

# Paul and Educated Unbelief

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Any rejection of Jesus Christ or any of the truth-claims of Christianity is unbelief. It may be simple, polite, benign unbelief, or it may be vocal, boorish, barnyard unbelief. It may also be ignorant, sophisticated, and educated unbelief. In Acts 17, Paul at Athens encountered educated but ignorant unbelief; it was religious ignorance by its own admission. How Paul met and dealt with it is very instructive for responding to modern man and his self-made autonomy. In other words, we see here how the apostle “contextualized” the gospel to modern man in ancient Athens.

Paul is on his second missionary journey. Luke’s purpose in writing is to show the extension of Christianity from its provincial, Jewish settings in Jerusalem to its global dimensions reaching to Rome itself. The Book of Acts shows what Jesus *continued* to do through His Spirit (in a loose sense the *alter ego* of Christ [John 14:18]) indwelling people with His power (Acts 1:1). It shows the Christian faith in its true perspective, depicting the triumph of the gospel in the face of bitter opposition, far worse than it was in the gospels.

Specifically, Paul is on a mini-vacation during his second journey (Acts 17:16). He had gone to Athens after his perilous activity in Macedonia. His whole ministry there had been dogged by hostility from the enemies of the faith.

1. In Philippi Paul and Silas had been beaten and imprisoned (Acts 16).
2. In Thessalonica the unbelieving Jews incited a riot, and the believers sent Paul and Silas as to Berea (Acts 17:1-10).
3. Then the Jews came from Thessalonica and caused agitation in Berea, so Paul went to Athens to wait for Silas and Timothy to join him

As Paul was going through Athens he encountered the pagan unbelief of the city and the culture. Not given to unplugging his total Christian world view even on holiday, he viewed the world around him in terms of the self-contained triune God of Scripture. He could never divorce his thinking from who God was, or from what sin was, or from the person and mission of Jesus Christ, or from the need for repentance and faith. Even during a chance, unexpected encounter with raw unbelief and pagan culture, he was constrained to confront it with the truth-claims of Christianity.

Paul could not evaluate any civilization, or any aspect of any culture, in detachment from his religious convictions and his faith in the living Christ. At the Areopagus he was compelled to speak out against the local godless culture, and that in terms of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and his overall Christian philosophy or world view. Paul understood there were only two classifications of people—those who worship the Creator and those who worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25).<sup>1</sup> Between the two was a complete antithesis.

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<sup>1</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Paul At Athens* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), p. 1.

## I. THE PRELUDE TO THE ADDRESS. Acts 17:16-21

**A. The Anger of Paul at Idolatry. 16** Paul's "spirit" was stirred (*paraxuno*) within him." The word means to become irritated or angry; it carries overtones of some kind of emotional upheaval (cf. Deut 9:8; 29:25-28 LXX). NASB has "provoked"; NIV has "greatly distressed." Paul was aroused to anger because the city was "full of idols," i.e., the excessive zeal the Athenians had for idolatry. He could scarcely have been surprised by idolatry as such. Compared to other cities, however, Athens was given to it in an overbearing manner, and it angered him.<sup>2</sup>

Athens had lost its wealth and political empire, but under Rome it was still a city of high cultural achievements and intellectual advances. In that perspective its extreme idolatry provoked the Apostle. The excessiveness is more fully described in verses 22 and 23, and by mentioning it here in v. 16, Luke is laying the groundwork for Paul's confrontation with the would-be intellectuals in Athens. It tells the reason of, or the occasion for, Paul's compelling need to speak out. One might say that the *cause* of Paul's anger was his commitment to biblical Christianity with its strict adherence to the one true God who had revealed Himself in the Scriptures. The *occasion* of his anger here was the unbridled idolatry of the Athenians.

For the Apostle, the true God, by whose son, Jesus Christ, everything held together, was the ultimate reference point for all truth and every fact. The local inordinate unbelief cut across that article in an especially sensitive way. In other words, the Athenians were not just breaking the First and Second Commandments in Paul's thought, he viewed them in the much larger context of his total Christian world view.

