Contextualized Gospel Witness: Paul's Areopagus Speech in Acts 17:16–34 As a Model for Cultural Engagement

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Abstract

Paul's address at the Areopagus in Acts 17:16–34 is one of the most important missionary speeches in the New Testament. Some scholars view the discourse as a paradigmatic example of contextualized gospel proclamation among educated pagans, while others regard it as an unsuccessful or overly accommodating engagement with Greek philosophy. This paper argues that Luke presents Paul's Athenian speech as a masterful example of culturally aware evangelism that faithfully communicates the gospel while critically engaging the surrounding worldview. By carefully attending to the historical, literary, and theological contexts of the passage, the study demonstrates that Paul's strategy neither compromises the distinctiveness of Christian revelation nor dismisses the cultural insights of his audience. A section-by-section exposition of Acts 17:16–34 shows how Paul observes the religious culture of Athens, establishes points of contact with Stoic and Epicurean thought, and then challenges the inadequacy of pagan conceptions of God. Paul proclaims the Creator as sovereign, transcendent, and self-sufficient, while also affirming God's immanence and providential rule over humanity. By appealing to elements of Greek poetry and philosophy, Paul acknowledges partial insights within pagan culture while exposing the folly of idolatry and calling his audience to repentance. The climactic focus of the speech is the universal call to repentance grounded in God's coming judgment through the risen Jesus Christ. Luke portrays varied responses to this proclamation—mockery, curiosity, and genuine belief—illustrating the typical reception to gospel witness. Ultimately, the study concludes that Paul's Areopagus speech provides an enduring biblical model for Christian engagement with culture: believers must thoughtfully understand their cultural context, affirm truths that reflect the image of God within human culture, confront idolatrous assumptions, and faithfully proclaim the risen Christ as Lord and Judge.

Keywords: Acts 17, Contextualization, Gospel and Cultural Engagement, Areopagus and Paul

Introduction

The Athenian discourse in Acts 17:16–34 has received considerable interest, with some lauding it as a definitive model for engaging sophisticated pagans. In contrast, others view it as a capitulation to contemporary culture. To illustrate the former, Adolph Deissmann called it "the greatest missionary document in the New Testament."[1] However, others give it little more than a glowing appraisal. Daryl Charles notes that several scholars have viewed it as either 'an unrealistic experiment' or evidence of his disillusionment in ministry.[2] King suggests that the poor response to the speech was evidence of his *under-contextualization,* meaning it did not address the precise concerns of his audience.[3] The way this discourse is viewed – either as a failure or as a success – largely determines how we interpret the text.[4] Does Paul yield to the curiosity and the endless philosophical musings of the Athenians, thus losing his Christian theological distinctiveness, or does he masterfully communicate the gospel in culturally sensitive ways?

Broadly, Paul's speeches can be divided into four major categories: (1) A mission speech to Jews at Pisidian Antioch (13:16–41); (2) Mission speeches to Gentiles at Lystra & Athens (14:15–17; 17:16–34); (3) The farewell address to Ephesian elders at Miletus (20:18–25); and (4) Defense speeches before Jews and Romans (22:1–21; 23:1–6; 24:10–21; 25:2–11; 26:2–29; 28:17–28).[5] While there are obvious parallels between the two mission speeches to Gentiles, our interest will be particularly on the Athenian speech (17:16–34).

Many scholars doubt that Paul actually wrote this speech.[6] Arguing for a Lukan construction, commentator Charles K Barrett says: "Luke was not in a position to recount something that he had himself heard but used what had come to be the accepted Christian approach to Gentiles."[7] This argument seems to be rooted in the apparent dissonance between Acts 17 and Romans 1. While Acts 17:16–34, for example, entertains the possibility that Gentiles would seek after God and repent, Romans 1:18–32 portrays the world as without hope because of its stubborn and culpable ignorance of God.[8] These issues can be resolved by recognizing that the Athenian

[1] Adolph Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient Near East* (New York, NY: H Doran, 1927), 384.
[2] J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16–34)" *Trinity Journal* 16, no. 3 (1995): 47–62.
[3] Fergus J. King, "A Failure to Launch? Paul and the Philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:16–34)," *Australian Biblical Review* 69 (2021): 63–80.
[4] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 48.
[5] Walter Hansen, "The Preaching and Defense of Paul," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 296–297.
[6] See for instance, Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 527–531, Luke Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Liturgical Press, 1992), 328; and M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 62–63.
[7] In David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: Eerdmans, 2009), 486.
[8] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 486–487.

discourse was a brief mission speech in a specific situation. In contrast, Romans 1:18–32 was part of a larger argument to Christians about how the gospel addresses humanity's plight.[9] Other objections, such as the historicity of the altar 'to the unknown god,' will be discussed in greater detail in the section-by-section analysis.

