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Leadership - Isolation, Absorption or Engagement: Paul, The Paradigmatic Role Model

by Elizabeth Mburu

Introduction

As a Christian leader, one cannot hope to transform the society if one lacks the knowledge and skills to engage the culture effectively. This is especially true, if one lacks the essential framework of a biblical worldview. Many Christians today, including leaders in society, live dichotomized lives, unable to integrate their faith and praxis, particularly when out of their church or church related contexts. Like precious jewels, faith is kept securely locked up in a safe, whose combination only the owner knows! Only on Sundays is it revealed to the community of faith. This dichotomy has weakened individual believers and the church as a whole, such that Christianity has lost a great deal of credibility. When this happens with Christian leaders, the result is tragic. Either they buy into the ideologies, philosophies and practices of the world (bribery, corruption, impunity and so forth), or they stand aside as though they have no role to play.

Plantinga argues, convincingly, that our vocation is to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God, no matter our place in the fabric of society.[1] In the public sphere faith is not an option. There are at least three attitudes toward culture evident in our society today: (1) Isolation, in which one chooses to interact only with individuals of like mind; (2) Absorption, in which one allows oneself to be absorbed by the culture such that he/she is indistinguishable from it; (3) Engagement, in which one demonstrates an appropriate balance between one's faith and the culture in which they live.

In his Areopagus speech (Acts 17) Paul demonstrates, with great skill, the appropriate approach to those whose faith and lifestyle do not conform to the Christian way. Paul handles elements of the culture that are at the core of every society and that form the basis for one's worldview: ultimate reality, anthropology, external reality, and epistemology.

Striking contrasts can be drawn between Paul's approach and that of the Qumran community whose isolationist stance meant that rather than engaging the culture, they alienated themselves from it. It can also be contrasted against the story of the Israelites, who allowed themselves at various points in their history to be absorbed by the culture. Paul's approach is informed by his worldview that is so impacted by the Christ event that it shapes all aspects of his life – both private and public. Much has been written on Acts 17:16-34, particularly on the historicity and the authenticity of the speech itself. It is not

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[1] Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging in God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2001), 108.

the intention of this writer to exhaust its every facet but merely to uncover principles of engagement with society based on Paul's approach, as well as practical tools that are foundational for all Christian leaders in society as they seek to engage the culture in the context of the public sphere, be it political, corporate, business, education, etc. This paper is intentionally interdisciplinary, integrating biblical texts, Qumran literature and worldview analysis.

Absorption

The Old Testament is rife with stories narrating Israel's oft-repeated capitulation to the surrounding culture. This capitulation, which took the form of idolatry, plagued God's chosen people for generations. Beginning with Abraham (Gen 12), we read the story of a special people, a people that God singled out in covenant, promising them land, seed and blessing in the generations to come. Scripture attests to God's faithfulness to his promise. But it also brings to light the wavering faith of the people of God, a people tossed about by life's circumstances, a people who, although "marked" out as God's chosen, were frequently indistinguishable from the pagan nations that surrounded them, often resembling a chameleon that blends into its environment. Scripture records that Israel was often tempted to "dilute the religion of the God of the Sinai with the popular religions of the time."[2]

While there are many stories illustrating Israel's frequent lapses, a classic case of absorption is the golden calf incident (Ex 32:1-33:6). Scripture often alludes to this incident that shows the negative consequences when people allow themselves to be drawn away from the true God. Here, the Israelites introduce a new form of worship without instructions from Moses, and disaster follows. Moses, up on the mountain communing with God, hears "sounds of battle" as he descends. What meets his eyes is horrifying – the people, believing that they have been abandoned, have fashioned a golden calf, an embodiment of their object of worship. This golden calf is not a result of their own creativity. It was similar to those in the pagan nations around them, as Keil and Delitzsch point out:

> The "golden calf" (עֵגֶל   a young bull) was copied from the Egyptian *…* but for all that it was not the image of an Egyptian deity, … but an image of Jehovah. For when it was finished, those who had made the image … said, "This is thy God (*pluraris majest*), O Israel who brought thee out of Egypt."[3]

God demonstrates his displeasure with their sin by vowing to destroy them and form a new nation through Moses (32:7-10). Although he relents, he nevertheless still punishes the offenders with violent death.

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[2] John H. Tullock, *The Old Testament Story* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 95.

[3] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 466.

