

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for the *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_cbtj.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_cbtj.php)

## **Paul's Apologetic at Athens and Ours**

LARRY R THORNTON, ThD  
Professor, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary

In a day of change and of mechanization, men are prone to change their methods in the Lord's work to reach more people with the Gospel in a shorter period of time. Their motives may be perfectly pure, but many times a change in methodology means a change in the message. This may result in heretical teaching which may stop or dwarf spiritual life. Certainly in the area of methodology there is room for variation as to time, place, levels of communication and modes of distribution, but when methodology has exchanged the revelational content with reasoning and emasculated doctrine, it has overstepped its limits.

A man's apologetic (a system of discourse in favor of a thing) with respect to Christianity will determine his approach in the communication of the Gospel. How close his apologetical system is to the Biblical or revelational approach will determine the measure of success as desired by God.

There are four basic apologetical approaches practiced by Christendom today.<sup>1</sup> Each endeavors to point to various Scripture passages to justify its approach. One such passage is Acts 17:16-34, Paul's defense at Athens. F F Bruce describes the significance of this passage.

There are two passages in Acts where the gospel is shown in direct confrontation with paganism, and these two passages anticipate the main lines of second-century Christian apologetic against the pagans. There are the passages which record Barnabas and Paul's protest against idolatry at Lystra (Acts 14: 8-18), and Paul's address before the court of the Areopagus at Athens (Acts 17:16-34). The gospel confronted unsophisticated pagans in the former place and sophisticated pagans in the latter.<sup>2</sup>

Many prefer to point to Acts 17:16-34 to justify their apologetic even though the approach is basically the same in both passages.

The method to be followed here in determining which of the four apologetic systems parallels the Biblical as used by Paul at Athens includes: first, the presentation of contemporary apologetic systems viewing Paul's address at Athens; second, an analysis of Paul's address at Athens; third, the advocacy and adaptation of the Biblical apologetic; fourth, a concluding summarization.

## Contemporary Approaches

The four contemporary apologetic systems viewing Paul's address at Athens may be characterized as the rationalistic approach, the semi-rationalistic approach, the semi-presuppositional approach, and the presuppositional approach.

### Rationalistic Approach

The rationalistic approach sees the task of apologetics to be the formulation and defense of Christian belief in a rational fashion. The leading proponent of this approach, Stuart C Hackett, sets forth his method in his book, *The Resurrection of Theism*.

The underlying assertion of my whole argument; therefore, is that Christian faith should be defended in terms of criteria which center in rational objectivity as the norm of truth and evaluation. This consideration means, in turn, that if Christian faith is obligatory for men, then it is so because it embodies objective truth for all rational minds.<sup>3</sup>

**Evaluation of the Rationalistic Approach.** Such an approach assumes that men are able, if they will think rationally, to see the superiority of Biblical theism over other systems. It fails to take into account the doctrine of total depravity. It fails to use revelation as inspired until the individual is convinced from reason of Biblical theism. Such an approach limits witnessing to the experts, for a person not only must be trained in logic but in all other disciplines of study.<sup>4</sup>

**Rationalistic View of Paul's Address at Athens.** As one may expect, little or no material on Paul's defense at Athens is found in the writings of the proponents of this view. In light of their approach, they would view Paul as the expert in religion, philosophy and other disciplines who soundly defeats his opponents. Paul starts with the Athenians' recognition of an unknown god who possibly might be supreme and reasons them on their own ground up to repentance because of a resurrection experience with the "noumenal realm." Surprisingly, Richard Rackham writes:

He seizes some local circumstance for a text, and lays himself open to the influence of his surroundings. He makes himself all things to all men, speaking to Greeks as a Greek and as a philosopher to philosophers. Where he can, he employs the doctrines now of the Stoics, now of the Epicureans. Similarly in regard to method, on the negative side, when criticizing popular idolatry, he uses arguments that had been commonplace in philosophic Greek thought since the days of Zenophanes in the sixth century BC.<sup>5</sup>

Paul's whole address is a rational attempt to convince the Athenians of Biblical theism according to this view.

### **Semi-Rationalistic Approach**

The advocates of a semi-rationalistic apologetic propose to remove from the critics any excuse for not accepting Christianity. A person cannot expect men to accept Christ until they are first "satisfied with the rational superiority of Biblical Christianity."<sup>6</sup> It is the task of the apologist "to prepare the ground so that the seed of the gospel can find good soil."<sup>7</sup> Leading proponents of this view are E J Carnell, John Gerstner, Wilbur Smith and Bernard Ramm. These men will admit that argument cannot make a man a Christian but is necessary to get him to the place of sowing the Word. An example of this is found in *Therefore, Stand* by Wilbur Smith.

It is perfectly true, of course, that argument alone is quite insufficient to make a man a Christian. You may argue with him from now until the end of the world; you may bring forth the most magnificent arguments; but all will be in vain unless there be one other thing—the mysterious, creative power of the Holy Spirit in the new birth. But because argument is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. Sometimes it is used directly by the Holy Spirit to bring a man to Christ. But more frequently it is used indirectly.<sup>8</sup>

It is said that if the argument is really persuasive and one does not feel joy in submitting his life to the religion for which it argues, then he is a hearer of the Word but not a doer.<sup>9</sup> Testing all the facts is as necessary to this realm as to the scientific before one accepts Christ.

**Evaluation of the Semi-Rationalistic Approach.** This apologetic is defective because it fails to account for the doctrine of total depravity and for the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration as logically prior to faith and repentance.<sup>10</sup> The entire approach de-emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and overemphasizes the rational ability of depraved man. Proponents of this view seem to be going back and forth between reason and

Scripture or to be tacking Bible references at the end of their extensive rational arguments. To use this approach a person would not only have to be a master in all fields of study but also proficient in quoting Scripture references.