### B. The Response of Paul to Idolatry. 16

#### 1. He Reasoned In the Synagogue.

"Reasoned" is *dialegomai*, to discuss, dispute; sometimes used of lectures that ended in disputations. Paul took advantage of the synagogue which gave him liberty to preach and teach. Exactly what Paul said is not stated, but it was probably no less than what he had said in the synagogue at Thessalonica (Acts 17:2-3), which was a fairly comprehensive presentation of Christianity and person and work of Jesus Christ.

Verse 18b states the content as "Jesus and the resurrection." For Luke this seems to be a summary statement of apostolic preaching (cf. 4:2); that is, Jesus as the sin-bearer of the world on the cross, the validation of His cross work by the resurrection, His ability to forgive sin, and the need for repentance and faith.

#### 2. He Did the Same in the Agora.

The Agora was the center of everyday life in Athens, so Paul also took advantage of this liberty to present the Christian message every day through the week.

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<sup>2</sup>For a description of the unbelievable number of gods/idols in Athens, see Oscar Broneer, "Athens: 'City of Idols,'" *The Biblical Archaeologist* 21.1 (Feb 1958), pp. 2-28. F. F. Bruce noted that these idols in Athens were not only masterpieces of art and sculpture, they had religious significance, being the residences and images of pagan gods. Correspondingly, Paul was filled with indignation. *The Book of Acts*, NICNT, p. 329.

Two observations stand out: (1) Paul exploited the liberties and opportunities afforded him, and (2) his message was the same before religious Jews and pagan Greeks. What he said in the Agora through the week was the very thing he gave in the synagogue on Saturday. He did not have two messages: one for the religious types and one for the intellectual types.

### **C. The Request of the Idolaters. 18-21**

While Paul was proclaiming Jesus in the Agora, he was approached by some would-be thinkers for an explanation; Athens was the headquarters for practically every school of philosophy. The stage is now set for the Aeropagus address.

#### **1. Their Philosophical Labels. 18**

##### **a. The Epicureans.**

This school held pleasure (happiness) to be the chief goal in life, particularly the pleasure of detachment from the world in a quiet life free of pain, passions, fear of death and judgment. In their thought the gods weren't interested in the affairs of men. Epicureans were materialistic and pleasure as the highest good was to include honesty, virtue, simplicity, and justice. As it turned out for some, luxury and profligacy brought the highest pleasure.

##### **b. The Stoics.**

Stoicism believed in the immanence of God (pantheism) which in turn led to a heavy emphasis on providence and fate. Stoics held to the "cycles" of the world, i.e., the cyclical character of the natural order. Each cycle was essentially the same as before, and the stream was endless. Stoics also stressed individual self-sufficiency, obedience to duty, and living consistently with nature.

#### **2. Their Approach to Paul. 18**

They were "conversing" with Paul. The word is *sumballo*, to converse, confer. Here it probably has negative overtones of dispute, quarrel, or argument, especially in light of the dismissive epithet attached to Paul—"idle babbler." That idea originally seems to be that of gutter sparrows, scrap/junk collectors, as well as those who cabbaged others' ideas and passed them off as their own.

#### **3. Their Question to Paul. 19-21**

They wanted an explanation of his "new" teaching concerning "Jesus and the resurrection." They were *not* "hungry for the word of God," but for some new intellectual scraps Paul evidently had picked up. Luke stresses the "new" things they wanted to hear, not necessarily that they wanted to hear the *truth*.

#### **4. The Place of the Confrontation.**

The Aeropagus was originally the Court of Ares, the god of thunder and war. At this time it was essentially a city council. It has been suggested that the council had some kind of jurisdiction over public instruction, such as religion and education.<sup>3</sup> There is some question whether Paul was actually taken to a hill or before a council in one of the porticos in the Agora.