Later on in Israel's history, we see the same theme repeated. God had given clear instructions regarding the centralization of worship and the destruction of all other places used for pagan worship. However, a theological evaluation of the kings of Israel and Judah by the author of Kings shows clearly that almost every king disregarded this requirement. Indeed, so entrenched in the culture were some of the kings of Israel, that Jeroboam in the North erected rival sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel almost immediately after the split of the kingdom (1 Kgs 12:25-33). He replaced the Ark of the Covenant with golden calves, the symbol of Hadad, the chief god of the Baal religion. And in the Southern kingdom, the high places competed with God in the peoples' hearts. Scripture reveals that even Solomon was drawn away from God (1 Kgs 11:7-13). Perhaps his biggest mistake was in following the customs of the lands around them by marrying foreign women in order to forge alliances with foreign rulers. Intermarriage with foreign nations was forbidden for the very reason of idolatry. God knew that once his people allowed foreign gods and cultures into their homes, their faith would be corrupted. In these narratives, the reader catches a glimpse of the deadly effects of absorption, namely the deterioration of the faith of God's people.

The prophets, in their turn, tell story after story of Israel's failure to relate wisely with the foreigners that surrounded them. They constantly called upon the Israelites to resist Baalism and other Canaanite influences. The story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel, up against 400 prophets of Baal, reveals that by his time Israel had conformed almost totally to its surrounding culture (1 Kgs 18). Isaiah prophesied judgment in the form of exile, and yet the people continued in their rebellious ways. He warned of this but promised that God would preserve for himself a righteous remnant (Is. 10:20-23). Jeremiah decried the people's wickedness but he too was unsuccessful. Jeremiah 7:29 captures God's words of judgment - "… the LORD has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath." Hosea, in the Northern Kingdom, prophesied about the judgment of God, a judgment brought about by Israel's continued breach of the covenant. Once again, spiritual adultery is identified as the fundamental sin that poisons the covenant. These stories are evidence of Israel's failure to keep herself from being defiled by the religious practices of her neighbors.

What we must understand is that God was not advocating total isolation from Israel's neighbors. What He warns against, in no uncertain terms, is the danger of finding oneself so totally immersed in the foreign culture, that the distinguishing characteristics of His people would no longer be visible. This story has been duplicated many times over by Christians unable to clarify the distinction between themselves and the culture in which they live.

Isolation

Unlike the examples above, the Qumran community was known for its extreme isolationist stance. The sectarian literature reflects the ideological matrix of the community and hence is most valuable for this paper. While

internal data concerning this community is scanty, these documents nonetheless reveal useful information about the community's self-identity and rationale for existence. For instance, the prolific use of Isaiah in their texts and the approach of the *pesharim*, sheds light on their experience of reality and their self-identity.[4] The members of the Qumran community believed that they were the final remnant and the 'converts of Israel' (cf. CD 4.2). Their texts reflect the high regard in which they held diligent study of God's Word (1QS 1b–2a). It constituted one of the most important functions of the community (cf. 1QS 1.3; 8.15 ff). Noting the recurrence of the expression פִּשְׁרוּ אל, which may be translated "the interpretation of this is," "this refers to" or "this means," Longenecker notes that only the Teacher of Righteousness possessed the interpretive key to the prophesies given to the community.[5] This individual "… was the bearer of God's special revelation (1QpHab), he was like Moses 'the Lawgiver,' he was the author of some of the hymns chanted in the community, and he most likely composed many of the rules to be memorized by members of the community (most likely, but not certainly 1QS iii.13–4.16)."[6] The *Damascus Document* and the *Commentary on Habakkuk* (cf. 7.1–5) provide evidence of the God appointed nature of the Teacher's role as interpreter as well as the inspired nature of his exegesis. Only his interpretation, propagated by his disciples, offered true enlightenment and guidance. Hence, it was expected that a member of the community would spend his time searching the Scriptures and their interpretations in order to attain a greater understanding of their contents and purpose in specific aspects of community life. They also believed that there was a distinction between the revealed law and what they themselves had interpreted and that it was only by a deeper study of the Torah that members of the community could unveil even deeper 'truth.'[7]

Even more significantly, the Qumranites were to have "a spirit … of concealment concerning the truth of the mysteries of knowledge" (1QS 4.4, 6). For the community, this knowledge was a privileged possession bestowed on them by God, hence the need to guard it so jealously (cf. 1QM 13.12). Indeed, in some instances (e.g. 4Q 298), scribes sometimes wrote in code in order to

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[4] J. J. M. Roberts, "The Importance of Isaiah at Qumran," in *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Second Princeton Symposium on Judaism and Christian Origins* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; 3 vols.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 1:273–286.

