
Chapter 5.13

Biblical Evangelism vs. *Intellectual Apologetics*

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Primary Points

- Christ does not desire to be *defended*, as much as He wants to be *preached*.
- Jesus and the disciples believed that preparing hearts to receive the Gospel was the Holy Spirit's job, lessening, if not eliminating the need for human, *intellectual apologetics*.
- Accordingly, Jesus told His followers that if people did not "**welcome**" or "**listen to**" their Gospel message, they were simply to leave them, not argue with them.
- While *intellectual apologists* point to Luke's description of the Apostle Paul *reasoning* with people in his presentation of the Gospel (cf. Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19), this does not refer to extra-biblical arguments, but rather, it is usually clear that the Apostle "**reasoned with them from the Scriptures** (17:2)
- According to *intellectual apologists*, Paul's evangelism in Athens is the "classic" text to support their view. However, the first description we get of what the Apostle actually preached to the Athenian philosophers is that, "**Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.**" There were no *intellectual apologetics*, but rather his approach in Athens is again reminiscent of how he described his ministry in Corinth. Accordingly, NT scholar F. F. Bruce concludes: "he does not condescend to his hearers' level by arguing from first principles as one of their own philosophers might do."

A) Christ's Approach to Evangelism: *Matt 7:6; 10:14*

It would be good at this point to be reminded of Christ's approach to evangelism. Particularly His repeated command for unbelievers to *repent*, which is to admit they are morally sinful and intellectually mistaken and to change their mind to align with what God says in Scripture. This is a very politically incorrect approach in our culture of tolerating sin and error. At times, it would seem that far too many in the Church are guilty of a cultural cowardice which lives to please men instead of God. They simply refuse to command people to repent, and congratulate themselves on the public relations work they are doing for Christ. Christ does not desire to be *defended*, as much as He wants to be *preached*.

Christ would rather have them imitate Him, Who from the very beginning of His ministry, **"began to preach, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near""** (Matt 4:17; cf. Luke 13:1-5), a message that in any age or culture would be considered very unapologetic. Elsewhere we read:

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," He said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15)

According to the King, the command to repent was an essential part of **"the good news"** of the Gospel. Which is why all of His true followers preached the same.

John the Baptist **"came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.'" What was the result? "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River"** (Matt 3:1-2, 5-6). It's clear that John did not have much concern for accommodating his message to the minds of unrepentant unbelievers, but was after the humble who were ready to repent.

Likewise, when the King sent out His twelve disciples, giving them instructions on how to really reach the lost, **"They went out and preached that people should repent"** (Mark 6:12; cf. Luke 15:7). And that was the habit of His messengers thereafter. After the Apostle Peter unapologetically told a crowd in Jerusalem, **"be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, Whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ,"** he then commanded them, **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"** (Acts 2:36, 38; cf. 3:19). There was no debate here about who really was Lord, or who really was guilty.

As further proof of Christ's approach to apologetics and evangelism, it is interesting to note how He communicated the Gospel to those on the road to Emmaus: **"And beginning with Moses and**

all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). There was not a defense of the Scriptures, but an explanation of them.

In general, it would seem that the King and His messengers were more inclined to believe that the preparing of hearts to receive the Gospel was essentially the Holy Spirit's job, lessening, if not eliminating the need for human, *intellectual apologetics* (cf. John 16:8-10; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 2:14; 1 Thess 1:4-5). Accordingly, Christ told His preachers: "**If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town**" (Matt 10:14). Notice that Christ did not imply that we are to try to persuade people to listen to us, nor certainly to argue with them. If they do not "**welcome**" or "**listen to**" our Gospel message, we are to simply leave them, apparently only communicating their condemnation as we go.¹ Again, a very *unapologetic* approach with no indication that the disciples were to argue with anyone. And we have record of the Apostles doing this very thing throughout their ministry (cf. Acts 13:51; 18:6).

Similarly, Christ had taught His disciples:

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces. (Matt 7:6)

Bible teacher John MacArthur succinctly summarizes Christ's meaning:

Jesus' point is that certain truths and blessings of our faith are not to be shared with people who are totally antagonistic to the things of God. Such people are spiritual **dogs** and **swine**, who have no appreciation for that which is holy and righteous. They will take that which is **holy**, the **pearls** of God's Word, as foolishness and as an insult.²

Likewise, NT scholar D. A. Carson notes here:

"Dogs" and "pigs" cannot refer to all Gentiles but, as Calvin rightly perceived, only to persons of any race who have given clear evidences of rejecting the gospel with vicious scorn and hardened contempt. The disciples are later given a similar lesson (10:14; 15:14), and the postresurrection Christians learned it well (cf. Acts 13:44-51; 18:5-6; 28:17-28; Titus 3:10-11). So when taken together vv. 1-5 and v. 6 become something of a Gospel analogue to the proverb "Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you" (Prov 9:8).³

Likewise, Archbishop Michael Green writes in his commentary:

Jesus goes on to warn his disciples against wasting time on the

hardened (6). Some people hear the message of God's kingdom and do not want to know. It is an irresponsible use of time and effort to continue to hammer on a door that is firmly closed. The disciples should push on a door and, if it is ajar, enter in. If it is firmly bolted, that is the indication to move on elsewhere. '*Do not throw your pearls to pigs,*' he says. They would rather have truffles or acorns! Disciples of Jesus are not to be storm-troopers for the kingdom of God. They should be equipped with the most sensitive radar to see where the Spirit of God is already preparing the way, and only then move in.⁴

None of this is a contradiction to the divine command that, "**this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations**" (Matt 24:14). Indeed, there is no way for us to know if the Spirit is working on people's hearts *until* we preach the Gospel to them and observe their reaction. If the "**Gospel**" comes "**not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction**" (1 Thess 1:5), then "**we know . . . He has chosen**" to save the people we are preaching to (v. 4). However, if after hearing the truth a person remains obstinate and hardened, that is probably not ground that God wants us to keep plowing and sowing with more "apologetics."⁵

B) Reasoning with Unbelievers?: *Paul's Evangelism in Acts*

Some advocates of *intellectual apologetics* will point to Luke's description of the Apostle Paul *reasoning* with people in his presentation of the Gospel (cf. Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19). It is suggested then that he was using the philosophical reasoning used by *intellectual apologists* today in attempts to prove the existence of God or the truth of Christianity. We do not believe this is true and will therefore take a brief tour of Paul's evangelistic ministry as recorded in Acts.

B.1) First Ministry in Damascus: *Proving that Jesus is the Christ through Scripture*

Soon after the Apostle's conversion, it would seem he engaged in evangelism. Accordingly we read:

At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. . . . Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:20, 22).