### **Semi-Rationalistic View of Paul's Address at Athens.**

Paul's address at Athens is frequently quoted by proponents of this apologetic. At a glance Paul seems to be reasoning apart from Scriptural truth and then concluding with an invitation supported by revelational truth. Carnell, in discussing "The Problem of Common Ground" in the field of apologetics, makes statements characterizing this approach to Acts 17.

Indeed, it is difficult to draw a line between Christians and non-Christians, for the former admit that when the latter worship God, they are really worshipping the true God, but they do not know it. But, strangely, after this admission we are still faced with the problem of common ground. The reason for this is that God, the final arbiter in all matters, has elected to accept worship in and only through His crucified Son Jesus Christ. So Paul, finding the Athenians energetically worshipping the true God, did not simply commend them and leave them as they were; rather, he preached to them the resurrected Christ, in relation to whom acceptable worship before the Father is possible.<sup>11</sup>

Carnell is wrong. "The god-concept in the minds of the Athenian audience in no way, shape or form resembled the God-concept" that Paul possessed and endeavored to present to them.<sup>12</sup> Advocates of this apologetic misinterpret Paul's use of the truth in the writings of the poets as starting on common ground in his reasoning with them. A close examination of the passage will reveal the truth concerning Paul's approach.

### **Semi-Presuppositional Approach**

The apologetic known as semi-presuppositionalism has been predominate among many evangelicals. It assumes the Christian world view for sake of argument. After assuming certain presuppositions, it demonstrates the view's self-consistency. Gordon Clark writes:

No demonstration of God is possible; our belief is a voluntary choice; but if one must choose without a strict proof, none the less it is possible to have sane reasons of some sort to justify the choice. Ultimately these reasons reduce to the principle of consistency. A postulate must be chosen such that it makes possible a harmony or a system in all our thoughts, words, and actions.<sup>13</sup>

In this apologetic reason confirms what faith knows to be true.

**Evaluation of the Semi-Presuppositional Approach.** The assumption of the Christian world view is commendable in this view, but the use of reason to show the self-consistency of the Christian world view is not. Even regenerate man has not had the entire effects of the fall removed from his thought processes. To the extent that it presents its world view in revelational concepts will be its success. The application of the principle of self-contradiction to the Christian world view has no value for the unregenerate man and little or no value for the regenerate man. It may give some assurance to the regenerate, but he should be living by faith as he was saved by faith in the Word of God. The regenerate man will only be spiritually benefited by the revelational content of the Christian world view of this apologetic. "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (Jn 17:17).

**Semi-Presuppositionalistic View of Paul's Address at Athens.** Paul's address at Athens would be viewed by exponents of this apologetic system as the setting forth of the Christian world view in a logical fashion. They would differ from the presuppositionalists only in their emphasis on the self-consistency of the world view. Paul's use of the Athenian poets would be viewed the same way as by the presuppositionalists.

### **Presuppositional Approach**

The presuppositional apologetic presupposes revelational truth and does not subject it to rational verification. Cornelius Van Til, professor emeritus of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, is one of the leading proponents of this apologetic. Illustrating why rational verification has no place in a Biblical apologetic, Van Til writes:

Sin will reveal itself in the field of knowledge in the fact that man makes himself the ultimate court of appeal in the matter of all interpretation. He will refuse to recognize God's authority. We have already illustrated the sinful person's attitude by the narrative of Adam and Eve. Man has declared his autonomy as over against God.<sup>14</sup>

Men fail to see that "if we must determine the foundations of the authority, we no longer accept authority on authority."<sup>15</sup>

The presuppositionalist challenges "the two basic errors of the natural man: (1) the idea of brute fact in metaphysics and (2) the autonomy of the human mind in epistemology."<sup>16</sup> He does this by the presentation of revelational truth, for the unregenerate knows he is a creature of God even though he may not want to admit it. This apologetic gives the Holy Spirit His proper place in the regeneration of man and in the relating of truth—natural and revelational.

*Paul's address at Athens was a masterful, Spirit-controlled sermon.*

Some of the leading exponents of presuppositional apologetic feel that a negative rationalism is needed. They believe that the opponent's system must be proved to be irrational before he will seriously listen to a revelational presentation.

**Evaluation of the Presuppositional Approach.** The Scriptural concept of preaching accompanied by the Holy Spirit seems to accord with this apologetic. It is that which is added to this approach—negative rationalism—which is objectionable. To think that a man's system of thought must be blasted as illogical is once again de-emphasizing the power of the Holy Spirit in the converting of men. Here again the inability of unregenerate man to reason consistently and to recognize truth is not acknowledged. The presuppositional approach appears to be the Biblical apologetic apart from any negative rationalism.

**Presuppositionalistic View of Paul's Address at Athens.** Exponents of this apologetic view Paul's address at Athens as a masterful, Spirit-controlled sermon which was used of God for the achievement of results which may occur any time the Gospel is preached. Since he was preaching to the Gentiles, he had to commence with God's creatorship and man's creaturehood. "This was not, as some have supposed, a piece of philosophical apologetic of a kind that Paul afterwards renounced, but the first and basic lesson in theistic faith."<sup>17</sup> Van Til makes it very clear that Paul is not accepting common ground of another system.

Whatever his reason may have been for singling out the altar to the unknown God rather than the altars to supposedly known gods as evidence that they were religious, it surely was not that he attached himself to the system of thought that any of them professed to hold.<sup>18</sup>

Paul's entire address was revelational truth adapted to communicate the truth to pagan Greeks and others.