[5] Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period,* 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 29.

[6] James Charlesworth, "Community Organization," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls,* eds., Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1:134.

[7] 4QMMT provides clear guidance on valid interpretation. James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 263.

hide secrets from the uninitiated.[8] Complete disclosure to fellow members was expected but absolute secrecy to outsiders, even under the pain of death, was required.[9] This position encouraged a high degree of isolation.

The most significant aspect of their ideological system, the belief in the doctrine of the two ways, characterized this community and shaped their response to their neighbors. They believed that man had within him two opposing spirits, the "spirits of truth and deceit" (1QS 3.18b–19; 4.23). These can be interpreted macrocosmically, as angelic beings, and microcosmically (i.e. psychologically), constituting spiritual dispositions in each person. In the Qumran community, where the members devoted themselves in strict obedience to the Teacher's interpretation of the Law, the "spirit of truth" was seen as dominant. Consequently, those that formed part of this community were identified as בני אור ("sons of light"), the sect's self-designation and a term almost always unique to Qumran theology. This term is contrasted with בני חושך ("sons of darkness"; cf. 1.9, 10)*.* This symbolism of light and darkness, used frequently in Second Temple Literature, was used as a designation that separated the good from the wicked. Elledge observes that this dualistic doctrine had serious implications for the daily life of the community: "since the cosmos had been structured according to a conflict between Darkness and Light, *strict separation from Darkness was necessary* to practice the Torah in purity."[10] (emphasis mine). Because the community understood life in terms of this dualism, its members were therefore obligated to separate themselves totally from all 'darkness' in order to avoid corruption. The 'sons of light' could therefore have no contact with those outside the community.

This belief was reinforced by the idea of covenant. A cursory reading of the *Rule* reveals that covenant ideology was foundational to the community's beliefs. It was the only legitimate form of the eternal alliance between God and Israel. However, unlike the original covenant, the community that participated in this renewed covenant differed in that it consisted only of the 'sons of light,' and was therefore not attained by heredity. Because of this, the community believed itself to be in a special relationship with God. This special relationship meant that they could not "contaminate" themselves in any way with outsiders.

Intimately tied to covenant, is the concept of community. יהד, the word frequently translated 'community' in the *Rule,* occurs numerous times in the Qumran literature. This term is unique to the community and Brownlee observes that its meaning embraces the ideas of unity, community and

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[8] James H. Charlesworth, "Secrecy," *EDSS* 2:852–53, also notes that there were seven categories of secrets.

[9] Cf. *J.W.* 2.8.7 from Michael A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), 99–100.

[10] C. D. Elledge, *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 57–58.

communion,[11] with context determining which is most appropriate. Entry into the community was presented as entry into a covenant with God and was synonymous with entry into the council or counsel of God (1QS 1.8). The implication therefore is that the community was a "closed" circle. But outsiders were admitted after they submitted to certain purification rituals.

Truth had an emblematic status in the community. Various contexts in the *Rule* and the scrolls attest to the community's self understanding as the 'house of truth.' However, by pointing out that the community is also a foundation of truth, the scrolls emphasize that it constitutes the foundation from which the new Israel will arise (cf. 1 QS 5.5, 6; cf. 8.5ff.). Isolation was therefore the only way to ensure that the community retained its purity and performed its purification function with regard to those eligible for entry into the community.

While the reasons cited above may not apply to Christians living in modern society, nevertheless the attitude of the Qumranites may be found amongst some Christian leaders today. Unable to process their role in the society, they opt rather to stand aside in a separatist stance.

Engagement

Paul had an entirely different approach from that of the Israelites and the Qumran community, as Acts 17:16-34 demonstrates. A crucial point to note as one analyzes Paul's message is that although he steps into the framework of his opponents, he never veers from his Christ-centered worldview. His control beliefs or assumptions enable him to engage critically with other beliefs and assumptions that he encounters without compromising.[12] As Paul debated his opponents, it becomes evident that any seeming similarities are superficial as the assumptions that undergird his worldview and that of the Epicureans and Stoics (and any other philosophies represented) are fundamentally opposed.

