

Jerusalem versus Athens: Paul's Apologetics

Acts 17:22-34

By Phillip G. Kayser 5-18-2008

When I was younger, Evangelism Explosion was used with retirees in Florida with far greater success because most people still had basic ideas of a Biblical worldview. They understood the basic Christian concept of God, that they were created, the nature of sin (to some degree), judgment, heaven and hell. But Coral Ridge Ministries recognized that they couldn't assume anything when they started talking to the pagans on the beach. Most had never read anything from the Bible, had (at best) a finite view of God (if they even believed in God), had no conception of sin, judgment, hell, heaven and a number of other things we take for granted. They couldn't relate to EE. So they really beefed it up for the beach evangelism. And three of the things they beefed up a lot was talking about creation and the nature of God and God's law. And it helps a great deal.

Well, in the same way, Paul could assume a lot of theology when he talked to the Jews because there was a huge overlap in their worldviews. But he couldn't assume much of any knowledge of the true God when he talked to pagans. Their worldviews were so different. And so I think this passage has a lot to say about how to approach our post-Christian society. This sermon is likely going to be one of the more difficult of the sermons I have preached in recent months, so I hope you have your thinking caps on. But I think this issue of apologetics is an important topic to at least introduce you to.

How do we communicate to a culture that is post-Christian? That is a debate that is raging within the evangelical church, and very few of them are following Paul's paradigm. I won't get into all the different answers that are out there, but in Omaha you can find 1) those who have opted for the old Willow Creek model, 2) those who are using the new Willow Creek model (which is kind of emergent church, 3) those who jettison doctrine because it is now seen as irrelevant; 4) those who jettison the church itself as passé and seek to have a movement of loose relationships and informal gatherings which they think will be more appealing to pagans, and 5) fifth, those who focus on winning people through activism in poverty relief, affirmative action, support groups and is primarily service oriented. And really, the last group has been doing some wonderful stuff, and so I am not criticizing them.

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But pastors have been wrestling with the question of how to reach a pagan society that doesn't want to be reached.

And even within Reformed circles there are differing approaches to apologetics. I know good people who emphasize an Experientialist apologetic, and they would appeal to the fact that Paul *knew* God personally and could testify to truth of Christianity from his personal experience. I know others who hold to a Modified Rationalist approach and can demonstrate quite well that Paul uses logic in this chapter to devastate his opponents. Others hold to an Evidentialist perspective and say that Jesus appeals to the evidence of Christ's resurrection. Others are Revelationists who point out correctly that Paul had been preaching from the Bible to these pagans for several days before his Mars Hill speech. It wasn't a one-time speech, but a daily exposure to the Scriptures. I know one Biblical Pragmatist who would say that Paul was showing these Greeks that their system doesn't work, and the biblical system does work. And all of these systems of apologetics do have some things to contribute. Because I am a Presuppositionalist, I will have my biases in this sermon, but I do want you to know that these other Reformed writers are worth reading and have a lot of great insights to contribute. But we would be here all day if I gave every point of view on every portion of this section.

The main error that I want to address (and some of the other approaches to apologetics would resist this as well) is that we must not approach apologetics on neutral ground as if it is OK to start by assuming that God does not exist and using a godless interpretation of evidences to try to come to the probability of God's existence. Buswell believed that we are all born with blank slates and no knowledge of God or law. He thinks that it is evidence and evidence alone that gradually makes people come to the conclusion of God's existence. Biblical Evidentialists like Sproul would be just as opposed to that as I am. Anyway, some of these people say that Paul was using the common ground of Greek philosophy (which he supposedly agreed with) to win friendships with philosophers. As one commentator put it, Paul shows "a clear appreciation of the elements of truth contained in their philosophy."¹ I disagree. Some of these scholars insist that he didn't use the Bible because that would have alienated these philosophers. He starts on common ground that they are comfortable with. As another author put it,

¹ J. B. Lightfoot, "St. Paul and Seneca," *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1953), p. 304.

“Paul ... did not come out fighting, ... he was far too polished a soul-winner to begin by insulting his audience.”²

I. Clearly present your presuppositions from the Word of God (vv. 17-19 and reiterated in verses 24-31) and demonstrate the inconsistency of their presuppositions in explaining the universe (vv. 22-30). Make sure you don't assume they understand anything in the bible. Make sure you don't let them think they can reason independently.