## **II. THE ADDRESS OF PAUL. Acts 17:22-31**

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<sup>3</sup>Greg Bahnsen, "The Encounter of Jerusalem With Athens," *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media, 1996), p. 248.

## A. His Evaluation of False Religionists. 22-23, 30

### 1. Their Religiosity. 22-23

“**Very religious**” (22b) is *deisidaimon*—KJV: “superstitious”; NKJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, NLT, NET: “very religious.” F. F. Bruce translates it “uncommonly religious.”<sup>4</sup> The word in itself seems somewhat ambiguous if not neutral. Some say Paul here is actually being complimentary in order to gain a hearing.<sup>5</sup> This seems doubtful in light of the overall context of the incident.

“**The objects of your worship**” (23a) (*ta sebasmata*) is somewhat neutral in force but appears to be a negatively shaded comment here. Paul’s other usage is 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and is tantamount to idolatry.<sup>6</sup> A cognate verb (*sebadzo*) is used only in Romans 1:25, and there it has a very negative and reprehensible sense.<sup>7</sup>

### 2. Their Ignorance. 23b, 30

The Athenians’ “worshiping” (*eusebeo*, to reverence, be reverent; pres. participle) was in ignorance or error (*agnoountes*). Again, the remark is negative in tone since the Unknown God here is a public idol among many others. Paul’s description of and reaction to the Unknown God and its devotees is anything but positive.

What is the significance of this religiosity and worship for Paul? The Apostle did not view it as a complimentary condition nor was he granting them some kind of “common ground” of theism in general. He was not saying that they were correct “up to a point” in their idea about God or the gods. He was not offering them some kind of a theological supplement from Christian theism. Their worship was embedded in abysmal, apostate, and culpable ignorance.

At best Paul viewed their ignorant religiosity as a reflection of the image of God by which man, by nature, is inherently a religious, worshipful being (v. 22; Rom 1:19; 2:15),<sup>8</sup> an image that was marred but not obliterated by the fall into sin. Thus, because of total depravity mankind responds to God in his own self-made, autonomous, apostate religion. Man will either serve the Creator or the creature (Rom 1:25), and the Athenians were obviously deeply immersed in serving the variations of “creatureliness.”

Paul’s theology here is simply that of the Book of Romans. He knew that these people had a clear idea of who the true God was because His self-disclosure was “evident within them” because “God made it evident to them” (Rom 1:19). He understood that they showed “the work of the Law written in their hearts” (Rom 2:15). It was obvious that in thousands of ways the

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<sup>4</sup>*The Book of Acts*, NICNT, p. 332. Greg Bahnsen says the word in Paul’s use here is purposely ambiguous (“The Encounter of Jerusalem With Athens,” p. 254).

<sup>5</sup>Lewis Foster, *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1680; idem, *NASB Study Bible*, p. 1608. Jason Q. VonEhrenkrook, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Aeropagus Address and its Missiological Implications,” *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 14.2 (Fall 1998). F. F. Bruce notes that the term is vague at best, but not complimentary (*The Book of Acts*, p. 335).

<sup>6</sup>Antichrist will exalt himself above “every object of worship.” This is not complimentary.

<sup>7</sup>“They worshiped ... the creature rather than the Creator.”

<sup>8</sup>Greg Bahnsen, “The Encounter Of Jerusalem With Athens,” p. 254; Ned B. Stonehouse, “The Areopagus Address,” *Paul Before the Areopagus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) p. 18.

Athenians were suppressing and perverting this clear and authoritative self-disclosure of the true God to them (Rom 1:18-23). These people were not “searching” or “hungry” for God; to the contrary, they were patent renegades from Him and had publicly advertised the same all over their city. The valid and authoritative knowledge of God is what the natural man ever tries to stifle by means of unrighteousness (Rom 1:18), even by unrighteous and apostate religious *worship*.