**Analysis of Paul's Address at Athens**

Having set forth a brief presentation of the four contemporary apologetic systems and an evaluation of them and their view of Paul's address at Athens, the next step is to analyze Paul's address at Athens in the light of the events leading to and following the address. The purpose is to set forth clearly the contents of the address to see how it compares with the four

apologetic systems and to see if any have the right to claim Paul's address at Athens as typical of their apologetic approach.

### **Circumstances Leading to Paul's Address**

Historical background is of vital importance to a proper hermeneutic. In this section the events leading to Paul's address will be considered for what light they might throw on the address.

**Paul's Righteous Zeal.** On Paul's second missionary journey, after receiving the vision of the man of Macedonia, persecution had dogged his steps from Philippi to Thessalonica to Berea. Upon leaving Berea in the care of Silas and Timothy, Paul traveled south to Athens for a rest until Silas and Timothy could join him. A practical comment is made by G Campbell Morgan.

The first declaration of this passage is that he was waiting in Athens. That is in itself an arresting and suggestive word, for it reminds us that we shall see how a Christian man awaits in a godless city.<sup>19</sup>

Like any visitor in a strange city especially like Athens Paul set out to see the sights. Immediately Paul's spirit was stirred in him. *Stirred* has the idea of sharpened or set on edge since it comes from a word denoting sometimes violent excitement. The wider application of the word grants that "we may readily suppose Paul to have felt, not only indignation in the proper sense, but grief, shame, wonder, and compassion likewise."<sup>20</sup> Donald Guthrie declares, "His strongly monotheistic faith reacted against the multitudinous idols."<sup>21</sup>

The entire city was given over to idolatry. "Petronius says that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens; Pausanias, that there were more images in Athens than all the rest of Greece combined; and Xenophon that the city was an altar, a votive offering to the gods."<sup>22</sup>

The sight of such a city aroused his interests, stirred his emotions, inspired his service and drove him to attempt to discharge that great debt to the Greeks and to the Barbarians.<sup>23</sup> E M Blaiklock concludes, "The remedy for loneliness and oppression of spirit is work."<sup>24</sup> Paul found in Athens a capacity for God spoiled by sin.

**Paul's Public Proclamation.** Constrained by his love for God, truth and souls, Paul preached in the synagogue on the Sabbath and in the market daily. The verb can be translated "reason," "argue," "speak." Some writers like to point to this word to indicate a rational approach. "But his reasoning never once compromised the Christian starting point—he reasoned from the perspective of special revelation."<sup>25</sup> Some light is thrown on Paul's daily discourse by Alexander.



It has been disputed whether by the Agora (or Forum), here translated market, . . . is intended the Ceramicus (the ancient Forum) or the Agora Eretria (the new one); but it seems rather to be used generically, just as we might say *the street*, without intending any one exclusively. *Daily* is a still stronger phrase than that in v 11, and means *on* (or *throughout*) every day which seems to imply a sojourn or detention of considerable though uncertain length.<sup>26</sup>

It was in the course of speaking of "Jesus and the resurrection" in the street that the way was made for the Athenian address of Paul.

**Paul and the Philosophers.** The philosophers of Athens had turned their attention away from strictly metaphysical discussions to the practical. "The primary interest of the Stoics and Epicureans was practical and ethical, and their aim the attainment of the 'end' of man—the blessed life."<sup>27</sup>

The Stoics claimed Zeno (340-265 BC) as their founder and derived their name from the painted stoa (porch) where he had taught. They stressed living according to nature. Rational conduct was the highest expression of this. Though stern and ascetic in their morality, and though they opposed the worship of images, they were pantheists. They acknowledged the supremacy of moral good, and even affected to deny the differences between pain and pleasure. This philosophy climaxed either in pride or suicide.

The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus (341-270 BC). He taught that the highest good was serene enjoyment. The creation of the world was explained by chance. Acknowledging gods as material in essence, they portrayed them as indifferent to human interests and conduct; thus, far removed from all earthly things. Their philosophy climaxed in selfishness and sensuality.

**Attitude of the Philosophers.** Some of the philosophers accused Paul of being a "seed picker." This is Athenian slang referring to a person who picks up scraps of learning and attempts to retell them. Gerhard Krodel writes, "Hundreds of itinerant religious charlatans offered their gods in the cities of the empire and no Greek was waiting for a Jew to offer a Jewish Messiah in Athens."<sup>28</sup> "He was regarded as a fool who was expounding a hodge-podge of other men's ideas."<sup>29</sup>

Still others accused Paul of setting forth strange gods. There have been three interpretations as to what gods the Athenians referred to in their ignorance.

The last clause has been variously understood as meaning that they, really or in pretence, took *Jesus and Anastasis* (Resurrection) for a god and goddess; or that *gods* is a generic plural, meaning Jesus only; or that it has its proper meaning, and refers to Jesus and the God who raised him from the dead.<sup>30</sup>

The first interpretation assumes Paul expressed himself obscurely or was misunderstood or was mocked with irony. The second interpretation is not characteristic of the language of the New Testament. The last interpretation seems the proper one in light of the ignorance of Jesus' deity by the Athenians. Whether the interpretation is the first or last, the Athenians reveal their ignorance of revelational truth.