The first description we get of the Apostle Paul's evangelistic method reveals two things that will show up repeatedly. First, when Paul arrived in a location for evangelism he habitually began in the Jewish synagogue. Of course he had a heart for fellow Jews (cf. Rom 9:1-5), and as a former rather well-known Pharisee, he could rather easily gain a hearing in such place. In addition, Luke notes repeatedly that there were usually a number of "**God-fearing Greeks**" attending synagogues (cf. 13:26; 17:4, 17; 18:4; 20:21), which would have especially appealed to the Apostle.

Secondly, in the Apostle's evangelistic ministry, he focused on using the Scriptures for "**proving that Jesus is the Christ**" (9:22). What other source or evidence would he use?

B.2) First Missionary Journey: *Telling the good news*

Later in Acts 13 Luke begins a description of the Apostle's first official missionary journey: "**When [Paul and Barnabas] arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues**" (13:5). This merely confirms our point above that the source of the Apostle's evangelistic preaching was not philosophical arguments, but Scripture.

Afterwards, the Apostle evangelized in "**Pisidian Antioch**" and "**entered the synagogue**" (13:14). Both Jews and "**Gentiles who worship God**" were present (v. 16). Essentially, after the Apostle reviews OT history (vs. 17-22), and relates the historical facts concerning the arrival, life, and death of Christ (vs. 23-31) he concludes:

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers [in Scripture] He has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. . . . ³⁸ Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹ Through Him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. (vs. 32-3, 38-9)

Once again, the Apostle simply referred to the message of the OT Scriptures regarding "**What God promised our fathers**" concerning a coming Messiah Who would provide "**the forgiveness of sins.**" This is not apologetics. Those listening in the synagogue already believed in the authority of Scripture. The Apostle was simply *teaching* the Scriptures to them and relating it to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for their salvation.

As we discussed thoroughly in the previous chapter (5.5), Paul's message and approach here is clearly reminiscent of the Apostle's claim to the Corinthians to have preached the simple "**message of**

the cross" (1 Cor 1:18). And even though the **"Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,"** the Apostle **"preach[ed] Christ crucified"** (1 Cor 1:22-3). We are reminded as well that the Apostle had told the Corinthians that the ultimate reason they were saved and his ministry to them was effective was God **"called"** and **"God chose"** them to be saved (1 Cor 1:26-7) and it was **"because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus"** (v. 30). Likewise, Luke records in Pisidian Antioch regarding the response to the simple biblical story of the Gospel: **"When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed"** (Acts 13:48). No *intellectual apologetics* are mentioned.

Subsequent descriptions are rather scant, but suggest the same approach and method:

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. . . . Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord . . . [T]hey . . . fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news. (14:2-3, 6-7)

The Apostles **"spoke . . . effectively"** but there is no hint of them communicating extra-biblical philosophical or scientific reasons for the faith, but rather they simply **"continued to preach the good news."**

Later regarding ministry in Lystra, we read:

⁸ In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰ and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ 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.

¹⁴ But when the Apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ In the past, He let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. (Acts 14:8-18)

Again the Apostles summarized their evangelistic message and approach in Lystra as, "**bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God**" (v. 15). But unfortunately, their purpose of evangelism was severely sidetracked by the people's response to Paul's healing of the crippled man. While God intended to use such a miracle to confirm that the Apostles spoke new divine revelation for Him, ⁶ these spiritually dead, deaf, and dumb Greeks interpreted it as evidence that "**The gods have come down to us in human form!**" (v. 11) in the persons of Paul and Barnabas. In fact, they believed them to be the gods "**Zeus**" and "**Hermes,**" (v. 12) deities responsible for a great deal of their welfare. Accordingly, "**The priest of Zeus . . . and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them**" to no doubt further secure their blessing on their lives.

At this point, evangelism *per se* was no longer the issue. Rather, the Apostles intent was simply to persuade them, "**We too are only men, human like you**" (v. 12), they were not gods, nor the source of their physical blessings. Rather, the blessings that these Greeks thought were coming from the Apostles, were coming from the one Creator God. And that is virtually all the Apostles are trying to communicate here. And they barely succeeded in their goal, summarized by Luke when we read: "**Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them**" (v. 18).

The Greeks in this crowd were not atheists, and in fact already believed much of what the Apostles said here. ⁷ They believed the gods worked in Nature to grow their crops and provide their food, which is why they sacrificed to these gods. But because their polytheism had now extended to thinking that even Paul and Barnabas were gods (cf. 14:11), the Apostles preached that there was only one God behind all of Creation. Accordingly, even here the Apostles were not communicating protracted scientific and philosophical reasons to convince atheists to be theists as *intellectual apologists* insist is the Christian's duty.

Next, in "**Derbe,**" and quite different from Lystra, the Apostles "**preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples**" (14:21). Why did no one apparently get saved in Lystra and "**a large number**" apparently did in another town "some sixty

miles southeast of Lystra"? ⁸ Because as Luke had noted regarding Pisidian Antioch, "**all who were appointed for eternal life believed**" (Acts 13:48) in Derbe, and there were no such people in Lystra.

B.3) Thessalonica & Berea: Reasoning from the Scriptures

We noted above that some interpret Luke's description of Paul "reasoning" with unbelievers as an indication that he engaged in *intellectual apologetics*. So far, we have not observed such a thing in the Apostle's evangelistic ministry. And in fact, the first use of this phraseology in Acts 17:1-4 helps us to understand what kind of "reasoning" the Apostle used:

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned [*dielexatō*: "conversed"] with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. (Acts 17:1-4)

The Apostle Paul "**reasoned with them from the Scriptures**" (17:2), not the philosophers. His "**explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead**" was "**from the Scriptures**" and not the philosophers either. ⁹ And even the fact that he "**reasoned**" does not mean he debated or argued. As NT scholar Albert Barnes (1798-1870) pointed out regarding the Greek word translated "reasoned" (*dielexatō*):

No argument should be drawn from the word that is used here to prove that Paul particularly appealed to reason, or that his discourse was argumentative . . . the word used here means simply as he discoursed, and is applied usually to making a public address, to preaching, etc., in whatever way it is done, Acts 17:2; 18:4, 19; 19:8-9; 24:12. ¹⁰

Dr. Barnes' point regarding *dielexatō* will be important to keep in mind as we discuss other places in Acts where Paul is said to have "**reasoned**" with unbelievers. ¹¹ Accordingly, Alfred Marshall's literal translation of *dielexatō* here is "**lectured.**" ¹² As NT scholar I. Howard Marshall notes on the use of this word in Acts: "for Luke 'argue' means 'preach' rather than 'debate'." ¹³

Luke probably reflects the essence of Paul's evangelistic message in Thessalonica when he records the Apostle claiming *unapologetically* **"This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ"** (v. 3). As he described in Corinth, the Apostle *proclaimed* the Gospel to unbelievers, rather than *defending* it.¹⁴ Accordingly, he was **"explaining . . . that the Christ had to suffer,"** something which, as we pointed out above, the Greeks would have found quite offensive in regard to a god they were to worship.¹⁵ Likewise, according to the Apostle's enemies in Thessalonica, he was very *unapologetic* in, **"defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus"** (17:7).