### 3. The “Unknown God” and the Athenians’ Apostasy.

The designation “Unknown God” appears to be code language for the idea of an open pantheon of sorts, a monument to sheer skepticism and irrationalism. As previously stated, it is not an expression of “groping” for the true God or any form of authentic worship. It is tantamount to an admission of the total inadequacy of their religion. This particular idol represented a kind of generic unknown, an inherent unknowability or an open vacuum of pure possibility at best and absolute agnosticism at worst. “This ‘unknown’ must be thought of as utterly unknowable and indeterminate.”<sup>9</sup>

Some see the idol here as a representation of a god whom they had unwittingly neglected and offended, whom they had not in fact worshiped, who had to be appeased, and yet who was completely unknown to them.<sup>10</sup> This may be true, but I would still understand the whole edifice to represent a deeper problem, namely that the whole realm of God/gods and religion in the last analysis was unknowable<sup>11</sup> because it was infinitely beyond human cognition. It was an area enshrouded in an apostate fog of wilful ignorance, unintelligibility, and irrationality, which means there would *always* be the Unknown God.

There is something decidedly negative about this whole scenario in Paul’s mind; his address is an indictment of their whole religious system, not just a particular part of it. He seems to be making a word-play between the participle *agnoountes* (ignorantly or in ignorance) and the adjective *agnosto* (unknown) of the idol’s inscription, amounting to something like “the idol of our ignorance” (v. 23). In other words, Paul capitalizes on this public profession of ignorance concerning the realm of deity/worship and sort of reads it back to them as a perfect characterization of their entire religion,<sup>12</sup> using their own words against them.

Paul is going to inform them with regard to that which they acknowledged ignorance. He will displace ignorance with certainty, i.e., with the truth of God. Their ignorance here was at bottom a wilful one; it was sinful and apostate, and they were culpable for it. It needed repentance or it would bring everlasting judgment (v. 31).

It is probably significant that Paul deals with “what” they worshiped and not with “whom” (v. 23).<sup>13</sup> They were not worshiping the personal, true God in any manner. It is not Paul’s agenda to assure them that they had found the truth after all and their problem was only that they didn’t know it or didn’t appreciate that they were somehow in contact with the God of

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<sup>9</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Paul At Athens*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 371.

<sup>11</sup>Ned B. Stonehouse, “The Areopagus Address,” p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, p. 372.

Christianity through Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> This is a monumental misunderstanding of the issues at stake in the Aeropagus episode.

**“Overlooked” (v. 30)** The word is *huperidon*, to disregard or overlook; it has the idea of forbearance, not of complacency or toleration. The Apostle was not giving these thinkers a mild reproof; their ignorance was worthy of divine judgment, but God had temporarily postponed it. This delay was on the order of Paul’s preaching at Lystra where he remarked that “in the generations gone by [God] permitted all the nations to go their own way” (Acts 14:16). In His forbearance God chose not to intervene and summarily bring these sinners and sins into final reckoning. This divine overlooking was somewhat like the “passing over” of the sins committed before the cross (Rom 3:25).<sup>15</sup> There was a forbearance of the guilt of sin until final expiation was made which included “the redemption of the transgressions committed under the first covenant” (Heb 9:15).

There was never any toleration of Paul for idolatry. At Lystra, as here at Athens, Paul called them to conversion from their “vain things to the living God” (Acts 14:15). He always had a totally negative opinion of idols and idolatry (Rom 1:21; 1 Cor 10:20; 12:2; Gal 4:8).

#### 4. Paul’s Authority in Encountering False Religion. 23ff

Paul claims that he alone has the answer to the problem of the big UG; he also claims that he could meet their need immediately. This authority is common in both the OT and NT—the revelation of God.<sup>16</sup> The remedy for apostasy is an authoritative one coming from God Himself. No biblical prophet, apostle, or preacher ever viewed himself simply as one who offered human observations on man’s moral need.

**“Proclaim” (v. 23b)** The word is *kataggello*, to declare, announce, proclaim, or preach, used frequently of the proclamation of the Gospel or the declaration of the truth-claims of God and Christianity (cf. v. 3; Acts 3:18, 24). Gospel proclamation, as such, is based on indubitable and absolute *authority*; it operates from a plane of previously established jurisdiction. This authority is none other than the living God Himself and is inherent in His verbal revelation. The Bible and its truth-content is authoritative because God is its author, and He is the author of Scripture by means of the miracle of inspiration (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:19-21).