Having briefly dealt with the aforementioned matters, we are now ready to make some general comments on Luke's intent for the speech, sparing a detailed argument for the section-by-section analysis. It seems fair to view Paul's Athenian speech not as a capitulation to contemporary culture, but as a masterful communication of the gospel to the 'educated pagans,' for several reasons. A closer look at the speech indicates that Paul finds points of connection with Greek philosophies, while challenging those ideas that fail to attain the truth about God. An example may suffice at this point. Paul seems to agree (at least in part) with a portion of Aratus's poem Phaenomena,[10] citing a portion of it, "for we are indeed his offspring" (v. 28b). Although said in honor of Zeus, he acknowledges that it bears some truth about the relationship between human beings and God, a shared kinship. He builds on this, arguing against idolatry (v. 29). As we will see, this pattern will hold throughout the speech. Jipp says this about the gospel:

> On the one hand, the gospel divinizes no culture or language; it critiques idolatry and polytheism. It calls into question all kinds of life patterns that do not produce human flourishing in accordance with the life and pattern of Jesus. On the other hand, the transmission of the gospel in new cultural frontiers invariably shows significant levels of continuity with the local culture.[11]

Thus, Paul masterfully demonstrates that effective gospel witness seeks both to *affirm* points of cultural convergence with the Scriptures and *to confront points of cultural divergence*. Luke also gives us a clue as to his own evaluation of the speech. The verb καταγγέλλω (I proclaim) is the same word he uses earlier to describe Paul's evangelism in other contexts (13:5, 38; 15:36; 16:17, 21; 17:3, 13; 26:23). He therefore wants us to see Paul's activity in Athens as his regular task of evangelism.

This speech offers an invaluable guide for Christians living in a pluralistic society. In light of ongoing scholarly debate over whether the speech represents faithful and culturally sensitive gospel witness within such an environment or an over-accommodation to Greek philosophy, the study aims to demonstrate that Luke presents Paul's discourse as contextual evangelism that both engages and critiques the surrounding culture. The significance of the study

[9] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 487.
[10] Douglas Kidd, ed. and trans., *Aratus: Phaenomena* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.
[11] Joshua Jipp, "Does Paul Translate the Gospel in Acts 17:22–31? A Critical Engagement with C Kavin Rowe's One True Life," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45, no. 4 (2018): 361–376.

lies in its contribution to contemporary discussions on contextualization, apologetics, and Christian mission, particularly showing that effective witness requires cultural intelligence and theological fidelity, affirming truths within human culture while confronting idolatrous or anti-biblical presuppositions and conclusions.

Historical context

Luke describes the narrative context framing the speech (vv. 16–21). The Romans divided their empire into provinces, each ruled by a senator or an equestrian from a capital city. Athens, one of the leading cities of Achaia province (whose capital was Corinth), had been the capital of an empire that made the classical era of the fifth century possible.[12] Soon after, however, it was destroyed by its rival, Sparta. Afterward, it was conquered by Macedonia in the third century and again by the Romans in the second century. In light of its history, "the Romans recognized Athens as a free and allied city and allowed it to continue its institutions and self-governance."[13] Paul visited Athens on his second missionary journey (AD 49–52), more than a decade after his conversion.[14] He entered Europe having received the 'Macedonian call' at the Aegean port city of Troas (Acts 16:9), and he and his companions sailed west to the district of Macedonia, through Philippi (16:11–40), Thessalonica (17:1–9), Berea (17:10–15), and finally south to Athens.

Athens was widely regarded as the intellectual center of the ancient world, the great "university" city, indeed one of the three "university" cities, along with Tarsus, his native home, and Alexandria.[15] Moreover, it was known as the major banking center of the ancient world.[16] In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, "its contributions in sculpture, literature, philosophy, and oratory … were unparalleled in the ancient world."[17] At the time Paul was preaching, however, it was politically a shadow of its former self, as in the days of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.[18] Yet Cicero, commenting on it one hundred years earlier, said Athens still enjoyed "such renown that the now shattered and weakened name of Greece is supported by the reputation of the city."[19] In summary, Athens was an intellectual, commercial, cultural, and tourist center. For Luke, therefore, it represented "the height of pagan culture". [20]

[12] Donald A. Hagner, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 245.
[13] James S Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (IVP Academic, 1999), 259–261.
[14] Don Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2015), 2255.
[15] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 47.
[16] Ibid., 49, n.13
[17] Ibid., 50
[18] Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 2256.
[19] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 50.
[20] Ibid., 51.

Despite this rich heritage, the Athens Paul preached in lacked what was common in the classical era: a serious intellectual pursuit, and, on the religious plane, there was no palpable evidence of knowledge of the Old Testament.[21] This accounts for the way in which Paul goes about his task of witnessing, and why the Athenians accused him of being "a preacher of foreign divinities" (Acts 17:18). One ancient document purported that the Greek god Poseidon (god of the sea) sued Ares (the god of war) for the murder of his son, and triumphed in the presence of other gods, and consequently that hill was named Ares. Thus, the Council of the Areopagus, which met on Ares' hill (the Roman equivalent, Mars' hill), was often viewed by Athenians as the fountainhead of justice and reason.[22]

Literary Context

Paul's Athenian speech (17:16–34) fits within the larger framework of his second missionary journey (15:36–18:22). Luke shows Paul's pastoral heartbeat when he urges Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are" (15:36, ESV). This typified the apostle's ministry for the rest of his life. He spoke of his daily concern for the churches (2 Cor 11:28–29), his desire being so he could "strengthen the churches" (Acts 18:23). A sharp dispute with Barnabas led them to go their separate ways (Acts 15:37–41), with Barnabas sailing south towards Cyprus and Paul heading north towards Syria and Cilicia. At Derbe in Galatia, he was joined by Timothy (16:1–6) and in Troas by Luke (16:10), where he received the 'Macedonian call' that took them into Europe.