But I don't think that is true. McGregor Wright has demonstrated that Paul could not have been more confrontational in this discourse with the Athenian philosophers. Contrary to those who say he kept the Scriptures out of it, verse 18 says that he preached “Jesus and the resurrection,” and verse 17 says that he taught them day after day. It's because they are puzzled by his Biblical message that they bring him for examination to the Areopagus. They've already heard the Bible. We've got only the smallest portion of all that Paul taught to them. But even if this sermon (which lasts all of two minutes) was all that Paul said, it is clear that Paul is referencing Old Testament doctrines. And McGregor points out that Paul, in an amazingly short space, trashes the Greek attempts to discount the Gospel. Let me read you his summary of this passage, which I think is probably the best summary I have read. He says,

“In the course of moving from God's nature to the status of the creation, and so on to the human dilemma, Paul contradicts at least two dozen popular Hellenistic religious and philosophical opinions. Greek notions are challenged in the areas of existence (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), moral action (ethics), and also with respect to the purpose of it all (teleology). The entire structure of the Greco-Roman worldview is meticulously subverted, and a coherent substitute is offered in its place. There is no way to make these two *theoriai*, or visions of reality compatible. To accept the new one is necessarily to abandon the other. The two systems have different sources; one is "divine," and the other "demonic." With incompatible presuppositions and conflicting methodologies, they disagree about what "the facts" are, they lead to different practical lifestyles, and

² John Phillips, *Exploring Acts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1986), p. 349.

finally to different expressions of worship.”³
I love his summarization of what Paul accomplished in this short section. I don't think there is any way I can do justice to it in a sermon. But in broad strokes we can say under point I that Paul presents His presuppositions (which come from the bible); and he does so very clearly. But Paul knows his presuppositions will be rejected, so he uses their presuppositions to show how they don't have a leg to stand on. In effect he is saying, “If you reject what I have been preaching, let me demonstrate how you cannot reject it and still be consistent.” He is arguing presuppositionally. And if you want an outstanding analysis of the Presuppositional methodology of Paul, read the appendix on Greg Bahnsen's book, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*. I think you will find it quite edifying. I don't plan to duplicate what Bahnsen gives in that essay this morning, so I will leave you to study point number I on your own. It really is a marvelous methodology. In fact, I recommend the study of apologetics for your children's education. OK. That's enough by way of introduction. Let's move on.

II. Show no neutrality

A. *The bankruptcy of Athens (vv. 22-23)*

1. Feared demons (v. 22)

Right off the bat Paul begins to show the bankruptcy of Greek philosophy. His first words are polite words, but they are still fighting words. **Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious.** And actually, the Stoics and Epicureans were trying to get the people to stop being what this word “very religious” describes. It's the Greek word *δεισιδαιμονεστερους* (probably one of the longest Greek words in the New Testament), and it is made up of two words: “daizy,” meaning very fearful of and “daimon,” meaning demons or gods. It's usually translated as demons. And interestingly, *δεισιδαιμονεστερους* was one of the buzzwords used by the Epicureans. They used this word as an insult of the superstitious fear of demons that many Athenians had. A Greek dictionary gives as the literal definition, “very fearful of demons.” And that fear made them preoccupied with religion, which is why “very religious” is a legitimate translation. One translation has, “overmuch given to fear of the

³ R. K. McGregor Wright, in “Paul's Purpose at Athens and the Problem of Common Ground,” a Paper at the Denver Reformed Round Table, August 1988.

gods” (BBE), another has “too superstitious” (Geneva), and another has “given up to demon worship.” But fear of demons is at the root of the word.

So he is starting off pointing out an obvious fact that the Athenians are overly fearful of demons and/or overly superstitious. In doing that he was temporarily siding with the Stoics and Epicureans. I think both of them would have been quite happy with this first phrase since they had been accusing the Athenians of exactly that for quite some time. Why do they have these 30,000 public idols? Greeks were scared to death of offending their demons or their gods. And the Epicureans were trying to say, “They really don’t have any relation to your life. They are far distant. You don’t need to fear them.” So right off the bat Paul is playing one group in the Areopagus against another group. He is putting his finger on one of the most controversial spots that he could for these philosophers.

2. Worshipped idols, while skeptical of them (v. 23)

Verse 23 says, **for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship...** Notice that he doesn’t let the Epicureans and Stoics off the hook. They didn’t dare stop worshipping these idols. They would have been in trouble just like Socrates had gotten into trouble for opposing this idolatry. It meant the death of Socrates, and it could have been their death too if they were not careful. Whereas the other Athenians feared the gods, these philosophers feared public opinion. So their opposition was more underhanded. They allegorized the gods and said that they were worshipping them for aesthetic pleasure.

So Paul is already creating some tension in this crowd. He agrees with some of them that such idolatry is δεισιδαιμονεστέρους – very superstitious or very fearful of demons. But then he goes on to say, “But you are doing it. I can’t believe that these are your objects of worship.” And Paul would have been right. The Stoics and Epicureans, while opposing the idolatry continued to worship out fear of what others would think, or at least that their fate might be the fate of Socrates. They are well-admired philosophers, but they don’t have a leg to stand on in opposing Paul. So they continue to listen. “Let’s see if Paul digs a hole for himself.”