The Athenians (and unsaved thinkers today) would gladly recognize Paul if he came as an “expert on religion” just as they would have been glad to hear a leading oncologist as an “authority” on cancer. But they would not willingly listen to an *absolute authority* from God proclaim to them about that which they thought was indigenously unknown and unknowable.

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<sup>14</sup>Clark Pinnock views Paul’s address along those lines. “Paul is described in Athens as acknowledging the good intentions of the Greeks in worshipping the unknown God. The gist is recorded of a sermon in which the apostle builds positively upon truths the Athenians possessed in their own scriptures (Acts 17:22-31). Evidently Paul thought of these people as believers in a certain sense, in a way that could be and should be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In this speech he recognizes the wider work of God in the world, in relation to which the Gospel can be proclaimed.” *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 32. Elsewhere Pinnock understands Paul’s use of pagan poets as teaching that there is truth in other religions that can be appreciated, honored, and learned; that these religions “have positive contributions to make and a wealth to share” (ibid., p. 139).

<sup>15</sup>Ned B. Stonehouse, “The Aeropagus Address,” p. 21.

<sup>16</sup>Bahnsen avers that there are 22 allusions to the OT in Paul’s address. “The Encounter of Jerusalem With Athens,” p. 239.

## **B. The Truth About God. 24-29, 31**

### **1. The Sovereign Creator God. 24a, 26-29**

God is the Creator and therefore the Sovereign of the world and man. Paul thus injects the Creator-creature distinction early into the discussion.

#### **a. The World. 24a**

Paul doesn't quote the OT directly but he has a very close verbal tie to Exodus 20:11 and other OT expressions that are quite similar (cf. Ps 146:6; Isa 37:16). He is not appealing to Hellenistic thought as some sort of "common ground" nor to natural theology as in independent source of theological truth. Only the Bible gives a clear witness to God as the personal, sovereign Creator and ruler of the world.

Paul knows that his hearers and all people have a valid knowledge of God from creation, but it is knowledge that must finally be interpreted by Scripture. Natural revelation must be understood in the categories, or through the lens, of special revelation and its pre-interpretation of the relations between God and the universe.

#### **b. Man. 26-29**

Again Paul is appealing to the truth and theology of Genesis 1 and 2 without a *verbatim* quotation. God created Adam in a direct, miraculous, instantaneous act from "nothing," and from him all the human race has descended. We are His "offspring" as created in His image. Furthermore, every man is dependent on God for his very existence (v. 28) and for national and political boundaries (v. 26).

Athenians boasted that they had sprung from the soil of Attica and were not like other men<sup>17</sup>; actually others were considered barbarians over whom they were superior. Paul not only debunks this idea but traces their true ancestry back to the Creator God.

**"Seek God" (v. 27)** The purpose of God's creation and control of mankind is that they would seek Him since He is immanent or present in His world. This is what people *ought* to do but depravity prevents it. Thus they *actually* do the opposite. "Though He is not far from each one of us" is a polite slap at their ignorance and inability to find God. This was especially true of the Stoics who professed to believe in the immanence of god/God.

**Paul and the Pagan Poets (v. 28)** Many feel that Paul appealed to the poets as further rapport and common ground with these would-be philosophers.<sup>18</sup> Is the Apostle taking their words and resignifying them with new meaning? One scholar says that Paul "disinfected" these poets' words and "rebaptized" them for his own purposes here.<sup>19</sup> Is he saying their words are formally true but materially untrue? These proposals seem to introduce dualism and other problems that are beneath Paul and NT Christianity.