**Purpose of Paul's Address.** The nature of the philosophers' request and the meaning of Areopagus help to determine the purpose of Paul's address at Athens. The three views of the purpose are set forth as follows:

The question then is, whether the proceeding was 1st, a solemn *indictment* of Paul for an infraction of the state religion; or, 2nd, an *inquisition* by the state whether Jesus and Resurrection were to be admitted amongst the recognised divinities; or 3rd, a formal development by Paul of the theory of Jesus and the Resurrection for the fuller *information* of the Epicureans and Stoics.<sup>31</sup>

The first view finds in the accusations that Paul was a seed picker and setter forth of strange gods grounds for a trial. This may have been true in Socrates' day, but not Paul's. "The absence of intimation of arrest and of distinctly judicial examination disallows the possibility of a formal trial."<sup>32</sup>

The second view holds that the council of the Areopagus had general prerogatives, one of which was to decide what was acceptable on moral and religious questions. The council was to decide whether Paul was to be permitted to continue preaching there. Against this view is the absence of a verdict or acquittal. That Paul's address is simply a reply to their desire to know his opinions is refutation of this view. The word *epilabomenoi* does not indicate arrest or judicial proceedings, for in Acts 9:27 where the word also appears Paul is brought to the apostles by Barnabas after his conversion.<sup>33</sup>

The third view that Paul is giving a fuller presentation of his teaching to the philosophers seems more fitting to the nature of the people of Athens. Luke seems to indicate this when he describes them as spending "their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21). The nature of the crowd seems to indicate an informal gathering.

**Place of Paul's address.** Was Paul's address given on Mars' Hill to a conglomerate crowd or in the Royal Portico in the city marketplace? The answer hinges on one's interpretation of *en meso tou Areiou Pagou*. Some interpreters say that Areopagus is a court which took its name from the hill.

This aristocratic body, of the most venerable antiquity, received its name from the Areopagus, the 'hill of Ares,' on which it met in early times, and it retained that name even when it transferred its meeting place to the Royal Portico in the city market place. Its traditional power was curtailed with the growth of Athenian democracy in the fifth century BC, but it retained authority in matters of religion and morals, and in Roman times it enjoyed enhanced power and commanded great respect.<sup>34</sup>

According to this view Paul was brought to a gathering of the court of Areopagus which happened to meet in the Royal Portico of the city. This view claims that Mars' Hill was too small an area to contain so large a crowd. It claims that the prepositional phrases "in the midst of" and "out of their midst" are referring to the same thing—the court of the Areopagus.<sup>35</sup> The designation of Dionysius as the Areopagite is claimed to be a conclusive proof that Paul appeared before the court rather than on Mars' Hill before a conglomerate crowd. It all seems very convincing.

Mars' Hill is the place of Paul's address according to other scholars. Lake and Cadbury, Dibelius, Chase and others hold this view. Just because historical information exists does not mean that it is applicable to certain passages. If the fact of the existence of the Areopagus court is of any significance to this passage it explains the meaning of an Areopagite. That an Areopagite was present does not prove the entire court was present. Dionysius may have been among the people who desired to hear Paul. If a judge gets saved, it does not necessarily follow that the message was delivered in his court; so it does not necessarily follow that because Dionysius the Areopagite got saved the message was delivered to the Areopagus court.

As for the size of Mars' Hill to accommodate the crowd who listened to Paul, the Scriptures do not indicate how large the crowd was. One cannot even deduct that the converted were small in number to those who departed. The hill could have been sufficiently large for those of the three attitudes. It seems logical to understand "in the midst of" to refer to place and to still have "out of their midst" to refer to the crowd, for if Paul stood in the midst of the hill and the people were seated around him he would not only be in the midst of the hill but in the midst of the people. It is granted that *epi* in Acts 17:19 may mean "before," but its usual meaning is *upon* or a word of like meaning. The context seems to favor a removal of Paul to a quieter place to hear a presentation of his opinions (Acts 17:19).

The request for the information is from the mouth of the people in the market place who were already interested in Paul's

discussions and not from the mouths of officials.<sup>36</sup> The description of the Athenians by Luke in the context seems to militate against at least the seriousness of a meeting of the Areopagus. "The motive or spirit of the request is explained by the passion for 'telling or hearing something new,' for which the Athenians were notorious.<sup>37</sup> If the gathering before which Paul spoke was a conglomerate crowd, it would explain the presence of the woman Damaris. It is unlikely that any Athenian woman would have been present at the gathering of the court of Areopagus. The sequel to the speech being a division of opinion does not accord with the idea of a court deciding whether a man should or should not speak in the city any longer.<sup>38</sup> The place of Paul's address from the context appears to be Mars' Hill.

### **Contents and Results of Paul's Address at Athens**

The Apostle Paul was invited by those who had heard him daily in the street to come apart from the noise of the city to Mars' Hill where he could present his thoughts to the inquiring hearers in a fuller way. The crowd contained philosophers, some of the court of Areopagus, and common people as Damaris.

**Introduction (Acts 17:22,23).** The Apostle opens his discourse in terms used by great Athenian orators from time immemorial,<sup>39</sup> "Ye men of Athens." Paul attracted their attention by saying that he had noticed that they were "very religious." This may mean "too superstitious" or "very religious." Many writers view this as a compliment to gain the attention of the audience.<sup>40</sup>

It is not likely that Paul commenced with a compliment, for Lucian writes that it is forbidden to compliment the Areopagus to secure its good will.<sup>41</sup> Though Paul is not addressing the Areopagus, there are some members of the Areopagus present who would not look favorably upon a compliment to secure the good will of the audience. Paul may be here simply "conceding to them what they might have justly claimed, the credit of superior devotion in the heathen sense, which, at the same time to a Christian, was the grossest superstition."<sup>42</sup> That Paul was not complimenting them but only stating a fact to get their attention is substantiated by his phrase "being ignorant you are worshipping." Paul's acknowledgment of their ignorance in worship or reverence without knowledge does not sound conciliatory.

The reason Paul gives for knowing of their reverence without knowledge is his perception of an inscription on one of their altars to an unknown god. Paul continues to hold their attention with that which is familiar to them. He uses this notice of such an inscription as a point of contact for further presentation.