3. They admit the existence of an unknown God (v. 23)

Verse 23 goes on to say, **I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD...** This was yet another sore spot for the Stoics because this altar came as a result of one of their Stoic philosophers, Epimenides. The story goes that a plague hit Athens in about 550 BC, and no matter how much they sacrificed to the gods or applied medicine, people

were dying off like flies. So the city elders called for Epimenides, the philosopher poet. And you need to understand that for the Greeks, a poet was equivalent to a prophet. They were thought to have been inspired by the gods. And Epimenides was revered by all of the Greeks. They thought that Zeus himself inspired him. So anyway, they called for Epimenides to see if he could figure out why they were having this plague. Epimenides told the Athenians to let some black and white sheep loose in the Areopagus (right where Paul is standing), and as the sheep wandered around the city, to erect an altar any place where one of the sheep would lie down, and then to sacrifice the sheep on that altar. Since they didn't know which god had sent this disaster, they inscribed, "to the unknown god" on each of these altars. And three ancient writers⁴ indicate that there were a number of these altars to the unknown god in that city.

Now what Paul is doing here is so clever. He is showing the utter inconsistency of these philosophers. They claimed to be opposed to superstition, yet practiced it. They claimed to be wise, yet admit that they don't know the name of a god who brought disaster that no other god, including Zeus could stop. They can't attack Paul for opposing idolatry because they want to oppose it themselves. Nor can they disagree with him about His God, since they've already admitted that they do not know much about Him.

4. They worship without knowing (v. 23)

Paul says, **Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.** Let me just take that first phrase: "Therefore, the One whom you worship..." Paul is getting these philosophers into a corner. Their most revered and supposedly inspired prophet was the one who set up these altars. He didn't even know who this God was. It wasn't Zeus or Athena or anyone else that they knew because those gods were not able to help them in their time of need. No, this was a God who was totally outside the realm of Greek knowledge. And yet they worshipped Him. Just because Paul is preaching a foreign God does not mean that they can't worship Him. They already have. They were admitting to being ignorant about the most important God of all. But because they worshipped Him and because they admired Epimenides, they would have a harder time getting on Paul's case.

⁴ Pausanias, Philostratus and Diogenes Laertius.

B. Affirmation of God's existence (v. 23) and His revelation (v. 23)

1. Paul knows this God (v. 23)

And so Paul gives his first punch line. **Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.** Now there are some commentators who (because of the two quotes Paul will give in verse 28 from the Greek writings) assume that Paul is identifying Jehovah with Zeus. But it is quite clear that Paul's God was unknown to the Greeks, but is known to Paul. They had sacrificed to Zeus and he couldn't help them. And the thought of identifying Jehovah with Zeus is repulsive in the highest. Zeus was an immoral god who in no way compares to Jehovah. It is blasphemy to identify the two.

So what has Paul done so far? In verse 22 Paul has identified something that the Epicureans and Stoics find distasteful about Athens and agreed with them that it is distasteful. So he is siding with one group of philosophers that this idolatry is not good. This may upset some of the philosophers, but hey – this is a respectable disagreement. In verse 23 he shows that the Epicureans and Stoics have not solved the problem, but really are a part of the problem of δεισιδαιμονεστερους. Nor do they have the answer since their own philosopher did not know the God who is above all Greek gods. Yet, in bringing up this altar, Paul is making a theological statement that is amazing. Paul's God is above all Greek gods. His God cannot be controlled by Greek gods. And the story of Epimenides would prove that. Paul's God is sovereign. In fact, Paul will now proceed to describe in great detail the Christian God whom the Greeks do not know and show how awesome He is.

2. Paul is a spokesperson for this God (v. 23 – “proclaim”)

But first Paul makes clear that they need to listen since Paul is the spokesperson for this God. **Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.** And the Greek word for “proclaim” indicates that Paul is a representative commissioned by this God. He speaks for this God.

This is entirely outside the realm of even Stoic thought because their Pantheistic God doesn't speak. The gods of some of the other philosophers did, but not the Stoic god. The Stoic god governs all things in a materialistic way and in a pantheistic way. They likened life to a river. Though there are brief eddies in a river that might be thought to be free will, they really aren't

free will because those eddies are swept away irresistibly in the downstream of life. They were fatalists who didn't try to change anything. Their idea of having meaning was to will valiantly to do virtue, which for them meant to act consistent with nature – it's to will to go down the stream of life as dictated, and not fight like those eddies in the river do. So they thought it was important to not be ruffled by the loss of relations, finances or anything else. They Stoically endured.

Against the backdrop of this fatalistic God of the Stoics, *and* the uninterested gods of the Epicureans, Paul sets forth the personal God of the Scripture. And so you can see that the Experientialist school of apologetics does have some element of truth. But all these truths are captured in Presuppositional apologetics. It's the most comprehensive.

