

## Acts 17:22-34 Paul's Address to the Areopagus

In researching this paper, I have seen that Paul's address to the Areopagus is considered the premier Scriptural text for understanding God's approach to apologetics. In this analysis I will first look at how Paul was "always ready" to defend the gospel and what his attitude was in front of the Areopagus. This will be followed by his address and the Areopagus' response. The Conclusion will include a summary of the presuppositional points brought out in this passage of Scripture.

It is clear from Acts 17 alone that Paul was "always ready" (1 Pet 3:15, Acts 17:19) to defend the gospel. Acts 17 covers Paul in three different cities explaining and defending the gospel. He knew his mission well (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8) and was usually found "reasoning in the synagogue" (Acts 17:17) for the sake of his Lord, Jesus Christ. Therefore, it was no surprise that Paul "went with them to Areopagus" (Acts 17:19) to explain this "new teaching."

Paul began his address with a respectful attitude. His greeting, "men of Athens," (V.22) set a tone of respect that continued throughout the address. When the sneering began, Paul simply left. This response is consistent with Peter's exhortation that our defense of the gospel be "with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15). The "reverence" in 1 Peter 3:15 is better translated "fear" and is toward God and not toward men. So it was with gentleness toward men and fear towards God that Paul began his address. Getting these men to hear the gospel was an infinitely higher goal than ridiculing them for all of their idols (especially when Paul

knew he was once like them per Titus 3:3).

Paul began the body of the address by proclaiming the existence of God. Paul established their religiosity by calling on the facts of Romans 1:19-23 in saying “I observe that you are very religious in all respects” (Acts 17:22). Then he got right to the point of his invitation before the Areopagus as he focused their attention on the altar to the unknown god (Acts 17:23). Paul knew the answer to the question “can man know the unknown God?” This is seen when he reminded the Galatians about the time when they knew other gods and the true God was unknown to them (Gal 4:8). So, there was no problem moving forward with his speech focused on the unknown god! Focusing on the unknown god got right to the point of the weakest part of their epistemology. They had “unknown” gods but also had enough knowledge to know they existed! I believe Paul knew that they had followed the downward spiral from revelation (natural) of God (Rom 1:19-20) to rejection of God (Rom 1:21) to righteousness of self (Rom 1:22) to religion of the creature (Rom 1:23). Therefore, Paul knew they were in a state of culpable ignorance per Romans 1 and had now established a reference point within their worldview to call them to repentance (Acts 17:30).

Paul continued, “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” (V.23). Calling on the established point of their ignorance (which he will keep stressing and comparing to God’s revelation of Himself), Paul labeled his next move – he was going to proclaim God to them. Paul was about to proclaim who God is. He was faithful to His God and used God’s word as His starting point, i.e. as his authority. Paul first established Christianity as the only

reasonable worldview.

In Acts 17:24-28 Paul proclaimed the Person of God – who God is and what God is. In this section Paul quoted the Old Testament almost directly, i.e., using much Old Testament language. In these five verses Paul proclaimed God as the Creator, the Lord, the self-existent and absolute Being, the Giver, the Determiner, and the findable God! All of these proclamations not only establish the knowledge of who God is but also establish the Athenian's accountability in V.27. Each of the following references to a proclamation is accompanied by a representative list of Old Testament verses that establish that Paul was entirely Scripture-based in his presentation. First, God is the Creator: "who made the world and all things in it" (Acts 17:24a; Ps. 33:6-7, 146:6; Jer. 10:10-14; Zech. 12:1). Second, God is the Lord: "since He is Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24b; Gen 14:19; Ps 24:1; Is 40:12-28). Third, God is the self-existent and absolute Being (does not need His creation): "does not dwell in temples made with hands nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything" (Acts 17:24c-25; 1 Kg. 8:27; Is. 66:1; Jer 32:17). Fourth, God is the Giver of all: "gives to all people life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:25b; Ps. 104:14-24, Is. 42:5). Fifth, God is the Determiner: "and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26; Ps. 31:15; Dan. 2:36-45; Is. 10:12-15). Sixth, God is the "findable" God: "that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27; Jer. 29:13; Ps. 145:18-19). God creates, gives, and determines so that men would "see" God in all of the previously mentioned revelation. Creation was designed to draw