There is evidence of such altars. Deissman confirms this:

In Greek antiquity cases were not altogether rare in which "anonymous" altars

To unknown gods,

or

To the god whom it may concern,

were erected when people were convinced, for example after experiencing some deliverance, that a deity had been gracious to them, but were not certain of the deity's name. Altars to "unknown gods" on the way from Phalerum to Athens, at Athens and at Olympia are specially mentioned by Pausanias (second century AD) and Philostratus (third century AD).<sup>43</sup>

In 1909 such an altar was found at Pergamum containing a similar inscription. Of those described in ancient writings and of this one found, the plural "gods" appears instead of "god." To some writers, therefore, the text appears to be unhistorical.

It is best to believe the inspired writer of the existence of such an altar. Stonehouse answers: "For even if there were many instead of a few declarations extant concerning altars to unknown gods, they could never demonstrate that an altar to an unknown god never existed."<sup>44</sup> It is possible to construe the language of some ancient writers as allowing for knowledge of an altar to an unknown god.<sup>45</sup>

Does the Apostle Paul say that the "unknown god" is the true God whom he proclaims? Carnell expresses this idea by saying: "So Paul, finding the Athenians energetically worshipping the true God, did not simply commend them. . . ." <sup>46</sup> Paul was not recognizing their worship as being toward the true God as common ground for a rational approach. The neuter gender is used: "What therefore you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you." Horne correctly states:

The ignorance, not the worship of these Athenians is underscored. Paul is not accommodating his message in a compromising sort of way to the Hellenistic religiosity of the day; the antithesis between Christianity and paganism is just as sharp as ever in his thinking. Contrary to the notion of many, he is not acknowledging important common aspects between Christianity and paganism.<sup>47</sup>

**Proposition (Acts 17:23b).** At the close of Paul's introduction is found the proposition. The difficulty of understanding it in light of the reference to the "unknown god" has already been set forth. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." The great preacher proposes to proclaim the unknown to them, not their "unknown god." That Paul is not referring to a pagan god can be seen by his bold declaration of the

*Paul proclaimed God to be Creator of  
the world, transcendent and independent of  
His creation.*

true God as Creator. "I proclaim to you" shows Paul's boldness of approach.

**Exposition (Acts 17:24-28).** Two questions need to be answered in light of the claims of the various apologetic systems concerning this passage. First, was Paul presenting revelational truth? Second, how can Paul use quotations from heathen poets if he is presenting revelational truth?

*The Doctrine of God (Acts 17:24-25).* Paul declares the true God as Creator of the world to be transcendent (verses 24, 25) and independent of His creation.<sup>48</sup> This is in direct contrast to the gods of the Athenians who depended upon the people. The declaration of the existence of God as Creator and Sustainer conflicts with some of the Epicureans' idea that the world happened by chance and also with the Stoic idea that the gods cared not for men and their problems.

Does Paul's presentation sound as though he has taken common ground with his pagan audience? No! "Rather the mood is the quite dogmatic one of special revelation associated with Paul's own authoritative claims and reinforced by a direct dependence upon the Old Testament."<sup>49</sup> Though Paul makes no reference to Scripture, his message is entirely revelational truth that could be found in various passages. Whitcomb notes,

This particular audience, after all, was not familiar with the text of the Old Testament. But it is the *message* of God's Word, not necessarily the precise Hebrew and Greek words of the original text as such, which God uses to draw men to Himself (remembering, of course, that the only message which God will honor is the one which in turn depends on and is ultimately derived from a true and therefore verbally inerrant text).<sup>50</sup>

Paul's claim that God requires nothing from His creatures parallels the thoughts of Psalm 50:9-12. Paul completely avoids in this portion any appeal to a deistic framework of the Epicureans or to a pantheistic framework of the Stoics. Paul's presentation of revelatory truth is in contrast to the rationalism of Stoicism and Epicureanism.<sup>51</sup>

*The Doctrine of Man (Acts 17:25-28).* Since God is creator, He is particularly the creator of mankind. Paul claims that all mankind is one in origin derived from a common ancestor. This directly contradicted the Greek idea of superiority of race.

Secondly, Paul discloses that God has ordained man's earthly abode and determined the seasons for his benefit. This teaching accords with revelational truth in Genesis. Thirdly, the Apostle teaches that God has acted in this way that man might seek Him and find Him. This truth reveals the fact that something—sin—has happened to cause man to have need to seek and find God. Paul says that this is natural because they are His offspring and He is near to them. It is with these truths that Paul quotes heathen poets—Epemenides and Aratus—to substantiate his points.

Was Paul attempting to adopt a common ground with the pagans to win them? Could he quote these men in support of an idea in a Christian frame of reference? Stonehouse answers this problem.

Thus while maintaining the antithesis between the knowledge of God enjoyed by His redeemed children and the state of ignorance which characterized all others, Paul could allow consistently and fully for the thought that pagan men, in spite of themselves and contrary to the controlling disposition of their minds, as creatures of God confronted with the divine revelation were capable of responses which were valid so long as and to the extent that they stood in isolation from their pagan systems. Thus, thoughts which in their pagan contexts were quite un-Christian and anti-Christian could be acknowledged as up to a point involving an actual apprehension of revealed truth. As creatures of God, retaining a *sensus divinitatis* in spite of their sin, their ignorance of God and their suppression of the truth, they were not without a certain awareness of God and of their creaturehood. . . . The Apostle Paul . . . could discover within their pagan religiosity evidences that the pagan poets in the very act of suppressing and perverting the truth presupposed a measure of awareness of it. Thus while conceiving of his task as basically a proclamation of One of whom they were in ignorance, he could appeal even to the reflections of pagans as pointing to the true relation between the sovereign Creator and His creatures.<sup>52</sup>

**Application (Acts 17:29-31).** Paul was pressing on his audience the rightful honor that God should receive. This He was not receiving because of their idol worship. At this point Paul brings the message home to the hearts of his hearers. The ignorance of idol worship in the past was passed over by God in mercy. "The particular point here is that God has overlooked men's earlier ignorance in view of the final revelation which He has now given of Himself in Christ."<sup>53</sup>

Upon the Athenian audience, the great preacher drives to the heart the need of repentance in light of the coming judgment. Paul's presentation of God as Judge accords with revelation. The

*The certainty of coming judgment is certified by Jesus' supernatural resurrection.*

assurance of the judgment by Christ, though He is not named, is His supernatural resurrection. Thus, Paul concludes with Christ and repentance.

