

“For the Sake of the Gospel”—The Apologetic Speeches of the Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts

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I am one of the first people to acknowledge that the contemporary debate over apologetic methodology between the “evidentialists” and the “presuppositionalists,” however unpleasant, nevertheless can be a vital and healthy exercise. It is very important to have a biblically based and carefully honed apologetic methodology in place before confronting the learned paganism of our age. In those instances when this is the goal of the evidentialist-presuppositionalist debate, it ought to be greatly encouraged.

I am perplexed, however, that the parties to this in-house debate spend little time analyzing the Apostle Paul’s apologetic speeches in the Book of Acts.¹ For it is here, in Luke’s record of the ever-extending reign of the Risen and Exalted Christ,² that we are given a clear picture of how the Apostle Paul sought both to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and defend the Christian truth claim, and this not only in the synagogues of the major cities of Greece and Asia Minor—before Jews and “God-fearing” Gentile proselytes—but also before magistrates as well as in the marketplaces of those Roman and Greek

¹ Cornelius Van Til’s little booklet Paul at Athens, (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978) is a notable exception. Two of the books by the major parties to this debate make little, if any, mention of these speeches: R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, Classical Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); and John M. Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994). It would seem to me that the apostolic pattern of proclamation-*apologia* would be a major issue of contention. Instead the apologetic speeches are barely given mention.

² According to John Calvin, the theme of Acts is “the beginning of the reign of Christ, and, as it were, the renewal of the world is being depicted here.” See John Calvin, The Acts of the Apostles, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 17.

cities where little or nothing was known of the God of Israel and the inspired texts of the Old Testament. It is here, then, with Paul's various encounters with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in cities such as Psidion Antioch (Acts 13:13-52), Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:1-15), with superstitious pagans in Lystra (Acts 14:8-19) and sophisticated Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 16:-34), or Gentile rulers such as Felix (Acts 24:10-27); and even a member of Israel's ruling family, Herod Agrippa (Acts 26:1-32), that we get a sense of the Apostle's approach to confronting divergent forms of unbelief in specific historical contexts.

All Things to All Men For the Sake of the Gospel

Throughout the apologetic speeches of Paul, as Luke recounts elements of them for us in Acts, it is apparent that Paul is putting into practice his own stated philosophy of ministry, expressed in some detail in his first Letter to the Corinthian Christians:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 1:9:19-23 *NIV*).

It is clear from these comments that Paul had thought very carefully about his unique calling as the Apostle to the Gentiles and his role as a loyal son of Israel, who's most heartfelt prayer for his people was "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel (Romans 9:2-3)." To win his own Jewish brothers and sisters to Christ, Paul became as "one under the law"—though he was free in Christ. To the Gentiles who knew not Moses, the law, or Israel's God, Paul instead became a man subject only to the law of Christ, so that those who were at one time "separate

from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” might be won to Israel’s Messiah (Ephesians 2:12).

Let us be careful to note that Paul was no mere pragmatist, adopting in chameleon-like fashion, the ideology of whatever group he happened to be facing at any given moment. Paul was not concerned with demographics or “success” in the modern American sense of church planting. He was concerned with being faithful to the commission given him by Jesus Christ. As recent Pauline scholarship has pointed out, perhaps it is best that we think of Paul neither exclusively as “systematic theologian,” nor, on the contrary, as a theological “innovator.” Instead we should view Paul as a man called to be an apostle by Jesus Christ, who in turn applied his core beliefs of an unchanging gospel of free grace to very specific, yet very dynamic situations, which, in turn, became the occasion for a number of the Epistles of Paul which appear in our New Testament canon.³ Throughout the various apologetic speeches in Acts, we see Paul proclaim one gospel to diverse audiences who stand poles apart from one another in terms of both their respective intellectual backgrounds and their interpretive “world and life” view. How does the Apostle bridge this wide intellectual gap?

Christ and Him Crucified

There are several things that must be pointed out about Paul’s basic theological core convictions, so clearly and energetically expressed in his letters to the churches, and that also repeatedly surface in the varied apologetic speeches described in Acts. The first thing that we need to consider is that Paul clearly thought in eschatological terms, seeing the course of human history as the unfolding of two successive ages—a present “evil age” (Galatians 1:4) and an “age to come” in which Jesus Christ himself rules

³ I am thinking of the “contingency-coherence” model set out by J. Christiaan Beker, in Paul the Apostle (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), especially pages 23-36.