As a theological history, Acts records the historical foundation for Christian faith, and shows that the church is the culmination of biblical history. Luke describes the exploits of the apostle Paul in his missionary enterprise and presents us with valuable theological insights. The text of Acts 17:16-34 is itself a piece of embedded genre that is identified as a speech. As far as setting is concerned, Luke reveals that Paul encounters the Athenians who proceed to engage him in spirited debate on matters of faith. By Paul's day the glory of Greece, at its peak in the 5th and 4th Centuries B.C., was fading. However, Athens was still a vital cultural center, housing a world-famous

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[11] William Hugh Brownlee, *The Dead Sea Manual of Discipline,* Bulletin of the American Schools of Research Supplement Series 10–12 (Connecticut: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1951), 7.
[12] Kirk E. Farnsworth, "Furthering the Kingdom in Psychology," *The Making of a Christian Worldview,* ed. Arthur F. Holmes (Downers Grove: IVP, 1985), 83, points out that the components of a worldview can be referred to as control beliefs.

university and beautiful architecture and art. Athens's art reflected its worship; the numerous idols on display reflected the religion of this once proud city.

It is evident that the narrator is intent on developing Paul's character. He allows the readers to catch a glimpse of Paul's point of view as he draws a mental picture of the psychological dimensions of his character. The text says that παρωξύνετο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ("his spirit was being provoked in him"). The use of the imperfect παρωξύνετο indicates this was not a one-time occurrence. The context suggests this verb is used in an ingressive manner. The sense is "Paul's spirit began to be provoked within him." The reason for this is that the city was full of idols (v.16). Ancient sources affirm Athens had more idols and sacred feasts than all Greece put together; they accepted any and all foreign gods, even providing a temple and altar for them. Paul gives us the perfect lens through which to view the world. Disengagement, even emotional disengagement, is not an option. Paul knew the gods and idols that the Athenians were so famous for could not give them the answers they so desperately sought.

Paul engages his audience. Beginning with an inferential conjunction οὖν (v.17), the narrator connects Paul's distress to his discussions with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, as well as Athenians and foreigners that lived in the city or had come to visit. In the *agora*, philosophers debated and presented their views. As the narrative develops, the readers find Paul in debate with certain philosophers of the Epicurean and Stoic variety. These are the main characters involved besides Paul and serve as his primary "antagonists." Their philosophies were apparently well known to Luke's readers as he does not find it necessary to flesh them out. It is not my intent to discuss their philosophies, but merely to point out those aspects with which Paul interacted in his debate - their assumptions regarding ultimate reality, external reality, anthropology and epistemology. These categories form the basis for worldview.[13]

Some debaters regarded Paul as an "idle babbler," with nothing constructive to debate, but others thought he was advocating strange deities, their interpretation of his preaching about Jesus and the resurrection (v.18). Babbler (σπερμολόγος) in the context was disparaging and contemptuous slang used of one who picked up scraps of learning and then shared his information where he could. Bruce comments, "But Stoics and Epicureans alike … looked upon him as a retailer of second-hand scraps of philosophy, a type of itinerant peddler of religion not unknown in the Athenian market place."[14] However, the narrator also brings to light the different tones of the two responses; the first being extremely negative and the second revealing perplexity and curiosity. Syntactically, the correlation of the clauses καί τινες

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[13] James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 77.
[14] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 331.

… οἱ δέ also implies different responses without requiring them to be opposite.[15] Readers see that Paul is dealing with at least two perspectives.

The fact that Paul has the ability to hold his own in such "exalted" company speaks for itself, and the dialogue that follows reveals a development in the narrator's characterization of Paul. The reader is already aware that Paul is well read, knowledgeable and articulate in Scripture. But now Paul is revealed as one who is well versed in the philosophies and writings of the time and evidences training in argumentation. Paul is clearly a full-fledged character in Luke's narrative.[16] However, his interest in debating with the Athenians is not to amass even more knowledge of their philosophies but rather to correct their wrong thinking by revealing to them the truth of God. His ideological mentality is thus clearly revealed.

His interaction with them is so engaging, his teaching so new and strange that they are curious to know more. The narrator inserts an editorial comment in verse 21. He provides the readers with an important context relating to the characterization of Paul's antagonists; namely that the people of Athens loved to hear new things, spending most of their time sharing new ideas. This gives Paul an opportunity to share more about his God and the implications of Christ's resurrection in the Areopagus. The Areopagus played a crucial role in Athenian life. Not only was it the town hall, housing magistrates and allowing business and justice to be conducted, it was also a meeting place for learned men, providing a forum for the exchange of ideas. No new gods could be admitted without the approval of this court. Faber notes that the court was probably still active in Paul's time, investigating homicides as well as moral and religious matters. Some scholars even argue that this text reflects that Paul was on public trial and is his defense before the city councilors.[17] This is unlikely as, "In the proceedings there is nothing of a judicial type, no accuser, no accusation, and no defensive character in Paul's speech."[18]

Paul begins his address in an unexpected way, given his emotional response to the many idols. Rather than fly into a rage or even criticize them for their idolatry, he opts to commend them on their commitment to religion (v.