Nonetheless, the power of the simple Gospel empowered by the Spirit (cf. 1 Thess 1:4-5) apparently resulted in salvations: **"Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women"** (17:4).

After Thessalonica, the Apostle arrived in **"Berea,"** preaching in **"the Jewish synagogue"** (17:10). What was the content of his messages there? We get an indication when Luke rather famously records: **"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true"** (v. 11). Evidently, **"the message . . . Paul said"** could only be evaluated by the OT Scriptures because it was derived from them, and not extra-biblical philosophical arguments. Like Thessalonica, Paul **"reasoned with"** the Bereans **"from the Scriptures"** (17:2).

B.4) Athens: Telling Philosophers to Repent

After Thessalonica, the Apostle was left in Athens. Here again, **"he reasoned [dielegeto: "conversed"] in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there"** (Acts 17:17). As noted above regarding his ministry in Thessalonica, *dielegeto* usually does not mean to "argue," or "debate" but to "converse".¹⁶ And again, Paul no doubt **"reasoned from the Scriptures"** (Acts 17:2) in this synagogue as he had previously.

Nonetheless, it is in this account that many claim biblical support for an *intellectual apologist's* approach to evangelism, and it is therefore perhaps the most discussed passage in all of Acts.¹⁷ Accordingly, the *intellectual apologist* Norman Geisler writes:

The classic case of apologetics in the New Testament is Acts 17 where Paul reasoned with the philosophers on Mars Hill. He not only presented evidence from nature that God existed but also

from history that Christ was the Son of God. He cited pagan thinkers in support of his arguments. Apologetics was done in the Bible whenever the truth claims of Judaism or Christianity came in conflict with unbelief.¹⁸

This is primarily assumed on the grounds that, "**A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute** [*syneballon*] **with him**" (v. 18), and "**All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas**" (v. 21). This, of course, would have seemed to be an ideal environment for Paul to debate these "philosophers" with extra-biblical philosophical, scientific, or historical arguments for the Christian faith.¹⁹ He does not.

First of all, the Apostle did not "debate" with the philosophers at all. The Greek word *synballo* is used six times in the NT and only by Luke. Accordingly, we have a good idea of what he meant by it. The word simply means "to discuss, consider, meet with" and is variously translated elsewhere in the NIV as to have "**conferred**" with others (Acts 4:15), to "**meet**" with others (Luke 14:31; Acts 20:14), and even to have "**helped**" others (Acts 18:27), and to have "**pondered**" something (Luke 2:19). We would suggest the NIV translators read too much into the context here when they translated *synballo* as "**dispute**" in Acts 17:18, suggesting an argument occurred. Accordingly, the NASB and ESV translate that the "**philosophers were conversing with**" Paul, and simply responding to his message as the text shows.²⁰

If Luke had thought that "debate" was more descriptive of the conversation Paul had with the philosophers, it would seem he would have used a word like *diemaxonto* ("argue") as he did to describe the "**Pharisees [who] stood up and argued vigorously**" against the Sadducees about the resurrection (Acts 23:9), or *syzētountes* which really does mean "dispute" "argue" and "debate" and which Luke used to describe how "**the Jews . . . began to argue with Stephen**" (Acts 6:9). Luke knew the difference between a debate and a conversation and he intentionally portrayed Paul's interaction with the philosophers in Athens as the latter.²¹

Of course, some of the philosophers disliked what Paul was saying, calling him a "**babbling** [*spermologos*]," derogatory Athenian slang for a novice philosopher.²² Did Paul then launch into a philosophical diatribe to earn their respect as a philosopher as *intellectual apologetics* encourages us to do? Not at all.

Accordingly, Luke shows clear contempt for the fact that the Athenians "**spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas**" (v. 21). As Dr. Marshall comments, "his tone is distinctly sarcastic."²³ While modern *intellectual apologists* may value such a philosophical context and engage in the

same thing, it seems clear that the Apostle and his companions did not have any interest in such things.

In addition, even the questions that Luke records the philosophers asking seem to reflect more of a desire for understanding, rather than disagreeing:

Some of them asked, "What is this babler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18)

Notice that the first description we get of what the Apostle actually preached to the Athenian philosophers is that, "**Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.**" There were no *intellectual apologetics*, but rather his approach in Athens is again reminiscent of how he described his ministry in Corinth where he preached "**the Gospel**" (1 Cor 1:17), "**the message of the cross**" (v. 18), and "**resolved to know [or preach] nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified**" (2:2).

Immediately after this we read that the Athenians wanted to hear an *explanation* of the Gospel, not a philosophical *defense* of it:

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean [not why you think they are true]." (Acts 17:19-20)

And the Apostle then tells these philosophers *unapologetically*:

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²⁴ ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. ²³ Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you [not defend to you].

²⁴ The God Who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of Heaven and Earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ And He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

²⁶ From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth [just as the OT Scriptures said]; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. ²⁸

'For in Him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are His offspring.' ²⁹ "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill [like you believe].

³⁰ **In the past God overlooked such [philosophical] 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 [Christ Jesus] He has appointed. He [God the Father] has given proof of this to all men by raising Him [God the Son] from the dead.** (Acts 17:23-31)

Admittedly, the Apostle meets the Athenians "where they are at" so to speak, acknowledging that they were, "**very religious**" (v. 22) and had made an inscription on one of their pagan altars, "**TO AN UNKNOWN GOD**" (v. 23). The Athenians believed in a god, and even that their existence and daily life depended on a god. Accordingly, the Apostle pointed out that "**some of your own poets have said, 'We are His offspring'**" and "**in Him we live and move and have our being**" (v. 28). ²⁵

It is here again that most *intellectual apologists* claim that the Apostle is practicing their craft—establishing the existence of God among atheists or agnostics and using extra-biblical sources to do so. However, quoting Greek poets to support something the Athenians *already believed* is a far cry from the philosophical and scientific argumentation *intellectual apologists* engage in to convince atheists, which is a major purpose of *intellectual apologetics*. On the contrary, the Apostle believed he was speaking to people who already believed in a creator god, and he was merely acknowledging something they were agreed on. ²⁶

Long before this, the preeminent Greek philosopher Plato (427 BC-347 BC) had taught the same things the Apostle was saying. ²⁷ Accordingly, many ancient witnesses "considered the Athenians to be the most religious of all human beings." ²⁸ Likewise, Paul's statement that God, "**is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else**"(17:25) was an "insight . . . shared by educated pagans, and numerous examples of the sentiment can be quoted." ²⁹

In fact, it would appear that by focusing his arguments on the Athenians idol worship, he rather ignored confronting the intricate and differing philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics who would have ridiculed the practice as well, as "the Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry." ³⁰

Nor should we believe that the Apostle had done any special study to know what some Greek poets had written. NT scholar F. F. Bruce (1910–1990) noted:

It is quite probable that Paul acquired the rudiments of Greek learning in Gamaliel's [Jewish] school. . . . The knowledge of Greek literature and thought that [Paul's] letters attest was part of the common stock of educated people in the Hellenistic world of that day; it bespeaks no formal instruction received from Greek teachers. . . .