Van Til asks some difficult questions of those who view Paul throughout or at points having common ground with his pagan audience.

How could the resurrection be preached as evidence of the coming of the judgment and therefore as evidence of the coming condemnation of those that did not believe and trust in Him, if the universe is all of one piece and gods and men are both subject to its laws? How could Paul communicate to the Greeks about the resurrection of Christ if he did not place this resurrection before them in the theistic frame of reference given in the Bible in order thus to distinguish it from the "monstrosities" of Greek philosophy?<sup>54</sup>

Paul's whole presentation climaxes as does his sermon to Jews and proselytes. He had to begin at an earlier point in revelation for the particular need of his pagan audience. The reaction is the same.

**Conflicting Reactions (Acts 17:32,34).** There were three reactions at Paul's address. Some mocked; others procrastinated; and some were converted. "The manner in which these Epicureans and Stoics are described as having treated the message of the apostle, is precisely what we should have looked for as the natural result of their peculiar systems of belief."<sup>55</sup>

One of those converted was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus court. Damaris, a woman, probably of the common people, responded in faith. Other converts are mentioned but not named. The three reactions to Paul's message are the three reactions to the same message today. Gary Meadors observes, "The reaction of Paul's audience actually presents the strongest proof that Paul's message was not philosophical but propositional. If Paul was presenting rational arguments, his auditors would have been more congenial."<sup>56</sup>

**Condition of Departure (Acts 17:33).** "So Paul departed out of their midst." Did Paul depart a failure? Did Paul look back on that day at Athens and determine to change his approach to a strictly revelational one? A host of Bible commentators think so.<sup>57</sup> David Smith sets forth this position in typical words.



Athens was no longer endurable; and there were two special reasons which constrained Paul to take his departure. One was the shame of his ignominious failure, aggravated by bitter self-reproach. In his speech before the Council of the Areopagas he had committed what he now recognized as a fatal error. His mind had been 'corrupted from its simplicity toward Christ.' He had forgotten that faith's best array is 'not men's wisdom but God's power,' and had attempted to meet philosophy with philosophy and win his hearers by 'persuasive words of wisdom.'<sup>58</sup>

Those holding this view believe that the activities at Athens "caused him to rethink his whole procedure in apologetics."<sup>59</sup>

Stonehouse declares that such a view is impossible for the following reasons: (1) in light of other examples of apostolic preaching in Acts it is incredible that Luke should have spent the time and detail to show "how the gospel was not to be preached," (2) the meagerness of the results, if this is true, does not argue for the falsity of the method, (3) the preaching of Paul in the synagogue and daily in the marketplace before the address recorded would argue for a "fairly stereotyped pattern," (4) with respect to I Corinthians 2:1-4 there is no suggestion that he had accommodated his method at Athens and later regretted it.<sup>60</sup>

Was Paul then consistent in his apologetic approach wherever he went? Those of two conflicting apologetic systems answer in the affirmative. Wilbur Smith answers for some rationalists and semi-rationalists.<sup>61</sup>

I believe that the Apostle Paul was definitely led of the Holy Spirit to utter this particular discourse on Mars' Hill as he was to give his apologies before Festus or Agrippa, or to preach any of the sermons that ever proceeded from his lips throughout his thirty years of powerful presentation of the Gospel.<sup>62</sup>

They believe Paul used rational arguments buttressed at the end with Scripture wherever he went.

Cornelius Van Til on this point represents many semi-presuppositionalists and presuppositionalists<sup>63</sup> when he writes:

He did what later he did in his letter to the Corinthians when he said: "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."<sup>64</sup>

After studying the address of Paul at Athens, it seems evident that Paul did not adopt common ground with the pagans but preached revelation. This being true, it appears clearly that Paul preached at Athens as anywhere else the revelation of God in a Christian frame of reference. There is no hint of failure in the text or in other writings of Paul.

A satisfactory explanation of the point in I Corinthians 2:2 on which men try to base a contrast between Paul's preaching at Athens and at Corinth exists. Lenski writes: "The dative 'to you' is merely incidental and lacks all emphasis. Hence there is not a contrast as though Paul avoided these means only in the case of the Corinthians although he had employed them elsewhere."<sup>65</sup> If there seems to be any discouragement on the part of Paul when he left Athens, it would be because of the hardness of men's hearts, not his message.

### **Paul's Apologetic at Athens and Today**

What apologetic should be used today to spread the Gospel as commanded by Christ? What determines the content of the presentation? These questions demand answers in light of two facts: (1) nearly every apologetic system claims Paul's apologetic at Athens as a Biblical example of their approach, and (2) there is a difference of content in Paul's addresses.

#### **Advocation of a Biblical Apologetic**

From a brief survey of the major apologetic systems and an analysis of Acts 17:16-34, it should be evident that Paul's apologetic is close to only one—the apologetic of the presuppositionalist. It was not the approach of the presuppositionalist who also uses negative rationalism to destroy a man's system. Paul's apologetic was a presentation of revelational truths in a Christian frame of reference. "Half-way measures therefore will not suffice; the only method that will suffice is that of challenge of the wisdom of the world by the wisdom of God."<sup>66</sup> Paul did not take common ground with the Athenians "but rather called them to his level."<sup>67</sup>

Paul used a point of contact—the unknown—to get their attention to launch into his presentation. A point of contact is not common ground. It is a truth observable by all, that is used as a springboard for the speaker. A point of contact can never lead a person to Christ. It is left the minute the hearer is attentive to the speaker. David Miller aptly expresses why.