(Ephesians 1:21). This is the lens through which Paul sees much of the wickedness and unbelief of his own age.⁴ For Paul, this present age is characterized as the dominion of death which has befallen us under the headship of Adam (Romans 5:12-19). It is an age of a “worldly wisdom” that does not understand the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 2:6-8). “This age” is characterized by speculative philosophy (1 Corinthians 1:20), and is an age in which the arch-enemy of God, Satan, rules by default, having blinded the minds of men to the truth of the things of God (2 Corinthians 4:4). To be identified with “this age” is to be tragically bound to death and the things of this world, things destined to perish.

The “age to come,” on the other hand, is an age of eternal life in Christ, the second Adam (Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:50 ff.), in which mere flesh and blood are transformed by resurrection life. The age to come is an age in which the eternal has swallowed up the temporal in the eschatological victory of Jesus Christ and the consummation of all things (1 Timothy 6:19; 2 Timothy 4:18). It is an age characterized by the wisdom of God, revealed in the person and work of his son.

Opposition to Paul’s preaching arises, then, directly from the “wisdom” of the citizens of this age, and such opposition cannot rise any higher than the innate idolatry of the human heart. What men and women learn of God through general revelation can only condemn them, leaving all without excuse before God’s righteous tribunal, since what they do know of God is sinfully suppressed in unrighteousness, having exchanged the truth of God for a lie (Romans 1:19-25). Apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the citizens of “this age,” suffer from ignorance of God, the futility of being unable to think God’s thoughts after him, a darkened understanding of revealed things, a profound hardness of heart, and are, therefore, according to Paul, “separated from God” (Ephesians 4:17-18). Paul would grant little quarter, I think, to those sentimental American Evangelicals who see the consequences of sin in purely moral categories. Sin not only makes us “bad,” it renders us incapable of coming to faith apart from prior grace and spiritual illumination. Human sinfulness renders us unwilling to believe what

⁴ Anders Nygren, Commentary on Romans (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1949), pp. 20 ff.

we know to be true about God and to trust in the saving actions of his son as our only hope of heaven. And above all else, our sin places us under God's just condemnation. We are blind, because fallen in Adam, we would rather gouge out our own spiritual eyes, than bow our knees and confess "Jesus Christ is Lord." For Paul, sin has grave intellectual ramifications, which are fundamentally and essentially related to our moral depravity.

With this in mind, we now can make sense of a second major category in Paul's theological core, "the theology of the cross." We see this in Paul's repeated comments about the gospel being "the power of God" unto salvation for all who believe (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18). As the wisdom, not of men, but of God (1 Corinthians 1:21), what appeared to be foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to Jews—both citizens of "this age" —the cross actually displays the very epitome of the wisdom of the "age to come." "We" says Paul, "preach Christ crucified to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks." For "Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God." Indeed, "Christ has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:23-30). This is why Paul can say to the erring Galatians—many of whom had returned to the works-righteousness principle of this "present evil age" (Galatians 2:16)—that it was the apostle's desire to never boast, "except in the cross of Christ" (Galatians 6:14). The way to combat the unbelief of the "present evil age" is to confront it head-on, with the power of God and the wisdom of God, which are evident in the saving work of Jesus Christ in his death, burial and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)—Paul's theology of the cross.

This has profound significance for any defense of the Christian faith, for Paul's theology of the cross is central to all his thinking, and is the basis for his proclamation of Christ crucified to Jew and Gentile. It also colors all of the historic encounters we find between Paul and unbelievers in the Book of Acts. While desiring to be "all things to all men," Paul has one gospel to proclaim, whether it be to "Jews and God-fearers" of the synagogues, the superstitious pagans of Lystra, or the learned pagans of

Athens. It is Paul's theology of the cross which turns these encounters with unbelief into what may be called a pattern of "proclamation—defense." There is a certain sense in which we cannot understand any of these Lukan reports apart from the content of Paul's preaching, which, in Luke's account, is always prior to the defense. This means that Paul's apologetic will not be grounded in natural theology or the so-called "classical proofs" for God's existence. Paul's apologetic will be firmly grounded both in general revelation through that which God has created, and in the redemptive acts of God in Christ which are, therefore, necessarily grounded in ordinary history. Paul was no devotee of Karl Barth's artificially imposed categories of *historische* and *Geschichte*. Since redemptive-history involves the saving acts of God in time and space, redemptive-history is necessarily objective history, a point made clear by Geerhardus Vos.⁵