Anyway, in doing this Paul appeals to something that is in every man, woman a child – a desire for ultimate meaning and relationship. I think it is brilliant what Paul is doing. He has not compromised his own presuppositions at all, but he has already trashed several presuppositions of the Greeks, and he has done so in a way that they are not really able to respond. But he has also appealed a hunger that is in man.

III. Show how the Biblical truths that have been preached are opposed inconsistently

Having established this beachhead, Paul relentlessly penetrates their defenses by reiterating his own presuppositions that he had been preaching in the days before. And each of these phrases is a bombshell being hurled into their midst. We are not talking about common ground here. We are talking about presuppositionalism to the max.

A. The nature of God

1. Creator of all (v. 24)

a) Versus polytheism

Verse 24. **God, who made the world and everything in it.** This God of which he speaks is the Creator of all. This stands in utter contrast to the polytheism of the majority of the Greeks. This God made stars and mosquitoes; mountains and rivers; good smelling flowers and bad smelling toads. One commentator said, "In one opening sentence, Paul banished all the gods of Greece to oblivion and all their idols and images to the rubbish

heap. And he did so without saying so.”⁵ So when I say that Paul is throwing bombshells with each phrase, I am not saying that Paul was being rude. He was very polite as he sliced them and diced them to pieces. In fact, one of the things that likely made him effective is that he didn’t need to rant and rave. He knew that God is sovereign in saving people. Those who have been given spiritual eyes and ears would hear and be convinced. And he didn’t need to try to shove it down their throats.

b) Versus pantheism

That first phrase stands in contrast to Stoic pantheism, which sees the material world and the indwelling power of that world as being coextensive and co-eternal. Like all evolutionists, they must believe that matter is eternal. But Paul is saying it all had a beginning point and God existed before that beginning point. Paul is saying that there is a vast Creator/creature distinction. For any God to be able to create this cosmos (which is the word for world there), He had to be infinitely greater than it, and more pointedly against Pantheism, He had to be *different* from it. Paul is stepping on some toes. He’s doing it nicely, but the point is that there is constant antithesis between truth and error. Unlike so many of us, he didn’t muddy the waters in order to be liked.

c) Versus some Greek dualism

That first phrase also stands in contrast to another Greek philosophy known as dualism. These philosophies saw hair, scum and human bodies as icky things unworthy of God. They think there is not way that God would create material. So they saw a whole series of emanations from God until something that was way, way lower than God eventually produced the physical creation that we are trying to escape from. And Paul says “No. This whole creation was the direct work of a Creator God, and therefore the physical is good.” So there is yet another group whose toes have been stepped on.

d) Versus Greek monistic ideas.

But it also was insulting to all monistic ideas that saw all reality as one. And we are coming into a generation that is very monistic. The emergent church has been influenced by monism. Why is it that Genesis 1 has come under such attack from Satan down through the centuries? It is because Genesis 1 and 2 are the biggest bombshell of all to all humanistic

⁵ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1986), p. 350.

system. If you understand the implications of Genesis 1-2, you will see how those two chapters are deadly to every non-Christian form of thinking. There are entire books that are written on the profound implications of God the Creator. And I believe it continues to be an essential component in our modern apologetics. If you want to be an apologist study six-day creationism.

e) Versus other Greek materialism

2. Ruler of all (v. 24)

a) Providence

But He is not just the Creator. He is also the Ruler of all. Verse 24 says, **since He is Lord of heaven and earth**. That is a phrase that shows both God's nearness and control of all of life as well as His exaltedness and transcendence. If He does not have providential control, and is not near to creation, He hardly rules over all of life. So He is near.

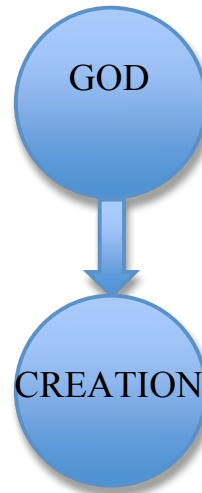
b) Transcendence

But it also shows His transcendence. Transcendence means that God is independent of creation. He doesn't need creation. And His providence and transcendence must always be held together. Providence shows that creation is totally dependent upon God, and transcendence shows that God is in no way dependent upon creation.

Well, this too is a bombshell being thrown into the Areopagus. There were philosophers who emphasized God's transcendence, but could not show how God was in any way related to creation. Others spoke of His imminence (being so near that He is in all of creation), but in the process, God is swallowed up by the Universe and is actually part of the universe and therefore God is irrelevant in *that* system too. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a diagram ought to be worth a hundred. So rather than simply speaking about the ways this phrase would be a bombshell, look at the diagrams I have given in your outlines.

a) Creator/creature distinction

The first picture shows the Christian view. God is different from creation, yet is related to this creation. He interacts with and governs this creation. He upholds it.



b) Versus the Materialist view

The materialist view excludes God altogether from the picture. All that exists is the material universe.