Luke slows his narrative to recount Paul's ministry and imprisonment at Philippi (Acts 16:16–40), with the firstfruits of his ministry in Europe being a wealthy Gentile woman named Lydia (16:14–15). Paul and his companions then made their way into another major city in Macedonia, Thessalonica. However, just as in Pisidian Antioch (13:45), Iconium (14:2), and Lystra (14:19), opposition arose from angry Jews jealous of his relatively successful ministry, even among influential Gentiles (17:1–9). This forced him to flee to Berea, about forty-five miles west of Thessalonica. The notable Bereans received the word with gladness, but a report of this reached Thessalonica, prompting the same angry mob to descend on Berea to force them out as well. This evacuation by some church members is what led Paul to Athens (17:10–15).

Paul's ministry at Athens (17:16–34) appears, therefore, to have been unplanned, but not in God's sovereign scheme. After witnessing in Athens, he went to Achaia's capital, Corinth,

[21] Ibid., 51.
[22] Ibid., 52.

where he camped for about a year and a half (18:1–17), the longest time he spent in one place besides Ephesus, where he spent three years (see Acts 19).

As previously mentioned, Luke records three of Paul's main speeches in Acts: a mission speech to Jews at Pisidian Antioch (13:16–41), another to pagan Gentiles in Athens (17:22–31), and the only one to a Christian audience, the elders of the Ephesian church (20:18–25). This is hardly coincidental. Several scholars agree that Luke intends these speeches to be models of how early Christians evangelized and, therefore, of how his audience ought to carry on the gospel witness.[23] The Athenian speech particularly serves as a model for reaching cultured, Gentile folks among whom we live today.

Section-by-Section Analysis

The following is an outline of the passage as we go about a section-by-section analysis:

(i) Backdrop of the speech (vv. 16–21)

(ii) Paul's observations of the Athenian culture (vv. 22–23)

(iii) A Sovereign and transcendent God (vv. 24–25)

(iv) Man, a dependent creature to an immanent God (vv. 26–29)

(v) A call to repentance. (vv. 30–31)

(vi) Responses to Paul's preaching (vv. 32–34)

Backdrop of the Speech (vv. 16–21)

In verse 16, Luke takes pains to develop the setting of Paul's address. He records that as Paul waited for Silas and Timothy, "his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (v.16). Far from being impressed with the magnificence around him or titillated with the philosophical musings currently in vogue (cf. v. 21), he was "provoked" ("greatly distressed, NIV) at the gross idolatry.[24] In somewhat hyperbolic fashion, Calvin remarks that even though the entire ancient world was full of idols, "Satan had made the city of Athens more mad than any other

[23] See for instance, Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 72; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 331–46; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 510–33; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2587–2645; David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 499–517; I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 280–89.

[24] The Greek adjective κατείδωλον which occurs only here in the entire NT can be translated 'a city submerged in idols' or 'overgrown with idols.' John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church and the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 278; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, *Commentary on Acts XV–XXVIII*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1998), 827–828.

city."[25] The Greek imperfect verb παρωξύνετο ("provoked") recalls the very same anger that God bore for Israel's idols (Deut 9:7, 18, 22; Ps 106:28–29; Isa 65:2–3; Hos 8:5) and a similar zeal for his glory (Exod 20:4; 34:14; Isa 42:8).[26]

Verse 17 details his response. "So he reasoned in the synagogues with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there" (ESV). Driven by a zeal for God's glory, Paul could only remain silent for so long, and soon his righteous indignation burst forth in evangelistic fervor.[27] The verb διελέγετο ("he conversed" or "he reasoned," lit., "he said thoroughly by way of argument") suggests a discourse rather than a monologue. This he did in the synagogues with those who quite likely shared his distress about idolatry, and in the *agora*, an open space designed to be the center of public life. Much like the 'bazaars' of modern-day Oriental towns, it was a commercial center and a meeting place for various assemblies. Typically, it was surrounded by temples, colonnades, public buildings, and numerous statues, often paved with stones and shaded by trees.[28] This witness in the *agora*, we are told, took place "every day," a break from his custom in the synagogues of speaking only on Sabbath days (e.g., 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2).

According to verse 18, a few Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took note of Paul and "began to debate with him" (NIV). Named after their founder, Epicurus (341–270 BC), Epicureans held a materialistic worldview and believed that pleasure was the ultimate good in life, attainable through self-denial, modest living, and knowledge of the world.[29] They also believed in the existence of many gods, but they were scarcely involved in the affairs of man, and thus human life was left to chance.[30] This deistic belief led to a denial of divine retribution and a distaste for "popular religion with its localizing of gods in many temples and its concern to supply their needs (cf. vv. 24–25)."[31] Furthermore, to them, death meant nothing, making the concept of the resurrection an even greater perplexity and likely to be rejected *a priori*.[32]

[25] "Acts 17 Calvin's Commentaries," accessed April 11, 2026, https://biblehub.com/calvin/acts/17.htm.
[26] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 489.
[27] Calvin ventures to say that this holy zeal must characterize all Christian witness (Ps. 69:9; 2 Pet. 2:8; 2 Cor. 11:2), and rather than being discouraged about the prevalence of evil, believers should be "pricked forward with a (sharper) prick to maintain godliness."
[28] Herbert Lockyer, ed., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary: An Authoritative One-Volume Reference Work on the Bible, with Full Color Illustrations* (Nelson, 1986), 879.
[29] Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible,* 2256.
[30] "Acts 17 Calvin's Commentaries," accessed March 11, 2026, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/acts/17.htm.
[31] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 490.
[32] King, "A Failure to Launch?" 73.