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[15] N. Clayton Croy, "Hellenistic Philosophies and the Preaching of the Resurrection (Acts 17:18, 32)", *Novum Testamentum* XXXIX (1997), 23-24.

[16] "A round (or full-fledged) character has many traits. A round character appears complex, less predictable, and therefore more real. A flat character has only one trait and seems one-dimensional." Tremper Longman III, "Biblical Narrative," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 91-92.

[17] For the debate regarding formal trial or unofficial address, see T.D. Barnes, "An Apostle on Trial," *Journal of Theological Studies 20,* 1969, 407-419; and C. J. Hemer, "The Speeches of Acts," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40, 1989, 239-259.

[18] William Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 243.

22). The narrator presents Paul as one who has spent his time in Athens well, observing the people of the city and taking note of what they profess. His comment opens up avenues of communication and sets the tone for the rest of the speech, turning and moving the narrative forward in a new direction.

Paul makes clear the basis of his observation in the next verse. In his examination of the objects of their worship, he had stumbled upon an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." Sources are not in agreement regarding this term. Historians indicate that the Athenians had many altars inscribed to the gods of Asia, Europe, and Africa - To the unknown god. The identity of the god is not relevant. What is relevant is that Paul focuses on this, using it as his springboard for introducing to them the true God. This clever technique legitimately fills their gap in knowledge regarding this deity and satisfies their curiosity for the new and the strange. His introduction also serves to effectively dispel any notion that he is introducing a new deity. Chrysostom says that Paul does this "in order to show that they have anticipated what he proclaimed."[19]

1. Assumptions of Ultimate Reality

Paul begins his debate, appropriately, with a discussion of ultimate reality (v. 26). This is the starting point of any worldview, forming the foundation for everything else. Although the narrator does not flesh out the ideological dimensions of Paul's opponents, a study of their respective historical contexts reveals a lot. Epicureans believed that while gods did indeed exist, they did not allow themselves to become involved in human events.[20] They were completely removed from humanity, living their lives in uninterrupted serenity. Since religion was regarded as a source of fear, banishing the gods was a means to attaining peace and a good life. In terms of their make-up, gods were themselves comprised of atoms, just like humans and animals, but their environment, being less turbulent, prevented them from being dispersed.[21]

Stoics, on the other hand, believed that the world had been created by Zeus, a power, not in the form of a human being but a force that permeates all things and unites them into one cosmos. This force, known as reason or *logos*, was viewed as immanent. Their worldview was monistic and materialistic pantheism. Stoics even saw God as material, being made out of a fine and subtle body known as *pneuma* (breath).[22] Man's goal was to live in agreement with nature, primarily through rational acceptance of whatever tragedy and triumph he encountered in life. While they had a monotheistic perspective,

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[19] Cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament, Acts, ed. Francis Martin; vol. v; (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 216.

[20] Diogenes Laertius *Vit.* 10.123-24. Translation from the Loeb Classical library.

[21] Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 94.

[22] Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy,* 97.

Stoics did not discount other gods, but regarded them as "metaphorical expressions of the God at work throughout nature."[23]

The narrator presents Paul as being knowledgeable about this background, though this is not explicitly stated. Paul immediately identifies this "unknown god" with the creator God who is sovereign over all creation. He who is "Lord of heaven and earth" cannot therefore be contained in temples made with human hands. His language is rife with Old Testament terminology. He goes on to speak about the life giving power of this God who also supplies humanity with all things and who has no need for humankind, being the origin of all things. The narrator also reveals that for Paul, this ultimate reality is a personal, loving and just God, who is both immanent as well as transcendent. Any relationship with Him is based on the understanding that He is both separate from creation and present within it. He is not under external compulsion to act in a certain way. This personal God chose to reveal himself to mankind in a comprehensible way.

2. Assumptions About Anthropology

Paul now seamlessly weaves in his assumptions regarding anthropology. Paul recognized that man is the intentional creation of a divine being. Ironically, this includes them! This implies that he is of worth. Paul argues he is also in need of salvation provided through a man, Jesus Christ. The resurrection, as evidenced in Christ's experience, is a reality and there is life after death. God is not only mankind's creator, he has also determines their destinies. Mankind is created with a yearning for God. Augustine (354-430), spent years searching for *summum bonum,* the "supreme good," the goal of human longing. Plantinga comments: "What Augustine knew is that human beings want God. In fact, humans want union with God. … Until it is suppressed, this longing for God arises in every human soul because it is part of the soul's standard equipment."[24] Paul recognized this essential fact and that this longing expresses itself as idolatry in the absence of true revelation.