men to Him. Paul structured Acts 17:24-28 into a single sentence that reads “The God who made...that they would...” The word “that” in V.27 begins a purpose clause. God’s purpose is that men “would seek God,” “grope,” and “find Him” (Acts 17:27). The purpose clause also establishes man’s accountability before God. The clause structure implies that it would be unlikely that men would seek God (Henry Alvord, The Greek New Testament, Vol. 2, pg. 198). That is consistent with Rom 3:11-12. God wants man to see Him in creation so that they seek Him, grope for Him and, when they’ve found Him, listen to God’s revealed message, and thereby be saved. Unfortunately, Paul’s sentence structure is implying that men won’t be likely to do this.

V.28 illustrates V.27. In ignorance their own poets have shown that God is creator and is knowable. In fact, Epimenides poem began “...by whatever name He is.” He was faithful to Rom 1:19-20! Paul phrased V.27-28 so that he emphasized God’s sovereignty and man’s dependence. His purpose was to show that the pagans were willing to admit their suppression by acknowledging the existence of God but were not willing to acknowledge who He was and give Him the honor due (Rom 1:21-22). Paul showed them that they were guilty of knowing God and rejecting Him (per Rom 1:19-21). This was not intended to be a point of contact to show that the Athenians were responding properly to God’s revelation. As Greg Bahnsen said, “Paul demonstrated that even in their abuse of the truth pagans cannot avoid the truth of God; they must first *have* it in order that they might then distort it.”(Greg Bahnsen, Always Ready, pg. 262). Their process of theological twisting does not remove their natural knowledge of God!

In V.29 Paul pointed out the obvious, that is, if God created us (as their poets just testified) then He is greater than us! This destroys their whole idolatrous system. Verse 29 is most likely based on Is 40:18-20 – God cannot even be compared or likened to an idol, and you're not going to find Him in a temple (V.24). If they were going to know the “unknown god” then they needed to seek and grope for Him. Fortunately for the “groper,” God is not far (V.27)! Paul wanted these men to think about who this God is and then to seek Him. At this point Paul had established that, as the self-existent Creator and Lord, God is the cause of everything we know and see. Hebrews 3:4 says, “For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.”

In these few verses (V.24-29) Paul has laid down the essential facts of the Christian Philosophy of Being, the Doctrine of God, the Doctrine of Creation, and the Doctrine of Man. Derived from Paul's presentation of these doctrines is his epistemology (which he uses throughout the entire address). At this point the “unknown” god is now Paul's God and it is clear that Paul has proclaimed his God as the only God (which makes for a lot of useless statues in Athens!). Having established these doctrines, Paul moved on to proclaim the message of God (V.30-31) and thus present the essential facts of the Doctrine of Christ and the basis for the Doctrine of Salvation. Since there is a purpose behind everything God does, it is important to answer the question “what does God want us to know and do?” Paul has established their ignorance and accountability, so that, now knowing who God is, they are responsible to God's command to repent (V.30)! The “now known” God, whom Paul has established as the ultimate being, has appointed Jesus Christ as

Judge. His “furnished proof” of Christ’s qualifications was God’s act of raising Him from the dead. Paul’s call for repentance is based on the presupposed Lordship of Jesus Christ, who will “judge the world in righteous” for God (V.31). Paul is very clear that God has a specific, already set the day on which He will judge. Judgment is the key focus of this verse, not the resurrection. That is just supporting evidence. Paul has established their accountability and is now closing with inevitable judgment if they do not repent. In addition, with their ignorance established and their ignorance-based worldview challenged point-by-point by the revealed truth of God, if they do not repent they prove they love their foolishness more than the truth!

The Areopagus’ response came immediately after hearing of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (V. 32). The response was two-fold: some rejected (V.32) the message and some were regenerated (V.34). Sneering was the only “appropriate” negative response. There was no reasonable negative response at this point since Paul had shut their mouths because of their own ignorance in V.23. It is obvious that Paul didn’t complete his message in the way that we would be most accustomed - by declaring the free gift of salvation. However, the message is complete because the rejecters could go no further. They had rejected this Christian worldview – this antithesis of their worldview. Paul had proclaimed Christ as the judge of men. No more needed to be said. Paul had also given them the necessary next steps in V.27. They needed to go back to V.24 and accept who God says He is before they could accept His message. To accept who God says He is, they would have to abandon their worldview and accept the Christian worldview. Then and only then could they move on, with understanding, to the message of God in Jesus Christ. They needed

to seek and grope for God!