Stoics took their name from the *stoa, where they often met with their founder, Zeno (340–265* BC).[33] They were pantheistic in their outlook, believing in a union between man and the divine.[34] Reason and discipline were their highest ideals, as they believed that the divine essence, *logos,* gave birth to the universe.[35] They also believed that all races originated from one man.[36] The Epicureans and Stoics were far from cordial in their reception of Paul. The term ὁ σπερμολόγος ("the babbler," or lit. "seed-picker" or a "scavenger") was a derogatory term that referred to one who picked ideas here and there into an incoherent whole, and thus a mere plagiarist.[37] It referred to someone who attempted to pass as a philosopher.[38] Worthy of note is that, even to the sophisticated pagan, Paul's ultimate message was to preach Jesus and the resurrection, a subject he will return to at the climax of his sermon (vv. 30–31).[39]

Even with that note of condescension, they took him to the Areopagus with a desire to have his preaching of "foreign divinities" (v. 18) expounded. The Greek clause ἐπὶ τὸν Ἄρειον ("into the Areopagus") could be understood as referring to the place, i.e., Mar's Hill (hence "to the Areopagus," so ESV, NRSV), or the court that met there (hence, "of the Areopagus," so NASB, NIV, RSV). Perhaps the latter is to be preferred, given that v.34 speaks of Dionysius the Areopagite's conversion, indicating a member of the council.[40] The Areopagus was known to have had many functions, represented by different 'commissions.' The educational arm of the Areopagus, the "university commission," attested to by Plutarch, still functioned when Paul visited Athens, and this is very likely the body he addressed.[41] Further, Marshall queries whether (a) this was a formal or informal meeting of the council, and whether it occurred on Mar's Hill or the Stoa Baselios, or (b) this was an informal gathering of the Athenians taking place on the Areopagus hill. He rightly favors the second option, since it does not read like any of the later defense speeches in Acts.[42] Also, Paul addresses the "men of Athens" (v.22), and later Luke tells us that "some men joined him and believed him" (v.34), suggesting that more than members of the Areopagus council were present. However, it appears that this was not a legal defense but an informal inquiry.[43]

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[33] A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 107.
[34] Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible,* 2256.
[35] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 57.
[36] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 490.
[37] David R. Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today,* 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 95.
[38] Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2596.
[39] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 491.
[40] Ibid., 492.
[41] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 52.
[42] I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 285.
[43] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 492–493.

In summary, far from being awed by the magnificence surrounding him, Paul was "provoked" by the gross idolatry masked behind the religious and intellectual curiosity of the Athenians. Consequently, he engaged in dialogue with the Jews in the synagogue and in the agora, the center of public life. He attracted Epicureans with their materialistic and deistic outlook, which holds that the ultimate good is attained through self-denial, modest living, and the pursuit of knowledge. His audience also featured the Stoics, who were pantheistic and valued reason and discipline as their highest ideals. Though initially condescending, they were, however, willing to hear this "babbler" and "preacher of foreign divinities."

Paul's Observation of the Athenian Culture (vv. 22–23)

Paul introduces his speech with ἄνδρες, Ἀθηναῖοι ("men of Athens," v. 22). This mode of address, Daryl notes, is thoroughly Greek and would have made his audience feel at home immediately, thus be willing to lend him an ear.[44] Flemming describes it as the rhetorical strategy of praise (*captatio benevolentiae*–gaining goodwill).[45] The Greek adjective δεισιδαιμονεστέρους ("religious") is ambiguous and could carry either positive ("devout") or negative ("superstitious") connotations. Scholars are unsure whether Paul intended it as an accusation or a compliment. Carson suggests that Paul is intentionally ambiguous as he readies his audience for his address. At the same time, Calvin thinks Paul intended it negatively here, given his reaction to their idolatry (v. 16). Marshall suggests that Paul is commending the Athenians. However, he also sees the possibility of irony given that the cognate noun is used in 25:19 in a somewhat derogatory fashion. Peterson notes that according to Lucian (*De Gymnastica 19*), "attempts to secure the goodwill of the Areopagus court with compliments were discouraged." He suggests that Paul's comments should be understood negatively, as we've already been told of Paul's "distressed" spirit (v. 16). This author views it that Paul is commending the Athenians, for both in the way he begins his speech and the tone he carries throughout it is respectful from the start, with Paul going out of his way to establish some common ground.