Paul in the Synagogue

Throughout the first and second missionary journeys of Acts, Paul begins his efforts in each new city by finding the local synagogue, and then immediately making it the base of his operations (See for example, Acts 13:5, 14 ff; Acts 14:1 ff., Acts 17:2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19 etc.). As Luke puts it in Acts 17:2, Paul went to the Synagogue in Thessalonica, "as was his custom," and for three successive weeks he "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead."

By taking a closer look at this, we can learn a great deal about Paul's approach to proclamation-defense with those with whom he found common ground in the pages of the Old Testament. Unlike the pagan Gentiles, who did not have and did not know the Old Testament, here, when dealing with Jews and

⁵ Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, ed., Richard Gaffin (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pp. 18-19.

“God-fearing” Gentiles who knew and believed the Old Testament, Paul could go to the synagogue, find a willing audience and then “reason” with them directly from the Scriptures. Paul did this by “explaining” and “proving” that it was necessary for Jesus to suffer unto death and to rise again from the dead as Paul tried to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah promised to Israel throughout the Old Testament.⁶ In the original language here, we are given a bit more of a clue as to how Paul did this, when Luke tells us that Paul set the Old Testament teaching regarding the Messiah, “side by side” with the account of the historical events of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. Thus, Paul clearly used what we would call the apologetic arguments from fulfilled prophecy and miracle to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith. Jesus was the one of whom the Scriptures spoke, because the events of his life and death, and especially his resurrection, are exactly what the Old Testament predicates of the coming Messiah. The very fact that the expectations of Israel’s prophets all come to fruition in the historical events surrounding the life, death and burial of Jesus Christ is a very powerful and compelling argument, and Paul uses it repeatedly.

Paul and Barnabas in Lystra

Things were markedly different when Paul encountered pagan Gentiles who did not know much, if anything, of the Old Testament and the God of Israel. We have two accounts of such incidents, the first being that of Paul and Barnabas’ encounter with indigenous paganism recounted in Acts 14:8 ff. According to Luke, the whole incident began with an amazing miracle. “In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, ‘Stand up on

⁶ For the use of these terms by Luke, see Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 468-69.

your feet!’ At that, the man jumped up and began to walk” (vv. 8-10).

This should sound vaguely familiar if you know the earlier chapters of Acts. Luke is, no doubt, drawing a parallel here between the ministry of Peter and that of Paul. What Peter had done in the Jerusalem temple before watching Israel (Acts 3:1 ff.), Paul is doing here before the Gentiles. The reference to bold preaching supported by signs and wonders occurs not only here, but also in Iconium (Acts 14:1 ff.). In both cases, Paul proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ and God himself confirms the content of the preaching by the miraculous signs that follow. The parallels to Peter healing the man crippled from birth and Paul doing the same here in Lystra, serves to put Paul on the same footing as Peter, and the mission to the Gentiles on the same footing with the original work in Jerusalem, especially in the accounts we find in Acts 3-4.⁷ Thus God confirms the truth of his word as proclaimed by Paul when the lame man stands up at Paul’s command, jumps around and begins to walk. This serves to confirm the legitimacy of the Gentile mission, a point that will be especially germane in the debate that takes place in the next chapter (Acts 15).

The result of this is recounted by Luke. “When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.” As Luke puts it, the crowds present were so amazed at what had happened, word quickly spread throughout the city that Zeus and Hermes had come to them disguised in human form. The background to this is important. Some fifty years earlier, a legend began circulating throughout the region of southern Galatia that Zeus and Hermes had wandered through the local hill country disguised as mere mortals seeking lodging. They supposedly stopped at nearly a thousand homes but were not able to

⁷ Robert C. Tannehill, The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) p. 177.

find a place to stay and were refused wherever they went. But when a humble peasant took them in and his home was transformed into a glorious temple, and he and his wife were transformed into beautiful oak trees which still stood in the region. Those who refused to take the gods in, instead, saw their homes destroyed and they were left destitute. This legend, along with the presence of a temple to Zeus just outside the city, meant that the expectation of the return of the gods to the region for a repeat performance was quite prominent in the minds of the Lyconians. And thus, when Paul healed the lame man, it must have meant that Zeus and Hermes had returned.⁸ As a result, Paul finds himself face to face with superstitious pagans wanting to worship him!