Paul appears to attach validity to the quotes although they are totally subordinate and incidental to the thrust of his address ("even some of your own poets have said"). He seems to be indirectly employing the truth of Psalm 36:9 ("with [God] is the fountain of life," or Acts 14:17 ([God] did not leave Himself without witness" but gave rains and fruitful seasons, leading to joy and gladness). The point is that God is near, even for spiritually blind poets.

<sup>17</sup>For one source, F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 337.

<sup>18</sup>For example, Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts*, in his *New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 636-37.

<sup>19</sup>Richard N. Longnecker, *Acts*, EBC, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007): 10.984.

Paul is using the theology of Romans 1:19 ff, meaning that pagans respond to general revelation and natural theology in such a way that even their perversions presuppose the truth and genuineness of the revelation itself. In suppressing and perverting the truth they already know about God, they are giving evidence of such an awareness of it. Bahnsen comments correctly: “Paul was noting the basic schizophrenia in unbelieving thought when he described in the Athenians *both* an awareness of God (v. 22) and an ignorance of God (v. 23)” (italics his).<sup>20</sup> These pagan poets were right in their understanding only to the extent that their conclusions stood in isolation from their pagan religious system that was the original milieu of the concept (e.g., Zeus theology).

## **2. The Self-sufficient God. 24b, 25**

This is further amplification of the Creator-creature distinction. As God’s offspring one ought not to think that the “Divine Nature” is material (v. 29) or is in need of anything. God is self-contained and self-sufficient. He is not dependent on anything external to Himself. Apostate thought always put “the gods” and man on the same plane of “being in general,” or “truth in general,” or “knowledge in general.” Everything shares a common reality. Hellenistic thought held that ultimately “all is one.”<sup>21</sup> What is true of man and the world must be true of God (or the gods) as well; both are correlative and reciprocal, each is tethered, Siamese twin-like, to the other. Modern thought has always been this way. God (or the gods) become at the same time both eternal and temporal, infinite and finite, abstract and concrete, rational and irrational. And God (or the gods) and the world are always in a state of flux—pure possibility, pure contingency, and pure randomness or chance—and all are essentially in a state of “becoming.” Without elaboration, these are the basic underpinnings of process theology, the recent neo-Arminian surge of the open view of God (a.k.a., free will theism, open theism), and all non-biblical philosophical theism (even Platonic neo-orthodoxy). They all do violence to one of the most basic biblical/theological principles—the Creator-creature distinction. At best they may propose an impersonal and unknowable god-postulate (e.g., Kant), but, like the Athenians, they still worship the big UG, a god without attributes.

The truth is that God is in need of nothing outside His own self-existence. He did not create the world because of some void in Himself. Humans, or any aspect of the created order, contribute nothing to His being; He does not need us for anything. We, and all the rest of the universe, however, are completely dependent on Him for everything.

## **3. The Judge God. 31**

This may have been especially poignant to the Epicureans who philosophically denied, and thus allegedly did not fear, death and judgment. Note some truths about God’s judgment.

### **a. It is Certain. “God has appointed a day”**

This “day” is probably what is known in eschatology as the Day of the Lord, in which a portion is divine judgment (cf. Rom 2:5, 16; 1 Cor 1:8; Phil 1:6, 10; Heb 9:26). In Paul’s little snippet of prophecy here, as in all prophetic truth, the curtain is drawn back a bit and a minuscule slice of God’s (mostly hidden) comprehensive decree of whatsoever comes to pass is exposed to the light of verbal explanation.

### **b. It is Just. “[God] will judge the world in righteousness”**

Paul quite evidently has in mind, without formal proof texts, the expressions in Ps 9:8; 96:13;

<sup>20</sup>“The Encounter Of Jerusalem With Athens,” p. 256.

<sup>21</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p. 8.

98:9. This means judgment according to perfect right, without partiality or favoritism.

**c. It is With a Qualified Judge.**

God had “appointed” Christ (*horidzo*, to appoint, determine), and the proof of this divine determination is the Lord’s bodily resurrection, a familiar theme of apostolic preaching. The resurrection is a historical fact that validated all of His work against sin, all of His own claims, and all of the truth-claims of Christianity itself. The resurrection gave Jesus a new status of lordship and authority to judge human sin (John 5:27; cf. Eph 1:19b-21a).