Having now looked at the passage verse-by-verse, I want to summarize the major apologetical aspects of this passage. First, Paul's point of contact with the Athenians was the knowledge that God gave them in natural revelation. He did an internal analysis of their system and established their supposed ignorance which was really based on knowledge from God. Through natural revelation they knew an "unknown" god actually existed. Paul used their language to contact them but used his God to end their ignorance. He even used their poets as a witness against them! Paul began with natural revelation, i.e. creation, but added the special revelation that God was the Creator of all things. He used a wider philosophical "picture" than he would have with a more theological Jewish audience. Paul's point of contact was based on knowing that every man, deep within the suppressed recesses of his mind, knows that he is created by God and hence, responsible to God.

Second, Paul presupposed God without justification, i.e. completely apriori, throughout the whole address. He presented God as the ultimate answer to man's ultimate questions. He did this by telling them who God is and what God expects from His creation. That is, God is the source, sustainer, and sovereign of all things, and God expects men to repent.

Third, all of Paul's authority was from God as revealed in Scripture. Paul kept his epistemology pure! God's authority controlled every aspect of his address. He never reasoned autonomously. Paul set his whole worldview on the presupposition of God. He held the Athenian worldview in complete dependence on God, never

granting it any basis in truth. With God as his authority, Paul proclaimed and declared God rather than trying to reason from their worldview up to God. He reasoned from theism to theism. Since Paul reasoned entirely from a Scriptural basis, these men could go, seek, and find God in Scripture.

Fourth, Paul held his worldview in complete antithetical contrast to the Athenian worldview. He forced a collision of worldviews! No common ground was built beyond their knowledge of God from Rom. 1:19-21. In fact, every point he made was a challenge to their beliefs as Greg Bahnsen has shown (Greg Bahnsen, Always Ready, pg. 260). Bahnsen said,

And when you look at what Paul said to the Areopagus council, if you have any knowledge of ancient Greek philosophy (especially that of the Stoics and Epicureans) you will notice that virtually everything Paul said stands over against the philosophical themes and premises of these schools of thought. (Greg Bahnsen, "At War With the Word: The Necessity of Biblical Antithesis," in *CONTRA MUNDUM*<sup>1</sup>, pg.16 of 25)

This also can be seen in that he never reasoned within their worldview. By holding their worldview in antithesis and being presuppositional, Paul went after the destruction of their whole system at once. As such the two extreme responses were not unexpected. With this approach, men would either reject or "regenerate"! Paul's conclusion of repentance and judgment validated by the resurrection didn't fit anywhere in their worldview, i.e. it looked foolish to them! The bottom line here is that Paul was never neutral and was always theistically presuppositional!

Fifth, Paul did not argue evidences. His entire address was a proclamation.

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<sup>1</sup> This publication was referenced as the source of the article and had a website reference. The link to the site did not work. The Internet address for the article as I referenced it is:

For example, he never tried to establish any part of his position historically. This is not to say that there isn't a place for the Christian to provide evidence. It does point out that it is necessary to be presuppositional and not necessary to be evidential!

Sixth, Paul had a goal. Paul was faithful to God and called them to repentance. This call was not an isolated point made at the end of his address. Paul had established the Athenian's knowledge of the truth of God in natural revelation and hence, established their accountability to God. Paul then presented the special revelation to lead them on the path to salvation. And, though he didn't complete what we would call a "full gospel presentation," he not only left them with enough to "seek" God but also left them with enough to further condemn them if they remained unregenerate. Paul's pinnacle proclamation was the need to repent now in light of the coming judgment through the risen Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul's address parallels Romans 1 by covering natural revelation, man's rejection, and God's future judgment.

Finally, in his address to the Areopagus, Paul witnessed the truth of Christianity using biblical rational thinking and reason. He thereby established Christianity as the only reasonable worldview while he proclaimed the heart of God's revealed message to men. The Areopagus address concluded with Paul walking away but God stayed behind so that by sheer mercy and grace the "sneerers" would take another breath.