We can recognize in his writings concepts and expressions, drawn especially from popular Stoicism, which were in the air at the time and which he freely pressed into service in a Christian context; but while he preached the gospel to the Hellenes, it was no Hellenized gospel that he preached. His proclamation of deliverance and life through Christ crucified brought his gospel into basic conflict with accepted standards of Hellenistic value and gave it the quality of "folly" which it had in the eyes of those of his hearers who made their assessments by what Paul called "the wisdom of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:20 ff.)³¹

Accordingly, the Apostle was *unapologetically* preaching biblical *facts* for the Athenians to believe, not extra-biblical *reasons* to believe. Accordingly the essence of what he told these intellectual unbelievers was that their beliefs were "**ignorance**" and they needed to "**repent**" or God would "**judge**" them.

And contrary to *intellectual apologists*, the only justification the Apostle gave for his claims that both salvation and judgment would come only through Jesus Christ, was one we only have recorded in Scripture—"**God . . . raising Him from the dead**" (v. 31). As Dr. Marshall comments, "he treats the resurrection as historical fact,"³² again, something to be believed rather than proven.

Luke then records: "**When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.'**" (v. 32). Dr. Marshall comments: "Not only was the cross 'folly to Gentiles', but so also was the resurrection."³³ Note that after hearing of the need for them to repent to escape the judgment of Christ, the Athenians, for the most part, do not repent (cf. Acts 2:36-41; 1 Thess 1:4-5). In fact, Luke records them as rather ignoring the essential part of Paul's message and focusing in on the general idea of "**the resurrection of the dead,**" not even the meaning of Christ's resurrection in particular.

In response to Paul's claim of Christ's resurrection, "**Some . . . sneered,**" apparently rejecting the message altogether. Others seemed to show little interest in repenting, but much interest in discussing the topic of resurrection. While we would not expect the Apostle to speak much further with those who "**sneered,**" it would

seem he also never gave an opportunity for further discussion to those merely interested in discussing “**the resurrection of the dead.**” However, Luke records, “**At that, Paul left the Council. . . . After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth**” (17:33, 18:1), implying that the Apostle did not accommodate those who merely wanted to talk about the idea of “**the resurrection of the dead.**” While this would be in keeping with Paul’s practice and instructions demonstrated in the previous chapter from 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 and the Pastoral Epistles, it would seem to be a refutation of what modern *intellectual apologists* pursue.³⁴

If there was ever a place for the Apostle to engage in *intellectual apologetics*, Athens would have been it. If there was ever a place where Luke would have described the Apostle’s preaching as including philosophical arguments, this would have been it. If God had intended to give us a biblical example to support the modern and immense effort and attention given *intellectual apologetics* in the context of evangelism, this would have been it. But there are no hints of the Apostle engaging in philosophical debate with the Athenian philosophers, but rather, Paul preached a very *unapologetic* message of biblical facts.

Accordingly, Dr. Bruce summarizes what we believe to be a proper interpretation of Paul’s ministry in Athens when he writes in his commentary:

[T]he present speech is . . . well designed to serve as a sample of his preaching to pagans (cf. the briefer summary in 14:15-17). Here he does not quote the Hebrew scriptures which would have been quite unknown to his hearers; the direct quotations in this speech are quotations from Greek poets.

But he does not condescend to his hearers’ level by arguing from first principles as one of their own philosophers might do [and as *intellectual apologists* popularly do]. His argument is firmly based on biblical revelation; it echoes throughout the thought, and at times the very language, of the Old Testament. Like the biblical revelation itself, his argument begins with God the creator of all and ends with God the judge of all.³⁵

Elsewhere in his well-regarded study of Paul, Dr. Bruce wrote regarding the Apostle’s ministry in Athens:

[T]he knowledge of God presented in the speech is not rationalistically conceived or established; it is the knowledge of God taught by Hebrew prophets and sages. It is rooted in the fear of God . . . Unlike some later Christian apologists, the Paul of Acts does not cease to be fundamentally biblical in his approach to the Greeks, even when his biblical emphasis might seem to diminish his chances of success. . . .

There is nothing . . . to commend the suggestion that “the word of the cross” was tactfully omitted from the *Areopagitica* because it was known to be folly to Gentiles: any mention of the cross could not have appeared more foolish to these particular Gentiles than did the note on which the speech concluded—the resurrection of the dead.³⁶

Accordingly, Paul’s evangelistic ministry and approach in Athens was essentially the same as that which he took up in the very next city he is recorded to preach in: Corinth.³⁷

B.5) Corinth: *My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words*

Luke continues in Acts 18 to describe the Apostle’s evangelistic ministry in Corinth. As was Paul’s custom, we read:

Every Sabbath he reasoned [dielegetō] in the synagogue, trying to persuade [epeithen] Jews and Greeks. ⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 18:4-5)

No matter how we might interpret Luke’s description that Paul “reasoned [dielegetō]” and was “trying to persuade Jews and Greeks,” in Corinth, we must not contradict the Apostle’s own description of his evangelistic ministry in the same city (cf. 1:17-2:5). As thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter, he said:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. . . . ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power. (1 Cor 2:1-3, 5)

First, we should recognize that 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 is a fairly lengthy discourse specifically focused on, and intended by Paul to rather precisely describe the manner of his evangelistic preaching in Corinth. Luke’s statement could be interpreted as simply a one sentence, rather off-hand remark about the effect of Paul’s preaching. In other words, if we want the most accurate description of the Apostle’s evangelistic preaching, it is in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, not Acts 18:4.

Secondly, as demonstrated above, *dielegetō* does not usually carry the idea of “arguing” or “debating” in Scripture, but merely conversing.³⁸ Thirdly, any reasoning or persuading in Corinth must be understood the same as that described in Thessalonica, which was a reasoning “**from the Scriptures**” (Acts 17:2) instead of extra-biblical philosophy.

Finally, the Greek that Luke uses here could refer to an *effect* rather than a mere *attempt*. In other words, Luke could be understood as saying that the *result* of Paul’s preaching was that people were being persuaded even though he did not use persuasive speech. This would accord well with how Paul himself describes his ministry in the same city—he did not use “**wise and persuasive words**” (1 Cor 2:4), but it was nonetheless persuasive and effective as Luke tells “many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).