The narrative takes a surprising twist in verse 28. Paul states, "for in Him we live and move and exist …" a line that is reputed to be the fourth line from a poem by Epimenides, the Cretan (c. 600 BC).[25] When Paul uses this phrase, it is not strange to the hearers' ears – both pagan and Christian. After all, the Genesis 1:27-28 records God's personal creation of mankind. Paul adds, "as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are his offspring.'" For Christians then and now, this might seem almost jarring. Why would Paul need to defend God's sovereignty over mankind by quoting pagan poets? After all, what does paganism have to do with Christianity? Does God need witnesses

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[23] Johan C. Thom, "Stoicism," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter Jr. eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 1140.

[24] Plantinga, *Engaging in God's World,* 6.

[25] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT, 339. The quatrain has been quoted in a Syriac version by the 9th century commentator, Isho'dad.

outside the Christian faith to validate his authority, his power, his very existence? To all these questions, Paul would give a resounding "NO!" However, and this is where Paul's genius becomes most evident, Paul understood that in every human being there is the pretheoretical knowledge that a divine being exists and that he, in some fashion, is responsible for all of creation, mankind included. Moreover, this belief would be articulated in various ways within every society, ancient or otherwise.[26] Paul cleverly uses this as a springboard, taking his hearers back to their own poets, and their expression of the nature of human existence in relation to a divine being. These three words, the combination of which makes the statement particularly emphatic, form a triad, referring to the same essential reality. Paul's use of this phrase indicates that mankind is utterly dependent on God for his existence. [27]

The quoted line, "for we are indeed his offspring," is from *Phaenomena* by the Stoic poet, Aratus. The first 18 lines, including the one Paul quotes, discuss the supreme god Zeus' omnipotence and omnipresence. While ancient Greeks understood Zeus as the sky god, Aratus lends a Stoic flavor to his understanding. Faber points out, "It is a kind of pantheism which Aratus advances in these opening lines: the divine Reason permeates every facet of human endeavour … Zeus must be praised at the start of his poem because this 'world-soul' controls the cosmos." Zeus' omnipotence is expressed clearly in these lines and mankind is understood to belong to the "race of Zeus." [28]

By citing one line, Paul does not agree with the context behind this poem. Rather, he uses the poem to point out that the Athenians had not only exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, but that they were also ignorant of the true God. Their assumptions about God were invalid. At the same time, the narrator brings in Paul's assumptions about external reality already hinted at. Paul rejects any notion that the world came into being by chance. Rather, God created the world and everything in it (*creatio ex nihilo*). His interaction with the world is therefore on this basis.

3. Assumptions About External Reality

Epicurean assumptions of external reality were opposed to Paul's. Matter was eternal, uncreated and without a divinely imputed purpose. They assumed that no deity created this world and c*reatio ex nihilo* was impossible.

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[26] Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 77, points out that worldview has pretheoretical, presuppositional and theoretical aspects. The pretheoretical encompasses those things which we know intuitively and without which we cannot think at all. Presuppositions refer to those beliefs which, although reasonable, we cannot prove. The theoretical is influenced by both the pretheoretical and the presuppositional aspects, and consists of that which arises from the mind's conscious activity.

[27] Mikeal C. Parson and Martin M. Culy, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 340.

[28] Riemer Faber, http://spindleworks.com/library/rfaber/aratus.htm retrieved 10/13/2012 Last Updated: March 12, 2001 (With permission from Clarion Vol. 42, No, 13 (1993).

They held that everything existing was material. Theirs was not a deterministic world but one where human beings had free will. "Since we are free we are masters of our own fate: the gods neither impose necessity nor interfere with our choices."[29]

For Stoics, nothing was viewed as immaterial, not even the gods. "Nothing exists outside the world and its material principles; there is no spiritual world or world of ideas, … hence the materialism of Stoicism."[30] The Stoic world, unlike Epicurean assumptions, was deterministic and the fates governed all of life. However, it was expected that mankind would live in accordance with Nature.

