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# Paul and the Philosophers

BY TIMOTHY A. BROOKINS

**Paul's speech to the Areopagus Council is a paradigm for "cross-worldview" evangelism. The Apostle restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.**

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**I**n many ways, the religious context North American Christians inhabit today shares less in common with the Bible Belt culture of the mid twentieth century than it does the pluralistic pagan environment in which the apostle Paul struck out to establish the world's first congregations. Until recently, North American pastors could expect their pews to be lined with men and women intimately acquainted with the Bible's stories and ideas. Evangelists stood before audiences of men and women who believed in both the existence of God and the Bible's authority as a sacred text. But in the "post-Christian" age of the present, Christians now stand, like Paul, on their own "Areopagus" and address audiences of "Athenians."<sup>1</sup>

In these times, we have much to learn from the preaching of the earliest Christians. In Acts 17:16-34, we find Paul in Athens, laying the gospel before this city for the first time. He begins by conversing "in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons," but quickly attracts the attention of "some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" and is summoned to present his message before the city's governing body, the Areopagus Council. Among his audience, which includes not only the Council but also a crowd of inquisitive bystanders (as 17:20-21 implies), some may be Jews who are drawn from the synagogue

in the commotion; and probably many are ordinary Greeks who are believers in the traditional “folk” gods or pious keepers of the local “civil” cults; but the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers are the only group mentioned by name. Not one of these people yet believed in Christ.

Paul’s address in 17:22-31 is often considered a paradigm for “cross-worldview” evangelism, for it depicts the Apostle ‘translating’ his gospel message into the vernacular of his audience. In other words, he restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.



If this is Paul’s strategy, then there is no sarcasm in his introduction: “I see how *extremely religious* (*deisidaimonesterous*) you are in every way” (17:22). Complimenting the audience at the opening of an address was conventional in the ancient world; Paul simply follows suit.<sup>2</sup> True, from one point of view, the basis of his audience’s religiosity is its rampant *idolatry* (cf. 17:16). It is not, however, their idolatry that the Apostle commends, but their scrupulousness to honor even a God whose name they do not know; he reports to them, “as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’” (17:23). Clearly Paul is capitalizing not on what he thinks is worst in their practices, but on what he thinks is best.

This claim becomes the pivot-point of the address: it is this God – the one of whom the Athenians are ignorant – that Paul aims to make known to them. Paul identifies the “Unknown God” whom these pagans worship with the very same God whom he preaches. They may not know this deity as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” or “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” but they acknowledge him as a “god” just the same. For the moment Paul highlights what they have in common and pushes their differences into the background.

The strategy of seeking common ground with his audience continues in Paul’s description of God. Each one of the affirmations that he makes about God in 17:24-30 is approximated in ancient pagan writings. God made all things, and is Lord over all (17:24); God does not dwell in temples made with hands (17:24); God needs nothing from anyone, but has given to all creatures “life and breath and all things” (17:25); God made all nations, and appointed times and boundaries for them (17:26); God made them to seek him, and he is not far from anyone (17:27); in God “we live and move and have our being,” and all are one race, from him (17:28); since people are a race *from God*, clearly God cannot be represented by merely material things (17:29); and while God has overlooked humanity’s previous ignorance, now

all need to repent (17:30). Only at this point does Paul say something that an average Greek listener might have found unusual: this God has appointed a day of judgment, to be executed by the (unnamed) man whom he has designated, and whom he has raised from the dead as proof (17:31).



Paul's speech does not include a single direct quotation from Scripture. And throughout it, even where Jewish figures are alluded to, Paul abstains from naming them explicitly (notice that humanity is said to have happened simply "from one" in 17:26, and humanity is judged "by the man whom God has appointed" in 17:31).

Rather than quoting from Scripture – which would not have been convincing, or even comprehensible, to his pagan audience – Paul selects a number of popular philosophical commonplaces for use. The material looks remarkably similar to things said by the Stoics, who were profoundly influential on popular thinking of the time. Much less would this material have appealed to the Epicureans among his audience. (This, indeed, highlights a common difficulty found in addressing diverse audiences: particular arguments have less appeal to some members than to others.<sup>3</sup>) For instance, the Epicureans could, with Paul and the Stoics, affirm that God does not dwell in things made with human hands, and that he needs nothing from humans. But no Epicurean would agree that God created all things (for on their view, the random swerve of "atoms" produced the current world), or that God has given people gifts and set boundaries of places and times (for the gods, if they exist, are remote and uninvolved in human affairs), or that God is near. On the Epicurean view, therefore, whoever seeks God, seeks him in vain.