Therefore, it would seem to be a mistake for most English translations to assume Luke meant Paul was merely *attempting* to be persuasive, rather than that Paul was actually successful. For example, the NIV and most English translations imply that Paul was “**trying to persuade,**” indicating attempts that may not have been successful. Accordingly, the NET Bible translates that Paul was “**attempting to persuade them.**”

However, the verb Luke uses (*epeithen*) is in the imperfect tense which can just as easily refer to something that is *successful* rather than just *attempted*.³⁹ In other words, Luke could be referring to the *result* of Paul’s preaching rather than its manner. Accordingly, other English translations give more of this sense. The RSV, KJV and NKJV translate the imperfect: “**And he argued in the synagogue every sabbath, and [successfully] persuaded Jews and Greeks,**” allowing for the idea of a successful, not just attempted action. Translating the imperfect verb in this way is the best approach to reconciling Paul and Luke on the manner of Paul’s evangelistic preaching.⁴⁰

B.6) Ephesus: Leaving instead of debating stubborn unbelievers

Likewise we read of two instances of ministry in Ephesus:

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria,¹⁹ They arrived at Ephesus . . . He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned [*dielexatō*] with the Jews. (Acts 18:18-19)

Luke records events less than a year later⁴¹ that are “Paul’s final major task as an evangelist”:⁴²

¹ While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. . . . ⁸ Paul entered the

synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively [*dialeghomenōs kai peithon*] **about the kingdom of God.** ⁹ **But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them.** (Acts 19:1, 8-9)

In 18:19 we again encounter Luke's typical word for how Paul dialogued in "**the synagogue.**" As we have pointed out above, it does not carry the meaning of arguing or debating, but merely conversing. Which is why the NIV translation of the same word in 19:8 as "**arguing**" seems incorrect. But even if we are to understand the Apostle as debating with people or "**arguing persuasively,**" he was doing so "**about the kingdom of God,**" which clearly implies he was following the custom described in Thessalonica of reasoning "**from the Scriptures.**" From what other source would he be "**arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God**"?

And notice again, that when "**some of them became obstinate . . . [and] refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way**" (19:9) as so many opponents of *intellectual apologists* do, "**Paul left them**" instead of debating with them. As discussed in the previous chapter (5.5), this reflects his repeated instruction in the Pastoral Epistles to do the same thing. Accordingly, *intellectual apologists* will find no support here either for the idea that God desires we include extra-biblical, philosophical arguments in our evangelistic ministries.

B.7) Rome: *Convincing them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets*

The final recorded act of Paul preaching the Gospel occurred while he was under guard in Rome awaiting trial. Luke records that the Apostle called together the leaders of the Jews (Acts 28:17) and that, "**They . . . came in large numbers to the place where he was staying**" (v. 23). Subsequently, "**From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the Kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets**" (v. 23). Once again, the Apostle was "**reasoning from the Scriptures**" (Acts 17:2), not the philosophers.

Pastoral Practices

- Ponder Luther's advice:
[I]f the people will not believe [in the authority of Scripture], then be silent; for you are not held to compel them to receive Scripture as God's book or Word . . . [W]hen you hear people of

this stamp, who are so blinded and hardened as to deny that what Christ and the Apostles spoke and wrote is God's Word, or doubt it, then be silent, speak no more with them, and let them go. Only say: 'I will give you reasons enough from Scripture; if you will believe it, it is well; if not, go your way.'

Of course there are sincere seekers who will humbly ask legitimate questions because of their ignorance, but desire to better understand. And those like this who are teachable should be ministered to. But ministers have often wasted too much time trying to convince hardened skeptics. God needs to humble them in life before they are ready to hear Him in Scripture.

- Let us preach the simple Gospel boldly, consistently, and clearly, trusting the Holy Spirit's desire to use it to do the supernatural work that must be done for conversion to occur. We fear, like Dr. Jones, that the great emphasis on *intellectual apologetics* in our day may have obscured the Gospel and distracted us from merely preaching it.
- Like the Apostle Paul, do not rely on human persuasion to bring about conversions, as this can lead to a lot of false conversions. Gently but firmly preach repentance as the King and the Apostles did.

Extras & Endnotes

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What are some conclusions you can draw from Christ's instructions and example concerning evangelism?
- 2) What are some conclusions you can draw from Paul's example of evangelism?
- 3) *Intellectual apologists* use several of the passages in Acts to support their approach to evangelism. We attempt to argue at every point that this is not so. Do you agree or disagree?

Publications & Particulars

¹ D. A. Carson comments on the disciples shaking the dust off their feet as they left a town:

For the disciples to do this to Jewish homes and towns would be a symbolic way of saying that the emissaries of Messiah now view those places as pagan, polluted, and liable to judgment (cf. Acts 13:51; 18:6). The actions, while outrageously shocking, accord with Matthew 8:11-12; 11:20-24. ("Matthew" *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (EBC), Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. CD-ROM [Zondervan, n.d.], Matt 10:14.

² John MacArthur, *MacArthur's New Testament Commentary* (Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Parsons Technology, 1997), Matt 7:6

³ Carson, "Matthew," Matt 7:6.

⁴ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew (BST)* (Intervarsity, 2000), 106.

⁵ John MacArthur attempts to share the balance between being discerning about how much truth we share with unreceptive people and our mandate to preach the Gospel everywhere:

God does not call his servants to minister only where the gospel is immediately and eagerly received. Many fields of service are extremely resistant to the gospel. But the focus of ministry in any area or circumstance should be on those people who are most receptive. (*Commentary*, Matt 14:13)

There is important truth in Dr. MacArthur's words, but we would question whether or not God would perceive those who "are extremely resistant to the gospel" as a "field of service." Jesus said if a town "**will not welcome you or listen to your words . . . leave that . . . town**" (Matt 10:14). Doing otherwise can be a waste of a minister's precious time, and in the end only bring harsher judgment on such people (cf. Matt 11:20-24; Luke 12:47-48).

A careful reading of Calvin's commentary on Matthew 7:6 seems to share the important balance. Note that even one who believed so staunchly in predestination to salvation, encouraged the diligent preaching of the Gospel.

Christ reminds the Apostles, and, through them, all the teachers of the Gospel, to reserve the treasure of heavenly wisdom for the children of God alone, and not to expose it to unworthy and profane despisers of his word.