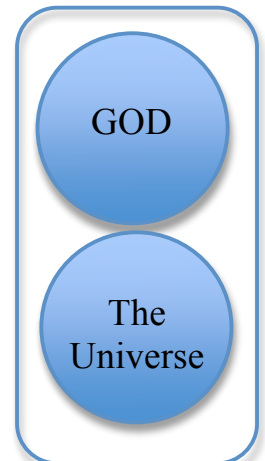
c) Versus the Pantheist view

The Pantheist view sees God as in everything and part of everything. Often they see god as the rational force within everything. But this denies a personal view of God, denies that God is the creator of all things, sees God as changing since everything else changes, sees evil as part of God and denies the significance of our personal existence since we too are swallowed up in God. God is a not a person who rules in the Pantheist system.



d) Versus the Dualist view

The Dualist believes that God and nature have existed side by side eternally. Nature is just as eternal as God is. Evil is just as eternal as God is. Thus there are two ultimate forces in the universe: God and matter. They posit an eternal conflict between God and the evil aspects of the material universe. This denies both God as Creator and God as Lord over the universe. It also denies the goodness of the material world.



e) Versus the Deist view

Finally, the Deist view says that God created the universe, but that God does not really interact with the universe. He is irrelevant to our day-by-day affairs.

Paul's view (as we will see) is that God is transcendent, yet involved; awesome, yet personal; powerful yet compassionate; holy yet merciful. In short, compared to the gods of the Greeks, the God of the Bible is very attractive.



GOD



Creation

3. The Immensity and Spirituality of God (v. 24b)

Paul goes on to discuss the Immensity and Spirituality of God. **...does not dwell in temples made with hands.** This of course is a slap against the whole worship system of Athens. Athens was filled with temples, or as one ancient author worded it, Athens is one gigantic altar and one gigantic temple. Now Paul is not denying that God's Shekinah Glory filled the temple in the Old Testament, or that He made that symbolically His throne. But Paul is indicating that the whole universe cannot contain God, and if that is true, certainly a temple cannot. But more importantly, Paul is indicating that God cannot be contained by, manipulated or controlled by a system of worship.

4. The Aseity of God (v. 25a)

Finally, Paul speaks about the aseity of God in verse 25 – **Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything...** We don't worship because God needs us; we worship because we need God. The doctrine of aseity is unique to Christianity. It indicates that throughout eternity God has never had any needs. He has always been self-sufficient. Evangelicals who say that God created man because he longed for fellowship are very ignorant of the God of the Bible. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit had perfect joy, fellowship and satisfaction throughout eternity without any angels or humans to fellowship with. God did not create all things because of needs. He created all things because of the overflow of His heart.

B. The work of God

1. Life-Giver (v. 25b)

Which leads Paul to speak of the generous work of God. Verse 25 goes on to say, **...since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.** He doesn't need anything. He's the one who gives everything. God is the life giver, the sustainer and the nourisher of all men, all creatures and this very cosmos itself. This means that God gives the very breath used by His enemies to speak against God. These people were totally in God's hands. This is not the god of the Greeks. He is not starting on some common ground. He is starting with the God of Scripture.

2. Creator of all humans (v. 26a)

a) Humans are of one blood, versus racism

Contrary to the racism of the Greeks who see various races as offspring of various gods, Paul says, **And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth.** This rules out the theories of the Identity movement. It rules out Nazism. The story of Adam is one presupposition that helps to solve racism. It helps to solve the chauvinism of the Greeks. It helps to solve the homosexuality of Athens. The evolutionary framework of the Greeks led to gross racism and other sins. But part of this great God's work is to create all humans, which means that when you despise another race, you are despising the work of our great God. When you demean women you are demeaning the work of our great God. So he appeals to the starting point in the creation of Adam.

b) Therefore all nations are accountable to Him

He goes on... **and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings.** Athens prided itself in determining their own destiny, but Paul says that God has been in such control of migrations, wars, and boundary changes - that it all was controlled by God.

3. Predestinater, planner (v. 26b)

Furthermore, God didn't just do this as history moved along. God predestinated all of that long before hand. He speaks of determined and preappointed times and boundaries. If all is determined by God and preappointed, it is all part of a wise plan. This means that Paul was opposing the pagan concept of chance. This not only eliminated the Greek version of free will, but the free will of the demons they worshipped. Those finite gods

were not the real ones who determined the flow of Greek history. God was. The altar of the unknown god would remind them of the fact that their gods were not able to deliver them or control what was happening during that previous plague. It was Paul's God who governed them and Athens.

C. *The Purpose of God (v. 27-28)*

1. For men to seek Him (v. 27)

Paul then describes God's sovereign purpose in all of this in verse 27. **...so that they should seek the Lord...** There is a moral imperative there. Men owe their allegiance to their creator. They should seek their Lord. They were created to worship Him, not the idols around them. The Epicureans were wrong to think that God had no interest in man, and they were wrong in thinking that the gods were so distant from man as to be irrelevant.