**C. The Call for Repentance. 30**

God had overlooked the “times of ignorance.”<sup>22</sup> He exercised forbearance (on those who rejected Him in favor of some form of idolatry) by not entering into immediate and final judgment with them. But with the coming of Jesus Christ and the finality of His atonement for sin, validated by the resurrection, has come the urgent call to repent (“now”). In the person and work of Christ, and especially in view of the rejection by Israel of the King and the consequent delay of His kingdom (Matt 21:43), have come God’s demands on Gentiles to come to terms with Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

“**Through a Man**” Jesus is the God-man, a one-for-one revelation of God (John 14:9). God has revealed Himself perfectly, exactly, and finally in the God-man (Heb 1:1-3), and ignorance of Him is all the more inexcusable and fatal. In the words of another,

God has now acted in the person and work of Jesus in such a manner as to make idolatry particularly heinous. To reject Jesus, therefore, is to reject the personal and vicarious intervention of God on behalf of humanity and to open oneself up to divine judgment, which will be meted out in the future by the very one who is being rejected in the present (v. 31).<sup>23</sup>

Jesus Christ is a (the only) revelatory extension of the essence of God, therefore idolatry is more than ever without excuse. The visible, corporeal coming of the Christ gives especial meaning, strength and urgency to the Second Commandment.

**Repentance** Paul implies that until the “day in which [God] will judge the world,” there is mercy and grace available to those who repent. Repentance is a change of mind about God and sin, including a disposition or determination to seek pardon. It includes a knowledge of who God is and what sin is, as well as a regret for sin as committed against God as holy. God calls “all people everywhere” to do this (cf. Acts 4:12). Repentance necessarily includes an immediate desire or intent to seek divine pardon; the actual, inevitable pursuit of forgiveness is what I understand to be saving faith. Both repentance and faith are unilateral, correlative gifts of God and both comprise the biblical idea of conversion, i.e., a complete turning from sin to God under the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Excursus on the Relationship of Repentance and Faith** That repentance and faith are gifts of God can be found in Acts 5:32; 11:18; 14:27; Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 2:24-25 and 2 Peter 1:3. To say that they are gifts of God implies that there has been a unilateral work of God the Holy Spirit that enables their exercise. The only alternative is natural ability or some form of universal enabling (or prevenient) grace.

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<sup>22</sup>See the comments on the Athenians’ ignorance at v. 23.

<sup>23</sup>Richard N. Longnecker, *The Acts of the Apostles*: 10:984.

### III. THE RESPONSE OF THE HEARERS. Acts 17:32-34

#### A. Scorn. 32a “Some began to sneer”

The bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was foolishness to the Greeks though they professed to believe in the “immortality of the soul.”<sup>24</sup> This latter idea, however, is completely foreign to the biblical truth of bodily resurrection. Soul immortality is Platonic and not Pauline.

#### B. Procrastination. 32b “We shall hear you again concerning this”

This was probably more than a curt dismissal; it may express some kind of interest, perhaps a wistful hope that Paul’s message was actually true.

#### C. Faith. 34 “But some . . . believed”

In the wicked city of Corinth God had “many people”—potential believers (the elect)—that were brought to repentance and faith by Paul’s faithful proclamation of the Word of God (cf. Acts 18:10-11). And so it was in Athens, and so it is wherever God specifically directs the Gospel to be given (Acts 16:6-7, 10).

### Helpful Sources:

Greg Bahnsen, “Appendix: The Encounter Of Jerusalem With Athens,” *Always Ready: Directions For Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth. Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media, 1996, pp. 235-73.

Greg Bahnsen, “Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North. Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1979, pp. 191-239.

Oscar Broneer, “Athens: City of Idol Worship,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*. 21.1 (Feb 1958)  
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<sup>24</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 343; I Howard Marshall, *The Book of Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 291.