But here a question arises: for he afterwards commanded to *preach the Gospel to every creature*, (Mark 16:15;) and Paul says, that the preaching of it is a *deadly savor to wicked men*, (2 Corinthians 2:16;) and nothing is more certain than that it is every day held out to unbelievers, by the command of God, for a testimony, that they may be rendered the more inexcusable. I reply: As the ministers of the Gospel, and those who are called to the office of teaching, cannot distinguish between the children of God and *swine*, it is their duty to present the doctrine of salvation indiscriminately to all. Though many may appear to them, at first, to be hardened and unyielding, yet charity forbids that such persons should be immediately pronounced to be desperate.

It ought to be understood, that *dogs* and *swine* are names given not to every kind of debauched men, or to those who are destitute of the fear of God and of true godliness, but to those who, by clear evidences, have manifested a hardened contempt of God, so that their disease appears to be incurable. In another passage, Christ places the *dogs* in contrast with the elect people of God and the household of faith, *It is not proper to take the children's bread, and give it to dogs*, (Matthew 15:27.) But by *dogs* and *swine* he means here those who are so thoroughly imbued with a wicked contempt of God, that they refuse to accept any remedy.

Hence it is evident, how grievously the words of Christ are tortured by those who think that he limits the doctrine of the Gospel to those only who are teachable and well-prepared. For what will be the consequence, if nobody is invited by pious teachers, until by his obedience he has anticipated the grace of God? On the contrary, we are all by nature unholy, and prone to rebellion. The remedy of salvation must be refused to none, till they have rejected it so basely when offered to them, as to make it evident that they are reprobate and *self-condemned*, (αὐτοκατάκριτοι,) as Paul says of *heretics*, (Titus 3:11.)

There are two reasons, why Christ forbade that the Gospel should be offered to lost despisers. It is an open profanation of the mysteries of God to expose them to the taunts of wicked men. Another reason is, that Christ intended to comfort his disciples, that they might not cease to bestow their labors on the elect of God in teaching the Gospel, though they saw it wantonly rejected by wicked and ungodly men. His meaning is lest this inestimable treasure should be held in little estimation, *swine* and *dogs* must not be permitted to approach it. There are two designations which Christ bestows on the doctrine of salvation: he calls it *holy*, and compares it to *pearls*. Hence we learn how highly we ought to esteem this doctrine.

Lest these trample them under their feet Christ appears to distinguish between the *swine* and the *dogs*: attributing brutal stupidity to the *swine*, and rage to the *dogs*. And certainly, experience shows, that there are two such classes of despisers of God. Whatever is taught in Scripture, for instance, about the corrupt nature of man, free justification, and eternal election, is turned by many into an encouragement to sloth and to carnal indulgence. Such persons are fitly and justly pronounced to be *swine*. Others, again, *tear* the pure doctrine, and its ministers, with sacrilegious reproaches, as if they threw away all desire to do well, all fear of God, and all care for their salvation. Although he employs both names to describe the incurable opponents of the Word of God, yet, by a twofold comparison, he points out briefly in what respect the one differs from the other. (*Commentaries*)

⁶ For further discussion of the biblical purpose of miracle working see section 10.5.A.1 and 11.1.F.

⁷ Norman Geisler writes: "The apostle Paul did apologetics at Lystra when he gave evidence from nature that the supreme God of the universe existed and that idolatry was wrong (Acts 14:6-20)." (*Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics* [Baker, 2000], 39). This seems to be stretching the meaning of apologetics. The Apostle's words are as follows:

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. ¹⁶ **In the past, He let all nations go their own way.** ¹⁷ **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.**

As noted, the Greeks believed it was *gods* who “**made Heaven and Earth and sea and everything in them**” and was “**giving**” them “**rain from heaven and crops in their seasons**” and “**plenty of food.**” Simply telling them that these things came from *one* God is not a defense of this fact. If Paul did engage in *intellectual apologetics* here he would have given them proof that there was one God instead of many. In fact, he just states it.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts (NICNT)* (Eerdmans, 1988), 279.

⁹ I. Howard Marshall comments on Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica and suggests it was rather typical:

Luke indicated at some length the kind of discourse that Paul would give in a synagogue setting. . . . It was based on the Scriptures. . . . He opened up the meaning of the Scriptures and brought forward what they said as evidence for his case. (*The Acts of the Apostles (TNTC)* [Eerdmans, 1980, reprint, 1999], Acts 17:3)

¹⁰ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Findex.Com, 1999), Acts 24:25. Nonetheless, Dr. Barnes interprets the use of *dielegatō* in 17:17 as “He engaged in argument with them.” But as Dr. Barnes himself pointed out, this is not reflected in the meaning of this word.

¹¹ Further information on this word group for “reasoned” comes from the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)*:

The meaning of *dialegomai* in cl. and Hellenistic Gk. is expressed by our loan-word dialogue; it means hold a conversation, chat. It was used by the poets with a neutral sense, but in the philosophers it came to mean conversation with teaching as its object. . . .

The LXX [Greek trans. of OT] uses *dialegomai*, when it translates *dābar*, speak, mainly with the meanings of speak, say, both of God and man; it is also used with the meanings of negotiate with someone, make a speech, and sometimes also dispute. . . .

[In the NT] *dialegomai* means in Mk. 9:33 f. and Jude 9 to argue, fight with words; but in Heb. 12:5 it is used of God’s speaking through fatherly discipline. This usage is derived from the LXX. . . .

The other examples of *dialegomai* in the NT are found in Acts 17-24 (17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8 f.; 20:7, 9; 24:12, 25). The word here has become a technical term for Paul’s teaching in the synagogue and approaches the meaning of give an address, preach. It refers to the reading and exposition of the OT . . . The RSV rendering “argue” is justified in so far as the audience was permitted to ask questions. (*D. Furst* “Think, Mean, Consider, Reckon,” III.820-1)

Accordingly, Dr. MacArthur seems to exaggerate what was occurring when

he writes:

Reasoned is from *dialegomai*, from which the English word *dialogue* derives. It describes not a formal sermon but a discussion, during which Paul repeatedly fielded questions from his hearers. That was the way he commonly ministered in the synagogues (cf. Acts 18:4, 19; 19:8-9).

Effective Christian witness includes being able to answer questions about the faith. Peter commanded believers to "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:15).

Scripture provides the truth for such a defense. The foundation of Paul's apologetic method was not the emptiness of human wisdom, or the extrabiblical traditions so revered by the Jews. Instead, Paul reasoned with them from the Old Testament Scriptures. (Acts 17:26-34)

The suggestion that "Paul repeatedly fielded questions" in his evangelistic addresses seems to us to be somewhat of an exaggeration of the meaning of *dialegomai*. For example, Dr. MacArthur's reference to Acts 18:4, 19 refer to his ministry in Corinth where the Apostle says:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words (2:1-4)

Accordingly, we don't believe "Paul repeatedly fielded questions" in either Thessalonica or Corinth as Dr. MacArthur claims. In Athens we note below that some simply asked the meaning of what Paul was preaching, and nothing at all like asking a lot of detailed questions as Dr. MacArthur implies.