The reason for having your point of contact lies in the fact that an unsaved man cannot be rational, he cannot understand a believer's argument, an argument cannot save and if the argument is convincing he is still lost. Other reasons consist of the fact that the Spirit's common ground is only through the Gospel, a believer cannot answer all the objections of the unsaved, and people are saved without any evidences.<sup>68</sup>

"The true Christian apologist will not compromise or dilute the gospel to make it more palatable to those whom he wishes to persuade of the truth of Christianity."<sup>69</sup> John Whitcomb states he is a presuppositionalist.

The best Christian apologist is the best student of Scripture, who, to use the Bible's own terms to describe him, is "accustomed to the word of righteousness" (Heb 5:13), "a workman who does not need to be ashamed" because he is "handling accurately the word of truth" (II Tim 2:15), a man who, like Apollos, is "mighty in the Scriptures . . . instructed in the way of the Lord . . . speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus," and thus able by God's Word to refute unbelievers "powerfully" (Acts 18:24-28).<sup>70</sup>

Charles Horne has summarized some of the important apologetic implications of Paul's address at Athens:

(1) It is important for the apologist to find a psychological point of contact with his audience if he is to communicate his message.

(2) But this establishment of a point of contact must not involve a toning down of the sharp antithesis between the message of the gospel and all false systems of thought.

(3) An appeal to the facts of general revelation must always be made within the interpretive framework of special revelation.

(4) All remnants of truth reflected in the thinking of the unregenerate man must be seen not as a positive corpus of ideas upon which to construct a case for Christianity but as a basis for the condemnation of all such who suppressed the truth.

(5) To those who have little or no background in the teachings of Biblical Theism, the proclamation of the gospel must begin here.

(6) Idolatry, wherever found and in whatever form, must be openly and forthrightly denounced.<sup>71</sup>

If this biblical apologetic were used, there would be more of the three responses to Paul's message. This apologetic works, yet we should not be motivated by pragmatism but by obedience to God's ordained pattern as set forth in the Word of God. John C Whitcomb confidently states, "Christian apologetics and evangelism ought to be two sides of the same coin. If we 'make a defense' in a God-honoring way, we become instruments of the Holy Spirit in a powerful evangelistic thrust."<sup>72</sup>

### **Adaptation in Communication**

Why the difference in content of Paul's messages? There is a difference in the audience to whom he is speaking. Paul adapted himself as to *where* and *what* he preached. In Ephesus Paul taught in

*Revelational preaching brings reactions of mockery, procrastination or faith.*

the school of Tyrannus; in the city of Socrates he spoke in the marketplace and elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> Paul changed his content and vocabulary according to his audience because he wanted to communicate. To Jews and proselytes he used a number of Old Testament references. To the pagans he used revelational truth going back to creation and proceeding to the truths of resurrection, judgment, and repentance apart from Scriptural reference. An illustration of his adaptation of his vocabulary is his use of *aner* instead of the Semitism, *huios anthropou* or *ho huios tou anthropou* when referring to Christ.<sup>74</sup>

"If we wish to communicate, then we must take time and trouble to learn our hearers' use of language so that they understand what we intend to convey."<sup>75</sup> If their spiritual need is to be met, that portion of revelational truth should be presented of which they are ignorant or seem to be. In communicating to the Athenians Paul with a good grasp of their language and forms foreign to their culture obtained their attention by a point of contact—the unknown—and preached unto them revelational concepts needed to bring them to the place of repentance.

**Conclusion.** Paul's apologetic at Athens does not endorse a rational, semi-rational, or semi-presuppositional apologetic. Neither does it support the use of negative rationalism in addition to a presuppositional approach. Paul presented a message with revelational content on Mars' Hill. The three-fold reaction of mockery, procrastination and faith accord with the results of Biblical preaching. He left Athens having fulfilled his responsibility of preaching the gospel. Any regrets by Paul came from the hardness of men's hearts.

To follow Paul's apologetic one need not be versed in logic, the ancient and modern languages, the principles of philosophy, the positions of science and the Word of God. One must be a genuine Christian motivated by love, controlled by the Spirit, well versed in Scriptural truth with a grasp of the recipient's language with which to communicate. Our approach should be such a Biblical apologetic because of obedience to God's ordained patterns and programs as set forth in the Word of God.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For another presentation of apologetical approaches in evangelical circles see "Unity and Diversity in Evangelical Faith" Kenneth S Kantzer in *The Evangelicals*, ed David F Wells and John D Woodbridge (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975) pp 38-67

<sup>2</sup> F F Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1959) p 34

<sup>3</sup> Stuart C Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism: Prolegomena to Christian Apology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957) p 9

<sup>4</sup> John C Whitcomb, Jr., "Christian Evidence and Apologetics" (unpublished mimeographed notes, 1971) p 42

<sup>5</sup> Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Methuen and Co, 1904) p 312

<sup>6</sup> Edward J Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics, A Philosophic Defense of the Trinitarian-Theistic Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1948) p 8

<sup>7</sup> Edward J Carnell, "How Every Christian Can Defend His Faith" *Moody Monthly* Jan-March 1950

<sup>8</sup> Wilbur Smith, *Therefore, Stand* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1945) p 500

<sup>9</sup> John H Gerstner, *Reasons for Faith* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1960) p 231