When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them (Acts 14:14-18 *NIV*).

Paul and Barnabas rush headlong into the crowds which had gathered, tearing their clothes, which was an act of pious Jews in the presence of blasphemers. Paul shouted to them, “The gods have not come down in human form,” “we too are only men, human like you!”

Once the miraculous healing had gotten the Lyconian’s attention, Paul now begins to proclaim to them the true and living God and Luke gives us but a very brief summary of Paul’s proclamation-defense.⁹ In this case, even though the Lyconians had no Old Testament, the Apostle begins by proclaiming “the good news to them,” but he also attempts to show them the untenable nature of paganism, pointing out the uselessness of idolatry and telling his hearers to turn from “these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.” In this, we see a

⁸ This is effectively summarized in Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 435

⁹ See F. F. Bruce, The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 36 ff.

simple form of the argument from contingency, as created things depend upon a creator. Paul is also very clear that unbelief has serious consequences, for Paul also tells his hearers that the same God who has created all things, will not let these false religious practices go on. God has clearly demonstrated his common grace to the Lyconians in the fact that the rain falls upon their crops and thereby provides them with food and joy, and the Lyconians are, therefore, without excuse. Here, where the audience is not familiar with the Old Testament, Paul proclaims the “good news” of Christ crucified, but the proclamation is, apparently, soon followed by a direct challenge to those false notions upon which Lyconian paganism was based. The pattern here is clearly “proclamation-defense,” as the good news is proclaimed and pagan assumptions are challenged. But all this was of little avail, for as Luke tells us in verse 18, “even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.” This must have been an amazing scene!

Paul Before the Areopagus

In Acts 17:16-34, Luke recounts for us Paul’s visit to Athens during what is now known as the Second Missionary Journey. We have no idea if Paul’s previous travels had ever brought him to Athens before, but we can just imagine what was going through the mind of the apostle as he walked through the city, which beyond all others, represented the high water mark of paganism and the “wisdom of the age.” According to Luke, Paul’s reaction to all of this was that he was greatly distressed. As with all of the kingdoms of Satan, “the bloom was off the rose,” so to speak. By the first century, the city of Athens was but a faint shadow of its former self, for the glories of the city of man are always fading as moth and rust go about their inevitable and tireless work of decay. With the faded glories of Athen’s past still everywhere evident, Luke tells us that as the Apostle wandered through the city he was “greatly distressed” when he saw that the city was so full of idols.

Once again, Paul finds the local synagogue and “as was his custom,” the Apostle was soon reasoning with Jews and “God fearers,” from the Old Testament, probably following the same methodology that he had used while in Thessalonica—setting the Old Testament prophetic expectation of a coming Messiah, “side by side” with the historical events of the life of Christ, and in doing so “proving” that Jesus was the Christ. But while in Athens, Paul also took the opportunity to go into the “Agora” (the marketplace), and the Apostle preached Christ to those who happened to be there.

According to Luke, it was not long before Paul attracted the attention of some of the more influential locals, “a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers,” two of the major schools of philosophy then found among the *intelligentsia* of Athens. When Paul, then, proclaims the gospel to them, the Stoics and Epicureans begin disputing with Paul, calling him “a babbling,” a word which is literally translated as “seed-picker,” but which came to mean a “charlatan,” or a kind of amateur dabbler. Others among the group saw Paul as a “proclaimer of foreign Gods,” “a propagandist,” for some kind of unknown foreign religion. And so these philosophers take Paul before the Areopagus. Meeting upon the “Hill of Ares”—hence “Mars Hill” to the Romans—the Areopagus had a long and illustrious history and is often regarded as the historic birthplace of democracy. By the first century, the Areopagus no longer exercised political authority over the city (as in the case of the magistrates of the other Greek cities), but its authority was limited to passing judgement in matters of religion, philosophy and ethics. Paul was brought here, not for a trial, nor likely against his will, but instead so that his strange views regarding this novel religion could be evaluated by these experts in Greek religion and philosophy. While Paul is horribly distressed by the idolatry he sees in the city, the Athenians, on the other hand are, apparently, quite amused and intrigued by this “novel” teaching from Paul. The Athenians took great delight in listening to novel ideas and speculating about religious claims and Luke does not exaggerate when he declares about them in verse 21—“All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” But here again, the encounter between

Paul and Greek paganism results from his prior proclamation of the gospel. The balance of Luke's account includes Paul's defense before the Areopagus.