In addition, as we demonstrate in section 5.4.B.2, Dr. MacArthur's interpretation/application of 1 Peter 3:15 is inaccurate. Nonetheless, we appreciate him noting that the Apostle used the Scriptures for his explanation of the Gospel, instead of "human wisdom" or "extra-biblical traditions."

¹² Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear NASB-NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English* (Zondervan, 1993)

¹³ Marshall, 283.

¹⁴ Accordingly, we would disagree with Richard N. Longenecker who writes in the *Expository Bible Commentary* at Acts 17:1-2:

In portraying the extension of the gospel to the main cities bordering the Aegean Sea, Luke lays special emphasis on the fact that Paul's preaching consisted of both proclamation and persuasion--interlocking elements of the one act of preaching. . . . "reason," "prove," and "persuade"--words that describe Paul's method of preaching--imply his careful dealing with his hearers' questions and doubts. . . (Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. CD-ROM [Zondervan, n.d.], *in loc.*).

This simply does not seem true, and certainly cannot be derived from Luke's use of *dielexatō* to describe Paul's preaching ministry. Dr.

Longenecker seems to forget that Paul “**reasoned from the Scriptures**” and there is no hint whatsoever that he entertained any and every question his listeners had. Finally, he seems to also ignore the Apostle’s clear description of his evangelistic ministry in Corinth as discussed in the previous chapter.

¹⁵ For further discussion of the “foolishness” perceived in Greeks by a crucified God see section 5.11.A.1.

¹⁶ See discussion of *dielegatō* above in section A.3. It does not mean “argued.”

¹⁷ Referring to Acts 17:22-31, Dr. Bruce comments: “Probably no ten verses in Acts have formed the text for such an abundance of commentary as has gathered around Paul’s Areopagus speech” (333). Unfortunately, much of this discussion has been among liberal scholars who deny and debate the question of whether or not Paul actually spoke as Luke records him. Of course he did.

¹⁸ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (BECA)* (Baker, 1999), 39.

¹⁹ Dr. MacArthur points out concerning Athens:

In its heyday, several centuries before Christ, it had been the greatest city in the world. Socrates, his brilliant student Plato, and Plato’s student Aristotle, perhaps the greatest and most influential philosopher of all time, taught there. So also did Epicurus, founder of Epicureanism, and Zeno, founder of Stoicism, two dominant philosophies.

By Paul’s day, Corinth had replaced Athens as the most important political and commercial center in Greece. Yet Athens had lost none of its cultural significance, was still the philosophical center of the ancient world, and was the home of the world’s most famous university. Athens was also a religious center, where almost every god in existence was worshiped. The pagan writer Petronius sarcastically quipped that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], 708). Every public building was dedicated to a god, and statues of gods filled the city (17:16, 23). (Acts 17:16-34)

²⁰ Compare this with “**debate**” (NLT, RSV), and “**argued**” (NCV), which are not good translations of *synballo*.

²¹ Accordingly, we disagree with Dr. MacArthur’s description of Paul’s preaching in Athens as, “Among those he engaged in debate were some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.” (Acts 17:26-34). On the contrary, the strongest meaning we can derive from the text is that the philosophers voiced disagreement with Paul, which is not the same as claiming Paul “engaged in debate” with them.

Likewise, there is no reason to assume as Dr. Barnes does that the Apostle, “engaged in an argument with them” (Acts 17:17). Calvin is even worse when he writes: “Luke addeth now that Paul had a combat with the philosophers” (online at www.ccel.org, *in loc*)

²² Dr. Bruce translates "**babbler** [*spermologos*]": "a retailer of second-hand scraps of philosophy . . . someone who picked up scraps of learning wherever he could. (331).

²³ Marshall, 285.

²⁴ Dr. Barnes points out regarding the KJV translation "**superstitious**" for "**religious**" at Acts 17:22:

This is a most unhappy translation. We use the word "superstitious" always in a bad sense, to denote being "over-scrupulous and rigid in religious observances, particularly in smaller matters, or a zealous devotion to rites and observances which are not commanded." But the word here is designed to convey no such idea. It properly means "reverence for the gods." It is used in the Classic writers in a good sense, to denote "piety toward the gods, or suitable fear and reverence for them"; and also in a bad sense, to denote "improper fear or excessive dread of their anger." . . . The meaning of the expression is, therefore, "I perceive that you are greatly devoted to reverence for religion

²⁵ Dr. Longenecker comments on Paul's use of Greek poets:

In support of this teaching about man, Paul quotes two maxims from Greek poets. The first comes from a quatrain attributed to the Cretan poet Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.), which appeared first in his poem *Cretica* and is put on the lips of Minos, Zeus's son, in honor of his father:

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one--
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever,
For in thee we live and move and have our being

(M.D. Gibson, ed., *Horae Semiticae* X [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1913], p. 40, in Syriac; italics mine).

The second comes from the Cilician poet Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.): "It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, *for we are also his offspring* [italics mine]" (*Phaenonlena* 5); which is also found in Cleanthes's (331-233 B.C.) earlier Hymn to Zeus, line 4.

By such maxims, Paul is not suggesting that God is to be thought of in terms of the Zeus of Greek polytheism or Stoic pantheism. He is rather arguing that the poets his hearers recognized as authorities have to some extent corroborated his message [and their own belief]. In his search for a measure of common ground with his hearers, he is, so to speak, disinfecting and rebaptizing the poets' words for his own purposes. Quoting Greek poets in support of his teaching sharpened his message.

But despite its form, Paul's address was thoroughly biblical and Christian in its content. It is perhaps too strong [maybe not] to say that "the remarkable thing about this famous speech is that for all its wealth of pagan illustration its message is simply the Galilean gospel, 'The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the tidings'" (Williams, p. 206). (Acts 17:24-28)

In our opinion, Dr. Barnes perhaps exaggerates and ignores 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 when he says of Paul's quotation of pagan poets, "It is one

instance among thousands where an acquaintance with profane learning may be of use to a minister of the gospel" (Acts 17:28).

²⁶ Dr. Longenecker comments on Paul's desire to "meet the Athenians where they were at":

[F]or one who elsewhere said he was willing to be "all things to all men" for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9:20-22), Paul's approach to his Areopagus audience is by no means out of character. On the contrary, in his report of this address, Luke gives us another illustration of how Paul began on common ground with his hearers and sought to lead them from it to accept the work and person of Jesus as the apex of God's redemptive work for humanity. (Acts 17:22-23).

²⁷ cf. Marshall, 286.

²⁸ See quotes in Bruce, 335.

²⁹ Marshall, 287.