With the introduction of these lines of poetry, the narrator allows us further insight into Paul's strategy. He goes to the heart of their religion, their assumptions about, and conceptions of ultimate reality, anthropology and external reality and shows them to be false. In so doing, he destabilizes the very foundations of their faith, showing it to be nothing more than idolatry. When one's starting point has been carefully examined and shown to be false, logic and reason demand that everything else built upon it be discarded and a new foundation erected. Paul uses their own history, beliefs and knowledge to build his case thus ensuring that he has an audience for his message!

Having established a point of connection between his hearers and himself, Paul then goes on to explain the implications of being God's offspring. Naturally, if humanity stems from God, according to Paul's continued reason and logic, God cannot be like gold or silver or stone. In the phrase χαράγματι τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἀνθρώπου ("an image formed by the art and thought of man" v. 29), the genitive ἀνθρώπου is a genitive of source, showing that man is himself the originator or the source of the divine nature. Even his syntactical construction reveals that Paul believes that it is ludicrous to suppose that this God who "births" all humanity can possibly be formed in the imagination of man and brought to visible form by shaping an image. Their assumption that gods can only be worshipped through temples, statues and altars is, in essence, false. Paul builds one thought upon another, as one might build a house, laying down the essential truths first and then, like a builder, adding on stone upon stone to build his case. His logic is irrefutable. In the midst of the surrounding idols, Paul argues that idolatry is ridiculous on the premise that mankind is the offspring of God.

4. Assumptions About Epistemology

What is the logical conclusion to Paul's argument? He declares that now mankind has moved beyond ignorance and received God's true revelation regarding himself (vss. 30-31, cf. Rom 3:25). This revelation must lead to repentance since their ignorance is no longer excusable. Knowledge of God here does not mean an intellectual exercise but rather, "it involves moral and

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[29] Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy,* 94.
[30] Thom, "Stoicism," DNTB, 1140.

religious responsibilities, and for lack of this knowledge, in the measure in which it was available to them, the hearers are summoned to repentance."[31] This is where Paul's epistemological assumptions tie his entire argument together and bring it to a resounding close. Paul's assumes that the basis for epistemology is God's revelation to mankind: the general revelation, which is seen in the world around us and special revelation, which is through his Word, and even more importantly through his son Jesus Christ. He regards all truth as being from God, hence truth is objective. For Paul, faith and reason are complementary and must be used together to build a cohesive worldview.

Although the narrator does not allow us to see "behind the text" to the antagonists' assumptions regarding epistemology, Paul is clearly aware of them. For Epicureans, epistemology was purely empirical and perception was viewed as the basis of all reason. Unlike Democritus, from whom he took over his atomism, Epicurus affirmed the reliability of the senses to provide accurate information. Kenny points out that Epicureanism believed that if one was misled about reality, the fault lay with the individual, genuine appearances having been used as a basis for false judgments.[32]

Stoics believed that knowledge was gained empirically through cognitive impressions. Reason was a crucial tool in making decisions leading to a virtuous life. This is seen particularly in their perspectives regarding self-denial, a virtue that contributed to the highest end in life. Stoics believed that all passions had to be suppressed (*apatheia*). "The will must be directed to live in accordance with human nature *by obeying reason*."[33] (emphasis mine)

Bringing in the Gospel, which in itself demands knowledge beyond the cognitive, Paul by providing the reason behind the injunction to repent. Certain judgment is coming. Paul declares the Gospel message in the last few words of his speech, pointing out that God appointed the Christ and that the proof of this was found in his resurrection from the dead. With the re-introduction of "resurrection," the narrator takes us back to the thought in verse 18. He links the resurrected Christ with the sovereign God, showing that what Paul has been talking about is not a new deity, but one approved by God. Having heard the message that idolatry is unreasonable, they should now worship the true God who is not made of gold, silver or stone, a product of man's imagination.

The narrator has already given the readers some insight into the Epicurean and Stoic assumptions regarding anthropology. Their skeptical comments about the resurrection are merely the tip of the iceberg. Epicureans denied the immortality of the soul, believing that death was final. They held that the human soul was made up of atoms, albeit smaller and subtler than those of the physical body, which at death, dispersed and ceased to be

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[31] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT, 341.
[32] Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy,* 94.
[33] Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*, 97.

capable of sensation.[34] As a consequence of this assumption, they believed that there was no future retribution. For Epicurus, the afterlife did not exist (since the soul was material and disintegrated at death) and hence there was no need to fear death or even the prospect of judgment.