Paul's approach here will naturally be similar to that we saw him take in Acts 14:15-17, only here in Athens, the audience is much more sophisticated than were the good citizens of Lystra. These were men, who while aware of all of the latest religious speculations of the day, also knew very little, if anything, of the Old Testament or the God of Israel, as would the Jews and "God-fearers" in the synagogue.

Standing before the professional philosophers, Paul begins his speech by again appealing to the common ground that he holds with his hearers—the religious nature of humanity. "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." Paul does not see the religious nature as an end in itself, for he immediately moves on to point these "religious" men to the source of that religious nature and intuition, the true and living God, the creator of all things. This is precisely the point that Calvin tries to make in the opening words of the *Institutes*:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone....On the other hand, it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.¹⁰

If one starts with humanities' innate religious nature, we are quickly pushed to the existence of God for an explanation. On the contrary, when we start with God's existence, only then are we able to explain the human predicament. In this case, Paul thought it best to begin by appealing to the religious nature of the Athenians, again finding common ground with his audience.

Next, Paul reminds the Athenians that their own philosophy amounts to practical atheism. For as

¹⁰ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.i.1-2.

he was passing through their city, he saw an altar dedicated “to the [or] an unknown god.” The reference to an “unknown God,” is very likely a reference to an altar dedicated to a “god” whose original name had been defaced many years before, and which was now long-since forgotten to subsequent generations. The altar may have been repaired and re-dedicated, “to an unknown god.” While the Athenians were willing to worship one whom they did not know, Paul now sets before them “the God who is there” —to use Francis Schaeffer’s term. “The ‘god’ who is unknown to you is the very God about whom I will now tell you!”

Consistent with the records of Paul’s previous encounters with paganism, he now sets forth the God of Israel, the only true God who has made the heavens and the earth and everything in them without appeal to what we call the so-called classic proofs. God’s existence is not “proven”— it is proclaimed! For Paul, there is no middle man between God and created order, typical of Greek cosmology and its stress upon a *demiurge*, who placed himself between matter [evil] and pure Spirit [good]. Though Paul doesn’t specifically cite the Old Testament here, the language that he uses is clearly full of Old Testament echoes. Paul’s God is the creator of all, therefore, no temple made from human hands no matter how glorious can contain him or his glory.

As the “Lord of heaven” the true and living God proclaimed by Paul is utterly transcendent and eternal, and, therefore, in no way subject to the whims of men. This leads to Paul’s next point recounted in verse 25, namely, that since his God has created everything, “how could he be dependent upon his creatures?” In fact, it is the other way around. He depends upon his creatures for nothing, but his creatures depend upon him for everything! “He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else!” Here again, Paul uses a form of the argument from contingency, all created things depend upon a creator.

But the God of Israel is not only the creator of all things, he is also the sustainer of all. Thus Paul now appeals to the providence of God, that is, his fatherly superintendence of the world he has

made. Here we find a clear echo from Deuteronomy 32:8— “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel”—in Paul’s argument. Thus to the Athenians, Paul declares, “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.” Since Paul’s God is the creator of all men and nations, all men are descendants of the “first man,” and all nations belong where God has placed them.

But God does this not merely in an exercise of brute power—this ordering of the affairs of the nations is also part of God’s purpose to draw men and women unto himself. It is important to note that Paul does not quote the Hebrew Scriptures directly, though he constantly alludes to them. But at this point in his speech, Paul does quote directly from two Greek poets, Epimenedes and Aratus, demonstrating to his audience that even their own philosophers have correctly analyzed the human dilemma, even if, apart from special revelation, they had no solutions to them. First, Paul cites from Epimenedes, “For in him we live and move and have our being.” The point is that because God is creator and sustainer of all he is never far from his any of creatures. This is virtually the same point that Paul will later make in Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so that men are without excuse.” As creator, God is not only transcendent and beyond his creation in such a way that he is distinct from the world he has made, nevertheless, as sustainer of the world he has made he is also immanent, always being near us since we are his creatures. This is, perhaps, a shot at the deistic tendencies of the Stoics in the audience.