³⁰ Marshall, 281-2. The relationship between Paul's speech in the Aeropagus and the philosophies of Epicureans and Stoics is debated, and in the end, perhaps rather fruitless. Dr. MacArthur claims Paul's speech was especially designed for the purpose of refuting these philosophies:

Paul's bold assertion that **God made the world and all things in it** was a powerful and upsetting truth for some of the Athenians to hear. It ran contrary to the Epicureans, who believed matter was eternal and therefore had no creator, and to the Stoics, who as pantheists believed everything was part of God. (Acts 17:16-34)

No doubt Dr. MacArthur's descriptions of Epicurean and Stoic philosophy are accurate, but it was not true of the "**men of Athens**" (v. 22) in general whom Paul is especially addressing. The Apostle describes his audience as those who were "**very religious**," had made an "**altar**" of "**worship**" to a "**god**," (vs. 22-23), and had popular poets speaking of a God who was the creator and controller of their life (v. 28). In essence, then, the Apostle seems to have completely ignored "the philosophers" and appealed to the masses who did believe in the supernatural.

Somewhat contrary to Dr. MacArthur, Dr. Marshall comments on the relationship between the Apostle and the philosophers as follows:

Paul's speech, which is delivered before the philosophers, has often been thought to be rather irrelevant to their concerns, since it was directed more against popular idolatry [which is our view]. In fact, however, it would have been very relevant to Epicureans, who thought it unnecessary to seek after God and had no fear of his judgment, and to Stoics, whose concept of God was pantheistic.

Paul in fact uses the insights of the philosophers in his attack on the beliefs of the Athenian populace; the Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry, while the Stoics stressed the unity of mankind and its kinship with God, together with the consequent moral duty of man. What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then demonstrate that they did not go far enough. (281-2)

Which is it then? Was Paul's speech in agreement or disagreement with the philosophers? Apparently both, which is another reason we don't think they were really Paul's intended audience. His intention was to preach about the real God to ignorant pagans, and as a result of this purpose, he would inadvertently have points of both agreement and disagreement with the various philosophical schools, which even had significant disagreements with one another. Paul's speech does not revolve around the intricate, differing philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics, but rather, the biblical truth about God.

Likewise, Dr. Bruce notes that "Here again parallels to Paul's argument can be adduced from Greek literature and philosophy" (337; cf. fn. 66 for examples), suggesting that the Apostles' claims were largely in agreement with the "**men of Athens.**" But once again, the Apostle was obviously preaching biblical truth (cf. 1 Kgs 8:27; Isa 66:1-2; Ps. 50:9-12). Dr. Bruce concludes:

The speech as it stands admirably summarizes an introductory lesson in Christianity for cultured pagans. The first thing the Athenians, like the Thessalonians, had to learn was to "turn to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). Therefore the greater part of the speech is, as Dieblius observed "a *hellenistic* speech about the true knowledge of God." But would the historical Paul, with his policy of being "all things to all" (1 Cor 9:22), have tried to win the Athenians from paganism with a *Hebraic* speech about the knowledge of God? . . . The essential content of the speech is biblical, but the presentation is Hellenistic [a culture- not a philosophy].

The knowledge of God set forth here is no merely philosophical discipline: it involves moral and religious responsibilities, and for lack of this knowledge . . . the hearers are summoned to repentance. . . . [T]he "delicately suited allusions" to Stoic and Epicurean tenets which have been discerned in the speech, and the direct quotations from pagan poets, have their place as [cultural] points of contact with the hearers, and illustrate the argument in terms familiar to them, but they in no way commit the speaker to acquiescence in [or argue about] their philosophical presuppositions. (341)

³¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, (Eerdmans, 2000), 126-27.

³² Marshall, 290.

³³ *Ibid.*, 291.

³⁴ Likewise, Dr. MacArthur comments:

When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, since there was no place in Greek thought for a bodily resurrection. **Others**, a little more charitably, **said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."** They never would however, since **Paul went out of their midst** and soon left Athens, never to return. (Acts 17:26-34)

However, Dr. Longenecker writes:

But because no action had been taken [by the Aeropagus] to approve Paul's right to continue teaching in the city, his hands were legally tied. All he could do was wait in Athens till the council gave him the right to

teach there or move on to some other place where his message would be more favorably received. And with a vast territory yet to be entered and a great number of people yet to be reached, Paul chose the latter. (Acts 17:33-34).

This implies that it was because of legal reasons that Paul left Athens so quickly. But this seems to ignore the fact that some wanted to hear more and at least one member of the Aeropagus became a follower. Accordingly, Dr. Bruce writes: "Before this body, then, Paul was brought, not to stand trial in a forensic sense, nor yet to be examined with a view to being licensed as a public lecturer, but simply to have an opportunity of expounding his teaching before experts." (331-2).

³⁵ Bruce, 335.

³⁶ Bruce, *Paul*, 245-6.

³⁷ Dr. Bruce comments on the relationship between Paul's speech in Athens and his ministry in Corinth:

The idea, popular with many preachers, that his determination, when he arrived in Corinth, to "know nothing" there "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2), was the result of disillusionment with the line of approach he had attempted in Athens, has little to commend it. (cf. Ned B. Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Aeropagus and Other New Testament Studies* [1957], pp. 31-40).

³⁸ On the meaning of *dielegetō* see section B.3 above.

³⁹ Walter Wessel writes in William Mounce's *Basics of Biblical Greek*:

The Greek imperfect tense is both limited and versatile in its usage. It is limited in that it only occurs in the indicative mood, but in that mood it has some interesting nuances of meaning. Basically, the imperfect expresses linear action in past time. That action may be repetitive, prolonged or just beginning. Sometimes, however, the imperfect expresses repeated *attempts*.

This is true in Galatians 1:13 where Paul says, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how I violently persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it." Both verbs in the second clause of this verse are imperfects. The first one [*ediōkon*: "**persecuted**"] simply expresses repeated action in the past. Paul is saying that he often [*successfully*] persecuted the church.

The second one [*eporthoun*: "**to destroy**"] is "tendential," i.e., it expresses attempted action. (This is why the NIV adds the word "tried," which does not occur in the Greek.) Paul repeatedly [*and successfully*] persecuted the church, but his violent acts did not, indeed could not, destroy it. His actions were only attempts, and feeble ones at that. Jesus' promise about his church was true then, as it is now: "The gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Zondervan, 1993)

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, if you do not like how we have reconciled or at least addressed this obvious difficulty in how Paul's evangelistic ministry is described by himself in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 as opposed to Luke in Acts 18:4, then you have to come up with your own suggestion. This is because no commentator we could find, ancient or modern, even recognizes or

addresses, let alone reconciles, these two descriptions. This absence of commentary on Acts 18:4 is not only found in commentaries on Acts, but on 1 Corinthians as well.

⁴¹ Cf. Longenecker, (Acts 19:1-19).

⁴² Marshall, 308.