2. For men to turn from self-dependence (v. 27)

Paul goes on to say, **in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.** If he is not far from each one of us, then why is God an unknown God? It is not that God is so unknowable, but that man is morally blind. That's what the word "grope" means. Every one of them was blind. The word for "grope" has a negative connotation for the Greeks. For example, in Homer, the blind giant Cyclops gropes around in his cave looking for Odysseus trying to kill him. The Old Testament Greek translation uses the same word for moral blindness for which people are blameworthy (Deut. 28:28-29; Isaiah 59:1-10). So Paul is setting up yet another punch line to show that these people know the truth, but have been suppressing it because they do not want God. Their unbelief is not because of lack of facts or evidence. Their unbelief is a willful unbelief in the face of a mountain of evidence.

D. *Reinforcing this inconsistency with two quotes about Zeus (v. 28)*

1. A quote taken from Epimenides the Cretan (600 B.C.) – "in him we live and move and have our being" (v. 28a)

And then here come the two quotes from pagans to prove that they had evidence: The phrase, **"for in Him we live and move and have our being"** is a direct quote from Epimenides, their Stoic philosopher, poet and hero.

2. A quote taken from the poet Aratus – “For we are also his offspring” (v. 28b)

The second quote comes from Aratus, “for we are His offspring.”

3. Note that Paul is not treating these Greek philosophers as authorities, but is using a debating technique of quoting the opponent’s authorities to disprove the opponent.

Paul is not quoting them because he thinks these poets are great authorities, or worth quoting, or that we ought to study them, or develop a natural theology. In fact, if you take the whole stanza from which each quote is taken, you will see horrible paganism. Both were poems devoted to the evil god, Zeus. McGregor says,

The quotes are rather cleverly used, because he quotes a verse sounding polytheistic from a pantheist (the Stoic Aratus), and a verse sounding pantheistic from a polytheist (Epimenides) in order to confute both parties. Paul was very capable of playing off one part of a hostile audience against another, as we observe in Acts 23. He may be quoting poets rather than philosophers because the poets were better known; as it is in our own day, the artists and poets mediated the ideas of the philosophers to the popular audience.

But it is clear that Paul is not agreeing with the views about God expressed by either author. They made correct statements, but those statements refute their positions. He’s arguing presuppositionally.

IV. Paul drives home the conclusion in calling them to repent of their philosophy and to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ

A. *In relation to the past - Greek philosophy and practice are inconsistent and should be repented of (v. 29)*

So this sets Paul up to drive home the absurdity of their philosophy and call them to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He does this in three steps. First, in verse 29 he looks to the past and shows how Greek philosophy and practice are utterly inconsistent and should be repented of. **Therefore, since we are the offspring of God** [and we can agree on that], **we ought not to think** [and I might parenthetically add – as these philosophers that he quoted did] **that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising.** These guys knew their philosophers. They know exactly what Paul is saying. After the

long treatment of what this unknown God is really like, it is utterly inconsistent to have any idolatry whatsoever, whether it is allegorized or not. How can an infinite God be compared to bits of rock? Even within the framework of Epimenides and Aratus it is inconsistent. Paul is showing that the Greeks theology is inconsistent with their practice. Furthermore, they are making God in their own image, starting with man. And if you start with man, you end up worshipping something that is even less than man. So this is a critique very much like Romans chapter 1. They know idolatry is wrong. They have even said so. Yet they continue to be idolaters.

B. In relation to the present - The ignorance of God is no longer excusable and should be repented of (v. 30)

In relation to the present, Paul calls them to repentance. Verse 30 says, **Truly these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.** He is pretty bold to be calling them ignorant, but he has just finished proving their ignorance and they have admitted to their ignorance with the altar to the unknown God.

I hope by now you are seeing that there is no way Paul is standing on neutral ground. Paul is standing as a representative of the one true God who is offended by their idolatry and false philosophy. Their ignorance (the mention of which is insulting to these Greeks in the highest) is not an excusable ignorance. It is excusable when a two-year-old child does not know math, science and how to read. But Paul has demonstrated that their ignorance is not excusable because it is a moral lapse. They know better. They have suppressed the truth.

C. In relation to the future – If they do not repent they will face the judgment of God (v. 31)

Therefore he points to the future in verse 31 and speaks of an “or-else.” **...because he has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness.** Greek theology had no concept of a future judgment (and for many, no life after death). So this too would be a bombshell. We are accountable to God for our actions! He was helping them to think about the future. And most people don't like to think about life after death, but it is important that we help them to do so. It's part of our apologetics.

D. But Christ's resurrection guarantees the reality of this issue they will faith after death

Christ's resurrection guarantees the reality of this judgment. Verse 31 again – **because He has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.** Christ's resurrection is proof that a resurrection can happen, and Paul indicates that Christ's resurrection guarantees our own judgment.