The second Greek poet that Paul cites is Aratus, “As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” Thus Paul is able to point out that some of the Athenians “had realized the folly of trying to represent the divine nature by material images, worship at material altars, or house it in material

temples, and had perceived, however dimly, how near God was to those who truly sought him.¹¹ We are the offspring of God, not because we are part of God, a kind of “little spark off the big flame” so to speak, but we are God’s offspring because we are created in his very own image. At this point, the Athenians were no doubt perplexed and taken aback by the force of Paul’s arguments, who as Cornelius Van Til has noted, certainly challenged the “entire framework of non-Christian thought.”¹²

But Paul is not finished. Immediately he calls for repentance. “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.” Thus with the coming of Jesus Christ, the man God has appointed to judge the earth, the period of time when God overlooked such ignorance in his forbearance is now past. The Athenians must repent and turn from their false conception of God, and instead embrace the true knowledge of God as found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. God has commanded this and there is a coming day of judgement when those who do not obey him will be punished. Paul’s point is simply that since God is creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all men, he is also the judge of his creation. Indeed, says Paul, there is coming a day when he will judge the world in righteousness—an idea quite foreign to Greek thinking.

But the climax of Paul’s apologetic speech occurs when he turns to his great apologetic argument, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The God who created, sustains and governs all things, enters into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. This same Jesus has died for our sins under Roman justice after being rejected by his own people, and his resurrection from the dead is “proof” that God has dealt with human sin once for all, since the wages of sin—death, is overcome in Christ’s resurrection. Paul, no doubt, appeals to the Areopagus on the basis of his own encounter with the Risen

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts, NICNT, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), p. 338.

¹² Van Til, Paul at Athens, p. 18.

Christ while Paul was on his way to Damascus (as we see elsewhere in Acts, 22:3-16; 26:9-18). For the God who has made the world, in whom we live and move and have our being, became man, died and was buried, and rose again. This is the great apologetic fact for the Christian faith!

The idea of the resurrection of the body was difficult for Paul's hearers to comprehend. The Greeks almost universally believed in the immortality of the soul, but the concept of the resurrection of the body [the prison house of the soul] was apparently seen merely as another foreign novelty from this "seed-picker." A number of the members of the Areopagus sneered at Paul's demand for repentance. And true to form, a number of those present thought that Paul's little "chat" was very interesting and would make a great topic for yet more interesting and seemingly endless discussion. But in the sovereign grace of God, several believed, including Damaris and Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus.

Paul's "Proclamation-Defense" in Acts

First and foremost, when we analyze these apologetic speeches in Acts, it is clear that Paul did indeed seek to be all things to all men for the sake of gospel, as evidenced in the fact that throughout these encounters with various forms of unbelief, the Apostle repeatedly was able to find common ground with his audience. With those with whom he held the Old Testament in common (Jews and God-fearing Gentiles), Paul appeals to fulfilled prophecy by setting the Old Testament prophetic expectation side by side with the facts of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With pagan Gentiles, on the other hand, Paul begins with general revelation, not by "proving" God's existence, but simply by proclaiming the God of Israel in language which echoes the Old Testament throughout. We also see the Apostle challenging whatever underlying pagan assumptions were present. But given Paul's theological core convictions about the nature of human sinfulness, it is clear that in finding "common ground," Paul does not in any sense expect to find so-called "neutral" common ground, as though the Apostle could

somehow place both himself and his hearers in a “neutral” frame of mind, without any influence upon the discussion by prior intellectual commitments to faith or various forms of unbelief. For the common ground that Paul does find, is in every case necessarily based in God’s self-disclosure, either the “Book of Nature,” or in the redemptive acts of God associated with special revelation and ordinary history. Throughout Paul’s encounters with unbelief, it is the non-Christian (Jew, God-fearer, or pagan Gentile) who is confronted with the consequences of knowing God through this self-disclosure both in general and special revelation, but who instead inevitably suppress that knowledge in unrighteousness. Thus Paul not only demonstrates his desire to be all things to all men by finding non-neutral common ground with his hearers, but he is repeatedly able to skillfully adjust his own “proclamation-defense” to each specific audience. The Apostle repeatedly exploits the internal tensions of suppressing truth in unrighteousness as he seeks to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