<sup>10</sup> Charles M Horne, "A Biblical Apologetic Methodology" (unpublished ThD dissertation, Grace Theol Seminary, 1963) p 20

<sup>11</sup> Carnell, *Introduction to Apologetics*, p 219

<sup>12</sup> Daniel L Hammers, "The Altar to the Unknown God in Acts 17:23" (unpublished M Div monograph, Grace Theol Seminary, 1969) p 37

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*, p 48f

<sup>14</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ Co, 1955) p 35

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p 32

<sup>16</sup> Horne, "A Biblical Apologetic Methodology" p 26

<sup>17</sup> J I Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1961) p 59

<sup>18</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Paul at Athens* (publ by author) p 4. For critical discussions on the philosophy and apologetics of Cornelius Van Til see *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed E R Geehan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ Co, 1977) and *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* by R C Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsay (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> G Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Fleming H Revell Co, 1924) p 408

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ Co, 1956) p 607

<sup>21</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ Co, 1975) p 150

<sup>22</sup> Lyman Abbott, *The Life and Letters of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin Co, 1898) p 46

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, *Acts*, p 408

<sup>24</sup> E M Blaiklock, *Acts: The Birth of the Church* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H Revell Co, 1980) p 159

<sup>25</sup> Horne, "A Biblical Apologetic Methodology" p 141

<sup>26</sup> Alexander, *Acts*, p 608

<sup>27</sup> Rackham, *Acts*, p 315

<sup>28</sup> Gerhard Krodel, "Acts" *Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) p 64

<sup>29</sup> Hammers, "The Altar" p 18

<sup>30</sup> Alexander, *Acts*, p 610

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Lewin, *The Life and Epistles of Paul* Vol I (New York: Scribner, Welford and Armstrong, 1875) n 77, p 262

<sup>32</sup> N B Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Areopagus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1957) p 8

<sup>33</sup> Lewin, *Epistles of Paul*, n 77, p 262

<sup>34</sup> F F Bruce, "Commentary on the Book of Acts, The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes" *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* ed Ned B Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1954) pp 351-352

<sup>35</sup> Stonehouse, *Paul*, p 9

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Jones, *St Paul the Orator* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910) p 90

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>40</sup> G Campbell Morgan, J A Alexander, Francis Clark, Wilbur Smith, Maurice Jones, H B Hackett and a host of others.

<sup>41</sup> F F Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1952) p 335

<sup>42</sup> Alexander, *Acts*, p 613

<sup>43</sup> Adolf Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (New York: Harper and Bros Publ, 1912) p 287

<sup>44</sup> Stonehouse, *Paul*, p 11

<sup>45</sup> Horne, "A Biblical Apologetic Methodology" p 147

<sup>46</sup> Carnell, *Introduction to Apologetics*, p 219

<sup>47</sup> Horne, "A Biblical Apologetic Methodology" p 148

<sup>48</sup> Hoyle C Bowman, "A Theological Investigation of Evangelical Apologetics" (unpublished paper, Grace Theol Seminary, 1969) p 37

<sup>49</sup> Stonehouse, *Paul*, pp 25-26

<sup>50</sup> John C Whitcomb, Jr, "Contemporary Apologetics and the Christian Faith Part III" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol 134 (Oct-Dec 1977) p 296. In six verses (Acts 17:24-29) there are twenty-two quotations or allusions to the Old Testament.

<sup>51</sup> Gary Thomas Meadors, "The Areopagus Address: A Judæo-Christian Missionary Sermon" (unpublished ThM thesis, Grace Theol Seminary, 1979) p 85

<sup>52</sup> Stonehouse, *Paul*, pp 25-26

<sup>53</sup> Bruce, *The Defense*, pp 44-45

<sup>54</sup> Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p 12

<sup>55</sup> H B Hackett, "The Discourse of Paul at Athens, A Commentary on Acts 17:16-34" *Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review*, Vol VI (1849) p 340

<sup>56</sup> Meadors, "The Areopagus Address" p 155

<sup>57</sup> William Ramsay, Maurice Jones, Finegan, Foakes and Jackson, G T Purves, David Smith, Merrill Tenney, Louise Atkinson, Leon Morris (?), G C Morgan (?), Richard Rackham, H A Ironsides and others support this view.

<sup>58</sup> David Smith, *The Life and Letters of St Paul* (New York: Harper and Bros, n d) p 148

<sup>59</sup> Merrill C Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1961) p 287

<sup>60</sup> Stonehouse, *Paul*, pp 33-36

<sup>61</sup> Wilbur Smith, E J Carnell, Bernard Ramm and many others favor this view.

<sup>62</sup> Wilbur Smith, *Therefore, Stand*, p 259

<sup>63</sup> Ned Stonehouse, F F Bruce, R C H Lenski, F W Grosheide, J W Shepard, Charles Horne, Hoyle Bowman, John C Whitcomb, J I Packer, Cornelius Van Til, and many others hold this view.

<sup>64</sup> Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p 13

<sup>65</sup> R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1946) p 87

<sup>66</sup> Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p 14

<sup>67</sup> Bowman, "Evangelical Apologetics" p 37

<sup>68</sup> David F Miller, "A Survey of Practical Apologetics" (unpublished paper, Grace Theol Seminary, 1969) p 19

<sup>69</sup> Bruce, *The Defense*, p 47

<sup>70</sup> John C Whitcomb, Jr, "Contemporary Apologetics and the Christian Faith, Part II" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol 134 (July-Sept 1977) p 202

<sup>71</sup> Horne, "A Biblical Apologetic Methodology" p 161

<sup>72</sup> John C Whitcomb, "The Value of Apologetics" *Grace Seminary Spire* (Spring 1978) p 5

<sup>73</sup> Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, p 332

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968) p 119