Some Greeks believed in life after death. None of them believed in a resurrection. But this statement goes way beyond any life-after-death belief that they might have. The essence of the Gospel is that Christ has conquered sin and death and the grave no longer holds terrors for the Christian. Can you see why I am pretty excited about Paul's sermon? Paul starts with a commitment to Scripture, continues with a commitment to those Scriptural presuppositions and ends with a commitment to them. He calls them to embrace the Gospel.

V. The reaction to Paul's message (vv. 32-33)

A. *Ridicule by some (v. 32a)*

- 1. From Epicureans who do not believe in life after death.**
- 2. From Stoics who do not believe in the resurrection of the body.**

Well finally they have something they can disagree with without getting themselves into hot water with the Areopagus. Verse 32 says, **And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked...** None of them believed in a resurrection, and the Epicureans didn't even believe in life after death. Up to this point they did not have an argument against Christianity because anything they might say would bring them into inconsistency with their own worldview, and if there is one thing those Greek philosophers hated, it was inconsistency. But now they can get attention off their own problems and mock a doctrine that is universally disbelieved in Athens – the resurrection of the body.

But let me point out that ridicule and mocking is a sure sign that people don't have a leg to stand on. These Greeks would have brought up intellectual arguments if they had any. They delighted in discoursing about why others were wrong. The absence of intellectual arguments is very significant. Their ridicule shows the bankruptcy of their position. If you

can't defeat a position, people ridicule it. And so they are admitting defeat (without realizing it) with their mocking.

B. Procrastination by others (v. 32b)

Others procrastinated. The last clause in verse 32 says, **while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter."** This is a second strategy used by those who cannot refute the Bible – they procrastinate making a decision. It may be that some of these procrastinators genuinely were interested in hearing more. But from Paul's reaction, it is unlikely. Verse 33 says, **So Paul departed from among them.** He never talked in Athens again. In chapter 18 he goes to Corinth. It may be that some of these people never had another chance to hear the Gospel. Procrastination has led some people to hell. Paul said, **"now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"** (2 Cor. 6:2).

C. Reception of Jesus by others (v. 34)

The third group clung to Paul and believed. Verse 34 says, **However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.** Dionysius was a part of the Areopagus council, a very intellectual and prestigious group. He likely jeopardized his chances of staying on the council, but the power of Paul's arguments gripped him and the irresistible power of God's grace changed him. Intellectuals can be won through apologetics. Leading citizens like Damaris can be won. This small group of believers stepped into a whole new world and a whole new worldview. And it was because Paul was not only willing to present the truth of the Bible, but to also challenge their arguments head on. This is called apologetics. And apologetics is something I urge you to study and to teach to your children.

VI. What can we learn from this for our own apologetics?

A. Never be neutral; always stand committed to the Word of God.

We aren't Paul, and we could probably not pull off a stunt like Paul did. But I think there is much we can imitate from Paul's discourse. I won't highlight everything, but let me end with seven lessons. First, it is important that we never be neutral. Christ said, **He who is not with Me is against Me** (Luke 11:23). We must always challenge any independence that others have from God, and when they reject dependence as nonsense, you can show that

without dependence upon God, life makes no sense. It's called the Transcendental Argument. Presuppositionalism shows you how to do that. And I would encourage you to check out Bahnsen's apologetics tapes or read books by John Frame, Richard Pratt, Van Til or other presuppositionalists. And actually, it is helpful to read some of the books from other apologetics schools. Though Evidence that Demands a Verdict is Evidentialist, it has tons of stuff you can incorporate into your Presuppositionalist Apologetics. Sproul, Gerstner, Schaeffer and others have some helpful materials. If you are grounded in Presuppositionalism, you will find them useful.

B. Realize that the heart of the problem is ethical rebellion, not insufficient evidence.

Second, realize that the heart of the problem with unbelief is not insufficient evidence. It never has been. Man has plenty of evidence for God's existence. The problem is an ethical problem; it's a heart problem. Scripture portrays unbelief as willful unbelief. Men know that God exists; they know they are doing evil, but they seek to suppress that knowledge. Presuppositionalism is the approach that most aggressively demonstrates this. It opens pagan eyes to their willful unbelief.

C. Be confident that the further from God any person may be, the more holes and inconsistencies there will be in his arguments.

Third, be confident that the further from God any person may be, the more holes and inconsistencies there will be in his arguments. Presuppositionalism helps you to find those holes and inconsistencies very quickly. But so do the Rationalist, Evidentialist and Combinationalist approaches. Finding inconsistencies is one of their strengths.

D. Know your presuppositions

The fourth lesson is that we need to know our own presuppositions. Most people don't really know what their own presuppositions are. But if we begin with ignorance, we won't know how many presuppositions are truly from God's Word and how many are from our culture or upbringing. One scholar said that these presuppositions act like absolutes, and if they aren't a revelation from God, then they automatically become epistemological gods that demand to be obeyed. We must know our own assumptions if we are to be effective in dialoguing with others, and if we are even to be faithful to God.