The occasion for Paul's address is emphasized with the words διερχόμενος γὰρ καὶ ἀναθεωρῶν τὰ σεβάσματα ὑμῶν ("for as I passed and observed your objects of worship" v. 23). Peterson posits that by Luke's implication, Paul does not immediately evangelize due to his uncertainty about the timing of Silas and Timothy's arrival.[46] While this may be true, it seems to miss the emphasis Luke places on Paul's waiting. It's rather clear that Paul is *intentional* in making observations of the culture he was immersed in. Luke piles up words that

[44] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 54.
[45] Flemming, *Contextualization*, 75.
[46] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 488–489.

describe a man making good of a happy coincidence. Paul "saw*"* (v. 16), "perceived*"* (v. 22), "observed" (v. 23), and "found" (v. 23), suggesting that while he waited, he took time to be thoroughly acquainted with the Athenians' religious culture. Small wonder, his speech reveals someone not alien to his listeners' presuppositions and beliefs.

A specific altar titled "To the unknown God" has not been found anywhere.[47] Pausanias (1.1.4) and Philostratus (*Vit. Apol. 6.3*) attest that there were in Athens "altars of gods both named and unknown." Tertullian (*Ad. Nat. 2.9*) wrote that Paul altered the wording from plural to singular for his address, and commenting on Tit 1:12, Jerome (*PL 26.572-73*) "speaks of 'all the gods,' not the one unknown god."[48] Based on this, some scholars deny that there could have been any such altar that Paul saw. But Marshall rightly notes that if there were more than one altar designated "to an unknown god," then they may very well have been called, 'altars to unknown gods.'[49] Again, such an altar may have been destroyed or become unrecognizable over time[50]. It is 'to the unknown god' that Paul commends his speech, "this I proclaim to you" (v. 23). Marshall sounds a good warning here. Paul could hardly have insinuated that the Athenians were unconsciously worshipping the one true God.[51] More likely, Paul is tapping into their thirst for knowledge as his entry point.

Thus, Paul begins his speech with a rhetorical strategy that demonstrates knowledge of his audience's prevailing worldview. His observation that the Athenians are "religious" is a classic example of cultural intelligence, designed to put them at ease, and reflects a thorough acquaintance with their religious landscape, even to 'an unknown god.'

A Sovereign and transcendent God (vv. 24–25)

Paul now responds to the Athenians' idolatry. He begins by laying down the truth about the one true God who, as yet, remains unknown to them. He does so masterfully, finding touchpoints between Stoic and Epicurean philosophy and using the idioms of the day, while challenging their presuppositions that contradict God's revelation. Marshall quips, "Paul employs language that we would expect a Greek-speaking Jew to use, especially when addressing pagans."[52]

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[47] Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 511.
[48] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 58.
[49] Marshall, *Acts,* 286.
[50] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 494.
[51] Marshall, *Acts,* 486. Contra Pathrapankal. See Joseph Pathrapankal, "From Areopagus to Corinth (Acts 17:22–31; 1 Cor 2:1–5): A Study on the Transition from the Power of Knowledge to the Power of the Spirit," *Mission Studies* 23, no. 1 (2006): 61–80.
[52] Charles frames it this way: "Paul's preaching … wraps universal truth in the language and idiom of the day, culminating in a uniquely Christian expression of biblical revelation, and inviting listeners to a higher metaphysical ground." Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 55.

In verses 24–25, Luke depicts Paul asserting two basic truths about God and lays out their implications: (a) God is the Creator of τὸν κόσμον ("the world")[53] and (b) the Sovereign Lord of it all. This means that he cannot be limited to man's conceptions, nor is he housed in man-made temples or required to be placated through man's worship (vv. 24c–25). The Stoics were known to believe that the gods did not need to be worshipped in temples or altars, a likely consequence of their pantheistic outlook (see, for example, Diogenes, *Lives* 7.33).[54] The gods were viewed as self-sufficient, and therefore the best way to worship them was through reason rather than sacrifice. The Pseudo-Heraclitus bears witness to this as well, "Where is god? Is he shut up in temples? … You ignorant men, don't you know that god is not wrought by hands … and does not have a single enclosure? Rather, the whole world is his temple, decorated with animals, plants, and stars."[55]

Obviously, one cannot miss the pantheistic flavor. Moreover, there is a stark difference between the Stoics' view on creation and that of Paul. While the former might hinge on Platonism, Paul's doctrine of creation is rooted in God's inscripturated self-revelation (Genesis 1–2; Exod 20:11; 1 Kings 8:27–30; Isa 42:5, 66:1–2; also Acts 7:48–50). God is self-sufficient, not needing anything from man, but instead, "he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." Again, the Stoics would have agreed with Paul on this point, as illustrated by Seneca: "God confers on us the greatest and most important favors without any thought of return. He has no need for anything to be conferred, nor could we offer anything to him."[56] Paul's overall point is that God is not dependent on man, but instead, man is utterly dependent on God.

Thus, in this brief introduction to his speech, Paul masterfully affirms and confronts his audience's worldview. He establishes a point of commonality by appealing to the Stoics' pantheism and upholds that the God of the universe needs no temples. However, with the same stroke, he challenges their pantheism by contending that this same God stands as Sovereign over a creation distinct from him.