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Despite the surface similarity of Paul's arguments to Stoic ideas, his discourse departs in critical ways from their philosophy. Indeed, the genius of Paul's rhetoric is that it maximizes the impression of agreement with his audience without compromising the deep structure of the Jewish and Christian worldview from which his discourse truly originates. For this reason, Copan and Litwak

suggest that Paul gives us an example of how to “shape, not compromise” our presentation of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> How does he do this? Paul employs language and ideas accepted in the dominant culture and suited for establishing common agreement, but “baptizes” them by placing them within a broader Jewish and Christian storyline.

Language receives specifiable meaning only in light of the narrative substructure that undergirds it. These underlying narratives, or what philosophers call “metanarratives,” are the stories that shape people’s lives; they are structured wholes that provide a kind of interpretive key to the individual parts or experiences taken separately. They form the deeper meaning of the words people use.

Here is an everyday example. At the university where I teach, we have a marketing slogan: “Houston Baptist University: A ‘higher’ education.” Now to a group of theological sophisticates, this slogan might naturally suggest education in “things above” – that is, in theological matters. But one can easily imagine some other individuals inclined to take the slogan to mean that Houston Baptist is the kind of place where students habitually partake of hallucinogens. Now, one of these interpretations is certainly a more responsible one than the other (and it is not second), but both are possible interpretations. What is the difference? How we use language and how we understand others’ use of language depends in part on the context, or *narrative world*, in which we are living.

Here is another example. Pastoral theologian James Thompson worries that church people today develop their metanarratives less from the Bible than they do from television series and other sources of popular culture.<sup>5</sup> As a result, he thinks Christians have come to critique biblical faith in the light of their secular metanarratives, when they ought to be critiquing secular metanarratives in the light of biblical faith.

When it comes to interpreting Paul’s Areopagus speech, then, it makes a great deal of difference whether we think Paul assumes the underlying narrative of Stoicism, or whether he is using Stoic discourse to provide, as it were, merely its garb. Modern rhetorical theory tells us that a common discourse, or common “lingo,” is a necessary precondition to attempts at persuasion.<sup>6</sup> But the common discourse is only a starting point, a first foothold where both parties can stand facing each other on a common plane. As dialogue progresses, it often becomes evident that the two parties are actually standing on two completely different kinds of terrain.



Despite heavy reliance on popular discourse, Paul’s speech in Acts 17 is unmistakably biblical. While he never reproduces exactly the words of any biblical passage, each of his points resounds with biblical allusions.<sup>7</sup> Moreover,

the framework or narrative that supplies the intended context for his meaning comes not from popular culture, but from the Bible. Deep-structure differences from Stoicism are evident at every turn.

For instance, Paul declares that “from one...[God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth” (v. 26) and that “we are God’s offspring” (v. 29). Taken apart from their biblical framework, these statements are sufficiently vague to win the assent of any Stoic-minded listener (and let us remember how far-reaching Stoic influence was in the first century). But some critical differences emerge upon elaboration. For Paul, the unity of the human race arises out of their common descent from the one *man*, Adam, who received from the Creator the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27-28) that is the quality of *reflecting* (rather than replicating) the Creator, and who passed this image on subsequently to his descendants (see Genesis 5:3). Now for the Stoics, the unity of the human race owes to their common origin from God as well. But the Stoics explain these origins quite differently: common origin is grounded not in common descent from one man, but common descent from the *stars*, the divine heavenly bodies, collectively comprising God (or Zeus or whatever divine name you like), of which the soul of each person constitutes a fragment. For the Stoics, then, all are indeed “sprung from the same stock”: God is both the father of all and is by nature *in* all, being *intrinsic* to human nature.

This difference in human origins naturally introduces further points of divergence. When Paul says that God is “not far from each one of us” (v. 27), and that in God “we live and move and have our being” (v. 28), can he conceivably mean, with the Stoics, that each person contains a fragment of God within, that indeed people live and move by that divine power that is *intrinsic* to their very constitution as

human beings? In a word, no. Paul, like any faithful Jew (or Christian) of his day, knows there is a fundamental distinction in being between the created order and the Creator himself. God is “not far” from people, then, not because they have “a piece of God,” but because he cares for them (Psalm 145:18) and has made himself known to them (Jeremiah 23:23);

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people “live and move in him,” not because they “contain” God, but because God supplies to them the breath of life (Isaiah 42:5) and all that they need (Psalm 23).

The Stoic-minded person also might have agreed that God, as Paul says, permitted humanity “the times of human ignorance” (v. 30). But here Paul’s meaning is in a completely different key. According to Seneca, a Stoic contemporary of Paul, human beings were born with the “seeds of reason,” but without the possession of reason itself. Thus, children, like animals, are unreasoning, and not capable of either virtue or vice (for these traits require reason and intentionality); children live in a temporary stage of ignorance.<sup>8</sup> While there may be a place in Paul’s thought for something in this vein, his claim here goes in a completely different direction. His meaning rather concerns the Jewish understanding of the *movement of history* under God’s divine providence.