A second point that must be made when looking at these speeches is that Paul began with the proclamation of the gospel, and once challenged, he was deftly able to give an apologetic by “reasoning” and “proving” from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ, and by challenging the very presuppositions underlying pagan unbelief. As we have seen in two instances (Lystra and Athens), Paul does this by using a form of the argument from contingency—the creation does indeed depend upon a creator. Neither Greek mythology nor Stoic or Epicurean cosmologies can give a satisfactory explanation of the world in which we live. Paul does not attempt to “prove” God’s existence typical of so-called “classical apologetics,” instead he proclaims Christ crucified, and then attempts to refute his opponents, showing the futility of unbelief. Paul places no confidence in the flesh, rather he believes that the proclamation of Christ crucified is the power of God unto salvation. He does not attempt to get his audience “to make a decision for Jesus,” he simply proclaims the truth, and then attacks the unbelieving assumptions of the opposition, trusting all the while in the power of God, the futility of unbelief, and the strength of the

evidences God has given.

Third, throughout these speeches, it is clear that the supreme apologetic argument for Paul is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. No doubt, this is the case for it was Paul, the great persecutor of the church, who became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, because while en route from Jerusalem to Damascus to hunt down and arrest Christians, the Risen Lord Jesus Christ himself confronted Paul, and Paul refers to this life-changing event in his apologetic speeches before the good citizens of Jerusalem (Acts 22:2 ff) and before king Agrippa (Acts 26:9-18). In Psidian Antioch, Paul concluded his sermon before the synagogue by declaring, “God raised [Jesus] from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people (Acts 13:30-31).” Just as Peter had done in the Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, here Paul also makes appeal to the prophetic significance of our Lord’s resurrection. “The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay is stated in these words....`You will not yet your Holy One see decay.’” There was not only factual evidence for Christ’s resurrection, there was theological necessity.

In the synagogue in Athens, Paul followed a similar tact, explaining that Jesus had to first suffer and then rise from the dead (Acts 17:3). And while standing before the pagan philosophers of the Areopagus, Paul ends his *apologia* with the words, God “has given proof of this to all men by raising [Jesus] from the dead.” In one amazing account, Paul spoke of his hope of the resurrection of the dead in the very presence of the assembled Sanhedrin, apparently to provoke an argument between his accusers, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who disagreed among themselves about the resurrection (Acts 23:6 ff.). Before Felix, Paul does much the same thing, proclaiming his hope in a resurrection, and acknowledging that it was this very hope that has brought him before Felix in the first place (Acts 24:15, 21)! Even Felix’s successor, Festus, when conferring with King Agrippa, was forced to concede that Paul was incarcerated because of his proclamation “about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive (Acts 25:19).” And last, when Paul makes his defense before Agrippa, his apologetic appeal is to the

hope of the resurrection. Thus Paul asks Agrippa, “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” Paul concludes this defense by declaring, “I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” When Festus interrupted Paul and declared to the Apostle, “you are out of your mind,” Paul’s response is significant: “I am not insane, most excellent Festus....What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things....I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.” “King Agrippa,” Paul asks, “do you believe the prophets? I know you do!” To which Agrippa replies, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?” “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening today may become what I am (Act 26:21 ff).”

Thus it seems to me that Paul’s “proclamation-defense” is clearly anchored in the death, burial and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not in the formal proofs of “classical apologetics.” But neither can we view Paul’s apologetic through the lens of semi-Pelagian Evangelical evidential apologetics which see Christian evidences are merely additional inducements for one to make a “decision” for Jesus. For Paul’s apologetic is based in his theological core and given human sinfulness and moral depravity typical of this present “evil age,” evidential “facts” by themselves cannot tip the scale from unbelief to faith. For Paul it is the gospel—the wisdom of the age to come—which is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe and his use of Christian evidences is to be seen in the context of the content of his proclamation, namely the historical events associated with the dying and rising of Christ. The same man who put no confidence in the flesh, is the same man who “reasoned,” “discoursed,” “persuaded” and “debated” with his audiences that the content of his preaching was true, because the Lord of Glory rose again from the dead.

This point, it seems to me, is critical in developing a Biblical and effective apologetic for our times and must be a central theme in the contemporary debate over apologetic methodology and tactics.