Man, a Dependent Creature to an Immanent God (vv. 26–29)

Having laid a foundation for describing God's nature, Paul moves from the general to the specific, from the creation of τὸν κόσμον ("the world") to the creation of man. He writes, "And he made from one man every nation of mankind …" (v. 26). There is disagreement on how best to translate πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων as either "every nation of mankind" or "the whole race of mankind." Some scholars suggest that the former carries ethno-geographical connotations, implying that individual

[53] The Greek τὸν κόσμον ("world") is not found in the OT (for there is no Hebrew equivalent), but is employed in Greek-speaking Judaism. Marshall cites Wisdom 9:9; 11:17; 2 Macc. 7:23 as examples.
[54] Joshua Jipp, "Does Paul Translate the Gospel in Acts 17:22–31?" 372–373.
[55] Ibid., 373.
[56] Seneca, *Ben.* 4.9.1

nations originated from Adam, while the latter reflects a Hellenistic belief that all peoples originated from one man. However, as Marshall rightly notes, both ideas are biblical, though the NT seems more concerned with the destiny of all men than with individual nations, as in the OT.[57] The Greeks viewed themselves as racially superior to others (whom they called 'barbarians'), and Paul's claim of a common origin strikes at this anti-biblical attitude.

The introductory phrase "he made from one man every nation" (v. 26a) is followed by two purpose statements explaining the purpose behind God's creation of man, "to live on all the face of the earth" (v. 26b) and "that they should seek God" (v. 27). The first purpose statement sounds eerily familiar with the creation mandate given to Adam and Eve in Gen 1:28 "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over … the earth."[58] God created man for him to inhabit the earth, and to extend his providential care to the world as one made in his image (Gen 1:26). Additionally, God "determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place" (v. 26b). The different climactic seasons may be in view here (as in 14:17, cf. Gen 1:14). Still, perhaps historical times in which nations exist is more appropriate, as indicated by the phrase 'allotted/appointed' times.[59] Peterson concludes that Paul means that, in God's plan, there are specific destinies for both nations and races.[60]

Luke may have intended for us to see Paul's developing argument in these verses as moving from general to specific. Verse 24 appears to be parallel in thought to verse 26, as shown in the table below. It further shows Paul's mastery in communicating biblical truth with cultural sensitivity.

v. 24a "The God who made the world and everything in it," **General**: God as the Creator of the *kosmos*	v. 26 "And he made from one man every nation of mankind." **Specific**: God created the human race through Adam.
v. 24b "being Lord (Sovereign) of heaven and earth," **General**: God's sovereign government over the universe	v. 26 "having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place." **Specific**: His sovereign government is evident in how he guides human history, determining the specific places and ordained times for nations.

However, other than inhabiting God's world and extending his providential care, man's responsibility is to "seek God," as captured in this second purpose statement. Humanity should

[57] I Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 287.
[58] Peterson sees a similarity between Acts 17:26 and the LXX at Gen. 1:29, which may be translated (more literally) "on the face of the whole earth."
[59] Ibid., 497.
[60] Ibid., 498.

"perhaps feel its way toward him and find him, for he is actually not far from each of us" (v. 27). The OT portrays some Gentiles responding favorably to God when they heard how he dealt with his people (see, for instance, Josh 2:1–11; 2 Kgs 5:1–8), but there seems to be no parallel of them seeking God. Peterson resolves this dilemma by noting that the grammar raises some doubt, thereby expressing an objective that may not be realized. [61]

Again, the picture of men groping in search of God in light of his nearness appears to have been present in Stoic philosophy, but it was often said with a spirit of intellectual haughtiness, suggesting that reaching God through man's rational faculties was quite within reach.[62] That Paul would include this idea in his speech is astounding.

Paul's citation "In him we live and move and have our being" (v. 28) is commonly attributed to the sixth-century BC poet Epimenides of Crete (similar words also appear in Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 12.43).[63] The original poem with the exact wording has not been found, so Paul may be quoting the gist of the poem from its original author.[64] These words would have been at home in Stoic thought as expressions of closeness to God. The second citation, "For we are indeed his offspring" (v. 28c), is often attributed to the third-century BC Stoic philosopher-poet Aratus in Phaenomena (the words are also found in Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus). These words were initially attributed to Zeus. Aratus wrote, "In all things, each of us needs Zeus, for we are also his offspring."[65] These citations demonstrate that the apostle was willing "to take over the glimmerings of truth in pagan philosophy about the nature of God."[66] At the same time, he is quick to denounce any notion that God is merely one with his creation; he possesses personhood, being capable of being known and loved.[67]

Finally, Paul draws a conclusion from our oneness with the Creator. By stating, "Being then God's offspring" (v. 29a), he exposes the folly of their thinking, perhaps taking a jab at their appeal to reason. If indeed we are God's offspring, then God cannot be an inanimate object made of precious metal or stone, nor can he be "an image formed by the art and the imagination of man" (v. 29c). In other words, how can personality emerge from what is impersonal?[68] Furthermore, the

[61] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 498.
[62] Marshall, *Acts*, 288.
[63] Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible,* 2256.
[64] Marshall, *Acts,* 289.
[65] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind, 58.
[66] Marshall, *Acts,* 289.
[67] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 500. Peterson further remarks that in view of God's redemptive activity on behalf of Israel (Exod 4:22–23; Hos 11:1; Amos 3:1–2; Rom 9:4), Paul is demonstrating God's commitment to bless 'all nations,' (Gen 12:1–3), and thus he shows concern for all who are made in his own image (Gen 1:26).
[68] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 501.

more dominant New Testament voice attests that only believers are truly the children of God (John 1:12–13; Gal 3:26; 1 John 3:1–2; Rom 8:14–17; Gal 4:4–7; Eph 1:4–5).