In fact, it is precisely at this point in the speech that Paul begins to change course. Having enjoyed an easy agreement until now, he begins veering away from his audience in verse 30, and by verse 31 he is rowing against the current. Paul introduces a thoroughly Jewish understanding of time as linear: it has a beginning and will have an end. Somewhere in the middle, at the appointed moment, God has started the clock on the final stretch: the end has begun, judgment is at hand, and history is coming to its final, unrepeatable goal. The Greek view of time, by contrast, is cyclical. In its Stoic inflection, the universe has neither beginning nor end, but continues eternally and uniformly through its natural cycles. When the cycle completes itself, the universe will find itself exactly where it was when the cycle began.

Certainly this different understanding of time puts Paul’s claim that God “allotted the times of their existence” (NRSV) or “determined their appointed seasons [or cycles?]” (ASV) into a new perspective (17:26). But more importantly, it introduces into the narrative a whole stage in “history” that had no place in the Greek sequence of thought, and right at the climactic moment in Paul’s speech. Popular Greek thinking left room, at most, for a final judgment according to works.<sup>9</sup> But Paul has much more than this in view: there will be an *appointed* day of judgment (cf. Isaiah 2:12; Amos 5:18) for all of creation at once, and a divinely-appointed *agent* of judgment (Daniel 7:13-14) who was *resurrected* from the dead. The Greeks believed in none of these things, least of all resurrection. The tragedian Aeschylus (c. 525-436 BC) is representative: “Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, *there is no resurrection.*”<sup>10</sup> Among the Romans, many believed in total annihilation, as is indicated by the epitaph, “I was not, I was, I am not, I care not,” which was used so widely that it could be indicated

simply by its Latin abbreviation, n.f.f.n.s.n.c.<sup>11</sup> Even the Stoics, who in Paul's day acknowledged the immortality of the soul, seem to have believed that the individual "lost perception" at death, when the soul "returned to the stars, whence it came."



F. F. Bruce once observed that Paul's Areopagus speech "begins with God the creator of all and ends with God the judge of all."<sup>12</sup> For this reason, the Epicureans among the audience would have objected from the beginning, but most of the audience not until the end. Yet, why would the Apostle strike such a controversial chord in the closing remarks, after stringing the audience along with such abundant signs of agreement up until this point? James Dunn suggests: "It is almost as though [Paul] wanted to set in the sharpest possible contrast the fundamental claim of Christianity and the mocking rejection of the Athenian sophisticates."<sup>13</sup>

There are many lessons in this. For one, it demonstrates that while Paul was happy to use the words and ideas of the surrounding culture as a point of departure, he was also unwilling to keep essential points of contrast concealed, despite knowing full well the potential consequences of revealing them. The audience response to his approach was mixed at best — "some scoffed; but others said 'We will hear you again about this'" while "some joined him and became believers" (17:32, 34). To the extent that this response constitutes a "failure,"<sup>14</sup> it presents us with a kind of failure that we could afford to emulate more often.

Despite its ever-changing garb, underneath, Christianity presents an uncompromising counter-narrative, a benchmark against which all other

narratives might be measured and critiqued. Paul was a master of adaptation — in his own words, he became "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22) — but he was hardly one to roll over for antithetical viewpoints. As the Church faces its own "Athenians" today, Paul continues to offer himself as an example of one who knows when to make use of culture, and when to speak against it.

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**NOTES**

1 Paul Copan, and Kenneth D. Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas: Paul's Mars Hill Experience for our Pluralistic World* (Downers, Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 11, 14-15.

2 For commendation of this practice by ancient orators, see Cicero, *De Oratore* (On the Orator) 1.119-122, and Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (Institutes of Oratory), 4.1.8. Examples are Virgil, *Eclogues* (Poems) 6.3 f.; Propertius 3.3; Horace, *Carmina* (Odes) 4.15.1 ff.; and Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* (Orations) 12.10, 15; 32.1-2.

3 Chaïm Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 477.

4 Copan and Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas*, 16.

5 "The metanarrative of *Seinfeld*," Thompson suggests, "which will live for many years in syndicated form, will continue to communicate a generation's commitment to the satisfaction of the self." In James W. Thompson, *Preaching like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 10.

6 Again, see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*.

7 For examples, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries Series (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 230-237.

8 See Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (Moral Letters to Lucilius) 118.14; 121.15; and 124.9-12.

9 See, for example, the *The Downward Journey* or *The Tyrant*, by Lucian of Samosata (c. 120-190).

10 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 6.478-479.

11 For the phrase *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*.

12 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 335.

13 James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 237.

14 James Thompson (*Preaching like Paul*, 48) points out that Acts tells us a lot about Paul's preaching failures.

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