What about the other "antagonists," the Stoics? A major Stoic assumption was that the human mind and soul were made out of *pneuma*. The soul was not immortal but only existed until the destruction of the universe, at which time it was either destroyed or absorbed into the divine essence. Stoics had two views regarding the afterlife. There were those who believed that the soul enjoyed a limited existence after death while others denied this altogether.[35]

Given this background, some of Paul's listeners find the idea of the resurrection unbelievable, even ridiculous, and not worth listening to any further (v. 32).[36] It is likely that the Epicureans, given their assumptions about life after death, would have been in this group. However, others (the Stoics?) perhaps convinced by the logic of Paul's argument but not ready to do anything practical about it at that point, desire to hear more.[37]

So, having concluded his argument, Paul leaves them. But his interaction with them is not in vain, for from this very crowd God finds for himself those who choose to put their faith in him, both men and women. Those specifically named included Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

As Paul debates with his opponents, he not only employs rhetorical skills but also bases his argument on certain assumptions that allow him to engage the culture of his opponents without ignoring it, dismissing it out of hand or even being absorbed by it. In this account, Paul clearly shows how an informed perspective based on logic and reason and embracing a cohesive worldview, is a powerful tool for engagement.

Conclusion

What principles and practical strategies can we draw from Paul's example? What tools can be uncovered for the Christian leader? The foundational principle to be drawn from the above discussion is that Christian leaders in society ought to have the ability to articulate a truly biblical worldview. I define a biblical worldview as the orientation of the self to all of

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[34] Diogenes Laertius, 10.124-5.Translation from the Loeb Classical library.

[35] Croy, "Hellenistic Philosophies and the Preaching of the Resurrection", 32-36.

[36] The identity of the two groups goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth mentioning that Luke phrases the statement of v. 32 to suggest that one group openly rejected the message while the other demonstrated sincere, if hesitant, interest. Croy, "Hellenistic Philosophies and the Preaching of the Resurrection", 28.

[37] Croy argues, convincingly, that the literary features of the text probably support the idea that the contrasting responses of derision and curiousity described here by Luke were those of the Epicurean and the Stoic listeners respectively. Croy, "Hellenistic Philosophies and the Preaching of the Resurrection", 38.

life, that under girds the expression of our identities as redeemed human beings in relationship with God and others, which expression, primarily embodied through behavior, is consistent with the biblical metanarrative in all its aspects.[38]

A biblical worldview is informed and shaped by biblical values. An indispensable tool in helping to improve worldview is study of the Bible and theology. Biblical instruction is crucial because it provides the content on which worldview is built. Acquisition of correct doctrine is necessary if one's worldview is to be consistent with the biblical metanarrative. In addition, biblical hermeneutics would be extremely beneficial in building crucial skills for engaging in discussion. This would be of great help in making the Christian leader more relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Christian leaders must have an informed understanding not just of their faith but also of the culture in which they find themselves. Even the Qumran community understood the need to know their scriptures and to live out their faith with integrity. Christian leaders must go beyond this to become students of their culture as well. The theme of the Nairobi, October 2012 ICETE conference, "Rooted in the Word, Engaged in the World," aptly reflects this. However, one must understand not only the "local" culture, but also global culture. Only by being "culturally astute" and allowing scripture to be the guide can a Christian leader truly transform society.

Finally, Christian leaders must learn to use faith and reason in balance to engage the culture. While some might argue that reason and faith are diametrically opposed, this is a false belief. Rather, they complement each other, and when developed in the right way, are invaluable tools in developing Christian maturity.[39] One of the most significant changes today is the shift to a knowledge-based society. Knowledge is the primary production resource and current national initiatives such as Kenya's Vision 2030 are being taken seriously. As Paul demonstrates so effectively in his speech, Christian leaders need the capacity to shape policy and address societal issues through the right kind of knowledge development. They must examine the assumptions that they encounter in their lives and submit them to the unchanging, authoritative Word of God. Training in critical and creative thinking and argumentation are beneficial in building crucial skills for engaging in discussion with members of society, particularly if those members are themselves highly qualified in their own areas of expertise.

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[38] This definition borrows some aspects from Sire, *Naming the Elephant.*

[39] For more see J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with all you Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1997), and Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *Come Let us Reason: An Introduction to Logical Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

Engagement provides the most appropriate balance between one's faith and the culture in which one lives. However, engagement with the world must be done with caution. Part of the goal of Christian leadership is "to test the spirits." Christian leaders must *discern* the spirit of our age but not absorb it like the Israelites, or reject it like the Qumran community. Their worldview, like Paul's, must be so impacted by Christ that it shapes all aspects of their lives – both private and public – allowing them to engage others with wisdom.

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