E. You can be successful in apologetics without converting a person.

The next lesson is that we can be effective in dialoguing with others if we humble the pride of man by taking away their arguments. Paul didn't convert everyone, but he did disarm everyone. Even young people can do this if they will study Presuppositional Apologetics.

F. You don't need to argue common ground; it already exists in the innate knowledge of God, ethics, logic, communication, etc that God has implanted in man as part of His image

The sixth lesson is that we don't need to argue common ground. This is a common tactic of apologists. But it is unnecessary. Because others are made in the image of God, we already know that we have common ground with them (even when they may deny it). For example, God has implanted a knowledge of the law within every man, woman and child. Even those who argue vigorously that there are no absolute ethics will get mad if someone steals from them, rapes their daughter, or lies in court about them or commits other sins against them. They cannot justify such moral outrage, and we can demonstrate that they have no grounds for objection. But we can also point out that the reason they are outraged is because they have been made in the image of God and cannot successfully escape from a sense of ethics, justice, logic, etc. They are borrowing from a Christian worldview while inconsistently trying to oppose a Christian worldview.

Even the philosophers who most believe in chance know that this is a world of law and order, cause and effect. Why? Because they have been made in the image of God. They can't escape from logic, or a sense of cause and effect. Francis Schaeffer pointed out this inconsistency in the philosopher John Milton Cage, Jr. He believed in total chance. He composed random music that incorporated chance into it. But he was also an avid mushroom collector. When collecting mushrooms, he failed to operate consistently with his worldview. If he did, he would have died eating poisonous mushrooms. He acted as if poisonous mushrooms are always poisonous and good ones are always good and as if there is nothing random or chance about it. And there are hundreds of these inconsistencies in a pagan's worldview. They are there of necessity. Presuppositionalism capitalizes on that.

Romans 1 and 2 indicate that man not only has the law placed on their hearts, they have knowledge of God. They seek to suppress it, but it is there. And we can bank on that knowledge in our apologetics. Paul did it, and

Presuppositional Apologetics can help show you how to do so. I strongly urge you to include that as part of your children's curriculum.

G. *God provides the answer to the chief questions of philosophy*

1. Epistemologically God's verbal communication in the bible is the starting point for how we can *know* reality

The last point that I want to make is that God provides the answers to the chief questions of philosophy. We could look at many, many examples, such as how the Trinity answers the perennial problem in philosophy of the divide between the one and the many. But let me end with four examples:

Epistemology is the study of how we know that we know. Unless you start with the mind of God as it is revealed to us in the Bible, we will have a hard time justifying this question. But if the God who knows all things has revealed a part of His knowledge in the Bible, then we can truly know it even if we are not omniscient. It takes omniscience to make any universal positives or negatives. There is no epistemology without universals. But only the Bible can provide such a basis for epistemology.

2. Ontologically, God as Creator is the starting point for understanding *being*.

Ontology is the study of being or existence. I won't go into all the debates that circle around this discipline, but if the God who created all things has revealed Himself to us, then God Himself becomes the starting point for understanding being. Greeks struggled with this. Christians need not. There are only two levels of being – God and creation, and creation came from God.

3. Ethically, God's righteousness is the starting point for right and wrong. (It is not independent of God.)

Ethics is the study of right and wrong. Socrates assumed that good was a standard independent of God and outside of God. But this leads to problem. How do we know something is good if it just is out there? What makes it good? How can you get "ought" from "is." Bertrand Russell (atheist that he was) showed that you can't. But in Biblical ethics, God is not subject to law as if it was outside of Himself. God is the law. God is good. And God's attributes must be the basis for any study of ethics.

4. Teleologically, God gives meaning, purpose and direction to life and history.

And finally, Teleology deals with the causes, purpose, and goal of life and history. Since we can't study those things scientifically, it is all speculation unless the God who made and governs all things reveals His purposes and goals. And He has in the Bible. Christ is the center of God's teleology and judgment day and a new heavens and new earth is the goal.

Whether intellectuals or not, all men have a common problem. They are running from the light, but the paradox is that they need the light in order to run from it. They must constantly assume the very things Christianity teaches while opposing Christianity. They are like the runaway boy that McGregor Wright talks about. The boy runs away from his parent's Light House in the pitch dark of night. He gets into a boat and starts rowing away from shore. As he rows his boat out into the sea he can't tell which way he is going without constantly looking back to the lighthouse to make sure that he still rowing away from it. In the same way, fallen man will show all kinds of examples of looking to the light of God, while opposing the God who lights His way. It is our job to call the prodigals back to the light and point out that without it, they are lost forever on a vast dark sea without hope. May God make us effective in apologetics. Amen.