical assumptions. First, the Apostle stresses the sovereign lordship of the one true God. This lordship is manifest in creation *ex nihilo*<sup>69</sup> and in maintaining the history of nations. Second, proof of divine self-disclosure can be found in the resurrection of the God-man, Jesus Christ. A stumbling-block to any generation, the resurrection "forces the issue," as it were, in validating Christianity's truth-claims.<sup>70</sup> As cultural apologists, Christians need to be equipped with an understanding of philosophical and theological "first things." Competing in culture are diametrically opposed world views,<sup>71</sup> and the ultimacy of Christian truth-claims stands or falls with the resurrection. Third, the movement of a faithful apologetic is always in the direction of moral accountability. By underscoring the reality of future judgment, the Apostle dismantles religious inclusivity: all people everywhere must repent and confront the knowledge of the Creator that has been imparted to them.

## VI. Epilogue

The story of Paul's ministry in Athens does not end here, however. A concluding observation remains. It is fair to say that Luke's rather abrupt ending of the narrative (vv. 32–34) does not strike the reader in any way as impressive. Almost as an afterthought, as if to say, "Oh, by the way . . .," Luke appends one sentence that mentions two individuals by name who happened to "believe." One is a woman named Damaris; the other is a member of the Council of Areopagus by the name of Dionysius.

Neither Damaris nor Dionysius appear again in the NT, and Luke leaves us with no clue as to the significance of either. And yet, a bit of extra-biblical reading changes the complexion of the entire Acts 17 narrative. Thirty years ago E. M. Blaiklock wrote of the mix of ancient and modern that strikes the person visiting Athens today. Describing the city over nineteen hundred years after Paul's visit, Blaiklock was intrigued to find that the street that today runs around the south side of the Acropolis ruins bears the name of Dionysius the Areopagite. What sort of person was this Dionysius, anyway?

---

[p.62]

The only surviving source in this regard is Eusebius. We are informed by Eusebius that Dionysius the Areopagite, a member of the elite Areopagus Council, converted to Christ through Paul's preaching and then went on to become a bishop in the church. Eusebius writes that Dionysius ended up being martyred for his faith. One wonders that still one thousand years later in parts of the Near East a body of pseudepigraphic literature (Pseudo-Dionysius)

---

<sup>69</sup> Thus, debates on creation should be central to ongoing apologetic discourse.

<sup>70</sup> Whether acknowledged or not, doctrine lies at the heart of contemporary debates over pluralism, as D. A. Carson reminds us ("Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993] 46-49).

<sup>71</sup> No better illustration of this clash can be found than the hostility of cultural anthropologists and sociologists toward the Christian missionary endeavor. As R. J. Priest notes, in many ways, social theorists and missionaries are opposites: the one advances the notion of original sin, while the other is united in discrediting and undercutting this inconvenient anthropological truth. Evangelical theorists should not compromise on intellectual rigor; they must, however, in the end maintain fidelity to God's revelation. See R. J. Priest, "Cultural Anthropology, Sin, and the Missionary," in *God and Culture*, 85-105.

J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16-34)," *Trinity Journal*, 16:1 (Spring 1995) p. 47-62.

was still being attributed to the Areopagite of Paul's day. One can only guess that this was an extraordinary individual. Perhaps a moral of the story is that one never knows what faithfulness to God will yield. To the natural eye, Paul's ministry in Athens may have seemed a "failure." Another perspective, however, reminds us that the church did grow in Athens and Greece in the fullness of time.

---

© 1995 Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Converted to PDF format by Robert I Bradshaw, March 2004

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---