To sum up, Paul moves from describing God as the Creator of the universe to the sovereign ruler over humanity. By affirming that God "made from one man every nation of mankind," Paul challenges Greek notions of racial superiority. He emphasizes the common origin and the shared destiny of all people. He then explains God's purpose for humanity: to inhabit and steward the earth in fulfillment of the creation mandate, and to seek God (even though this is not always achieved). Paul further demonstrates remarkable cultural sensitivity by engaging Stoic philosophical ideas and citing pagan poets in support of truths about God's nearness and man's utter dependence on him, while at the same time rejecting pantheistic and idolatrous conceptions of deity. He argues that it is irrational to hold a living and personal God can be represented by lifeless images fashioned by human imagination, since personality cannot arise from the impersonal.

A Call to Repentance (vv. 30–31)

Luke has consistently demonstrated that, for all their intellectual curiosity and prowess, the Athenians have been living in ignorance (cf. vv. 19, 20, 23). But even though, "the times of ignorance God overlooked, (he) now commands all people everywhere to repent" (v. 30). This section forms the zenith of Paul's speech, what he has been aiming for all along, to "preach Jesus and the resurrection" (v. 18). Paul's entire speech fundamentally urges repentance, calling the Greco-Roman world to abandon its former religious traditions and turn to the one true God.[69] He was not seeking to add yet another god to the Athenian pantheon,[70] but to introduce them to the one true God so that they might repent.

The phrase "the times of ignorance" (cf. 14:16; Rom 3:25) refers to the pagans' misunderstanding of God, evidently a pre-Christian era. That God *overlooks* these times points more to his forbearance than his approval.[71] Thus, the gospel now inaugurates a new phase of accountability for all humanity. Hitherto, Paul has sought points of contact between his Christian message and Greek philosophy; now he issues a universal clarion call to repentance that applies to both Jews and Gentiles. "No one is exempt from the call to repent, neither idolaters nor those

[69] Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1990), 218.
[70] Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 248.
[71] Marshall, *Acts*, 290.

who critique them." [72] The offer of forgiveness and reconciliation with God is implicit in this call to repentance, even though it is not explicitly mentioned.

Paul grounds his call to repentance on the reality of future judgment. He directly confronts the Epicureans who scorned the idea of divine retribution, stating that God has indeed "set a day when he will judge the world in righteousness by a man he has appointed" (v. 31, ESV). Elsewhere in Scripture, this divine Judge is identified as Jesus (e.g., 1 Cor 1:8; 1 Thess 5:2, 4). Peterson states that the open-ended phrase "a man whom he has appointed" is Paul's use of a rhetorical technique, as it prompts them to ask, "What sort of man could this be?"[73]

Repentance is therefore the sine qua non response to the gospel because God now holds all humanity to account and has set a day (unknown to humankind) on which he will judge the world, the resurrection being the authentication of that claim. Thus, not only does the resurrection validate Jesus's claims of deity in his earthly ministry, it establishes his right to be the Judge of the world.[74] In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's lengthy treatise on the resurrection establishes it as the most important event upon which other redemptive acts rest. It explains why the resurrection is so pervasive in his writings (Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 6:14; 15:1–58; 2 Cor 4:14; 5:15; 13:4; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:19–20; 2:5–6; Phil 3:10–11, 20–21; Col 2:12; 3:1; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:14–17; 2 Tim 2:8, 18), and specifically in Acts (13:30–37; 23:6; 24:15; 25:19; 26:8, 23). It appears, then, that all of Paul's apologetic discourse is teleological, aimed at preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, grounded in the resurrection (Luke 24:44–49).

Responses to Paul's Preaching (vv. 32 – 34)

In somewhat characteristic fashion, Paul's Athenian distress is met with three kinds of responses: (1) mockery (v. 32), (2) mild interest in further explanation (or simply mere politeness), "we will hear you again about this*"* (3) conversion (v. 34). It is possible that Damaris was an influential figure, perhaps one among the Areopagus council. Even though some were cynical of Paul's message, this climax exemplifies what should characterize Christian witness today, and the kinds of reception we must be prepared for.

Up to this point, the paper has examined Paul's Mars Hill address (Acts 17:16–34) as a model of culturally informed witness in a pluralistic environment. Having observed the gross idolatry beneath the thin veneer of intellectual and religious sophistication (vv. 16–23), Paul is portrayed as deeply distressed, which compels him to engage in daily dialogue in both the

[72] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 501.
[73] Ibid., 502.
[74] Ajith Fernando, *Acts: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 482.

synagogue and the agora, the center of public life (vv. 17–19). Paul is presented as engaging Epicurean and Stoic philosophers with both conviction and sensitivity, demonstrating familiarity with their worldview while refusing to compromise the distinctiveness of biblical revelation.

Paul's speech masterfully balances affirmation and confrontation. By referencing the Athenians' religiosity and the altar "to an unknown god," Paul establishes common ground before proclaiming God as the Sovereign Creator, transcendent yet immanent. Drawing from Stoic concepts and pagan poets (v. 28), he contextualizes his message without surrendering biblical truth, affirming humanity's dependence on God while rejecting pantheism and idolatry. The speech also emphasizes the unity of the human race, God's providential rule over history, and humanity's responsibility to seek God (vv. 26–-27).

The climax of the speech comes in Paul's universal call to repentance, grounded in the certainty of divine judgment and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (vv. 29–31). Therefore, all of Paul's apologetic engagement is ultimately teleological, aimed not merely at philosophical discussion but at calling people to repentance and faith. Luke concludes by highlighting three responses to Paul's preaching—mockery, curiosity, and conversion—thereby presenting the Areopagus speech as both a paradigm for Christian mission and a realistic portrayal of the varied receptions the gospel receives in the world.

Theological Analysis and Application

Paul's Athenian speech provides believers today with an inspired model for gospel proclamation and cultural engagement. The context, as Luke describes it (vv. 16–21), helps us see that the human quest for God, unaided by him (vv. 27–28), fails spectacularly and will invariably lead to gross idolatry, even as it maintains a façade of reverence for God. The speech also demonstrates that although human culture has fallen, it still retains something of the image of God, a fact that should be affirmed. Nevertheless, it does not and cannot attain to God's ultimate design for human life and flourishing (Rom 3:23), and therefore must be confronted with the truth of the gospel. Further, the call to repentance is universal and the answer to sophisticated, modern culture. Just as it did for Paul, it is likely to draw cynicism (17:32) since Scripture itself attests that the message of the gospel is "foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). Yet, for all time, "Christ (is) the wisdom of God and the power of God*"* (1 Cor 1:25, ESV, cf. Rom 1:16).

On a biblical-theological level, it is interesting to note that, following a statement about the nature and character of God (vv. 24–25), Paul begins with the first Adam and ends with Jesus, the last Adam (vv. 26, 31). The idolatry which so characterized the Athenians first found root in Adam's heart, whose pride and desire to be like God actually made him a lot less human and less

like God. Nevertheless, through the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus which Paul preached (vv. 18, 31), this second Adam has made reconciliation possible with those who are still ignorant (v. 30) and in darkness (v. 27). In short, "whereas Adam was the starting point of all humanity, Jesus, the counterpart to Adam, is the culmination of all things, by virtue of having mediated all history." [75]

Conclusion

This study has argued that Paul's Areopagus address in Acts 17:16–34 should be understood not as a capitulation to pagan philosophy, but as a compelling example of contextualized gospel proclamation within a pluralistic and intellectually sophisticated environment. The paper first situated the speech within the historical and literary framework of Paul's second missionary journey and the cultural prestige of first-century Athens, a city renowned for its philosophical traditions, religious diversity, and intellectual influence. It further demonstrated that Luke intentionally presents the Areopagus discourse as paradigmatic for Christian witness among educated Gentiles, thereby offering a model for how believers are to communicate the gospel in culturally complex contexts.

The section-by-section analysis showed that Paul's engagement with Athens was driven not by admiration for Greek culture, but by profound distress over its pervasive idolatry. Consequently, Paul engaged in reasoned dialogue in both the synagogue and the agora, interacting directly with Epicurean and Stoic thinkers while maintaining the distinctiveness of biblical revelation. The study also demonstrated that Paul employed a deliberate rhetorical strategy by beginning with observations about Athenian religiosity and the altar "to the unknown god," thereby establishing points of contact with his audience before confronting the inadequacies of their worldview. His proclamation of God as Creator and Sovereign Lord affirmed divine transcendence, self-sufficiency, and providential rule, while simultaneously challenging pantheistic and idolatrous assumptions common within Greek philosophy.

The analysis further revealed that Paul moved from the doctrine of creation to the doctrine of humanity, emphasizing the unity of the human race, humanity's dependence upon God, and humanity's responsibility to seek him. By drawing upon Stoic concepts and citing Greek poets, Paul demonstrated remarkable cultural awareness without compromising theological fidelity. His use of pagan sources did not signify endorsement of pagan religion, but rather an appropriation of partial truths that could be redirected toward biblical revelation. At the same time, Paul firmly rejected any notion that the living God could be reduced to material representations fashioned by

[75] Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 59.

human imagination, insisting instead upon God's personal nature and humanity's accountability before him.

Finally, the paper established that the climax of the Areopagus speech lies in Paul's universal summons to repentance grounded in the certainty of divine judgment and authenticated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection functions not merely as an apologetic proof, but as the theological foundation for Christ's authority as Lord and Judge of the world. Luke's record of the varied responses to Paul's message—mockery, curiosity, and belief—further underscores the enduring reality that faithful gospel witness will provoke differing reactions within every culture. Therefore, the Areopagus discourse remains a significant biblical model for contemporary Christian engagement: believers are called to understand their cultural context carefully, to affirm reflections of common grace where appropriate, to confront idolatrous worldviews, and to proclaim the risen Christ with clarity, conviction, and theological faithfulness.

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