

PAUL AND THE ATHENIANS:
ARTICULATING THE GOSPEL IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

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Introduction

Who could blame European Christians today for feeling like strangers in a strange land? Ours is a world of “post-Christendom,” in which most European cultures have long since given up any pretence of being “Christian,” where our neighbours might well embrace Islam or Hinduism or some form of “designer spirituality.” In this world, the people living around us more than likely think the word “gospel” simply refers to a style of music, and they may have no idea what a “disciple” is, let alone how many of them there were. Evangelical Christians in today’s Europe find themselves a marginalised minority within a many-cultured, religiously plural and increasingly postmodern land. If we hope to articulate meaningfully and to embody the gospel within such a context, we must learn to think missiologically. We must become missionaries within our own countries and cultures.

Confronted with this reality, I sense a magnetic pull back to our scriptural roots. The earliest theologians and missionaries—mostly Jewish Christians—found themselves in a Roman Empire that was multicultural and religiously diverse. They too were part of a minority and often misunderstood faith community that had precious little social or political clout. The New Testament tells the story of how these witnesses and theologians engaged their socio-cultural and religious world with the gospel. It reveals, for instance, a church wrestling with how the gospel could be freed from an exclusive identification with Jewish culture and incarnated afresh within a predominantly Gentile environment. It spotlights writers like Paul who chisel out the ramifications of the Christian message in light of the concrete needs of mission communities in the Greco-Roman world. The New Testament writings, then, do not simply give us a theological content. They also show us a *process* of doing theology in context-sensitive ways, of engaging the dominant culture and offering various audiences a fresh and fitting articulation of the Good News. Such scriptural precedents invite us to discover analogies and patterns that speak to the task of contextualising the gospel within our life settings.

This paper will focus on one biblical precedent case from the book of Acts. Paul’s address to the Athenians in Acts 17 is perhaps the outstanding example of intercultural witness to a pagan audience in the New Testament. Luke’s story gives us a snapshot of Paul at the height of his powers as a missionary communicator, transposing the gospel for the Greeks with both firmness and flexibility. I turn to this passage not simply because it offers an instructive case study in articulating the gospel for a specific audience, but also because I believe it holds some intriguing parallels to ministry within a pluralistic, postmodern setting such as we find in much of Europe today. What is more, it touches on themes that resonate with classic emphases of Wesleyan theology. I will therefore consider not only the content and method of doing missional theology that this passage brings to light, but also its potential to serve as a model for the encounter between God’s Word and God’s world today.¹

This is the last of three missionary sermons of Paul that Luke includes in Acts, each directed to a different representative audience. In chapter 13, Paul speaks to a mainly Jewish synagogue crowd in Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52); in chapter 14, he briefly addresses some rustic pagan Gentiles in Lystra (14:8-20); and in chapter 17 he preaches to a group of sophisticated pagans in Athens. As with the two previous sermons, Luke does not want his audience to hear the Areopagus speech only as a record of Paul's preaching on an isolated occasion. This sermon synopsis offers a paradigm case of Paul's approach to an educated pagan audience. At the same time, the speech's content is enmeshed with the concrete setting and occasion described in the narrative. It is to this we now turn.

Audience and Setting

Although by the first century the university city of Athens had already lost much of its former glory, for Luke it still symbolises the cultural, intellectual, and religious nerve centre of the Greco-Roman world. When the gospel comes to Athens, it penetrates the very heartland of urban pagan culture. Luke almost completely ignores Paul's synagogue ministry in Athens, choosing instead to focus on his encounter with the pagan inhabitants of the city. Athens is therefore the ideal setting for Paul's major missionary speech to the Greeks. Luke describes the context with meticulous detail. In particular, verse 16 sets the tone for what follows. Rather than being impressed by Athenian architecture and learning, Paul is "deeply distressed" over the pervasive idolatry and religious pluralism he observes there. A city rife with pagan images, temples, sanctuaries, and altars provides the backdrop to the whole narrative.² Paul adapts his evangelistic approach to the situation. Like a Greek philosopher, he goes to the marketplace and publicly debates the intellectuals of Athens on their own turf (17:17).³

In verse 18, Luke introduces us to two groups of philosophers, the Epicureans and the Stoics, who initially spar with Paul in the *agora* and later become the primary audience for his address. The identification of these two Athenian philosophical schools is critical to the narrative, since Paul interacts with their beliefs—especially those of the Stoics—in his sermon. The reaction of the educated sophisticates to Paul's market preaching is a mixture of outright contempt, gross misunderstanding, and faddish curiosity (17:18, 21). Without a doubt, this is a difficult crowd. The accusation that Paul was introducing foreign deities into the Greek pantheon is probably based on the false assumption that he was endorsing multiple gods; "Jesus" and his feminine counterpart, "Anastasia" (Resurrection).⁴ This confusion simply underscores that the Athenians' polytheistic perspective creates a serious hurdle to their hearing the gospel rightly. Luke exposes a fundamental collision of worldviews between Paul and his audience.

The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers are not Paul's only listeners. The immediate setting for the sermon is the meeting of the Areopagus, the supreme governing council of Athens, which had responsibility for deciding religious questions.⁵ Whether or not Paul faced some kind of official trial or hearing, he was asked to explain his novel teaching to this powerful body of leading citizens (17:19-20). In addition, there was apparently a wider listening audience, including a woman named Damaris who became a convert (17:33-34). That Paul addresses not simply the philosophers, but also the council and perhaps other curious citizens of Athens (cf. 17:22 "men of Athens"), is important for understanding the critique of popular Athenian religion in his speech, especially since the Areopagus is the very group that is responsible for

religious matters.⁶ Paul turns the occasion of a complete misunderstanding of his preaching and the ensuing demand for an explanation into an opportunity to proclaim the gospel afresh in the very epicentre of Greek thought and culture.

Persuasive Features

The form and style of the Areopagus speech are exquisitely adapted to a sophisticated Gentile audience. In contrast to the extensive use of language and quotations from the Greek Bible that we find in Paul's synagogue sermon to Jews in Pisidian Antioch, this discourse reflects a more Hellenised style, which is suited to the occasion and the hearers.⁷ Luke shows Paul addressing the council with rhetorical skill and sensitivity. He stands in their midst like a Greek orator and opens with a conventional form of address for a speech in Athens ("Men, Athenians" 17:22),⁸ enabling his audience right away to feel at home. The sermon itself is highly rhetorical in its structure. We can observe the following elements: (1) a brief introduction (called the *exordium*), designed to gain a hearing from his listeners (17:22-23a); (2) a thesis (called the *propositio* 23b), stating the desired goal of the discourse—to make the unknown God known to the Athenians; (3) the main proof (called the *probatio* 24-29), in which he argues his case; and (4) a concluding exhortation (called the *peroratio* 30-31), which tries to persuade the audience to take the right course of action; namely, to repent (17:30).⁹ According to the categories of Greco-Roman rhetoric, the speech has a deliberative purpose; Paul wants to persuade his audience to come to a decision that will change their beliefs and their behaviour.¹⁰ The speech "proclaims" to the Athenians (17:23; cf. 4:2; 13:5, 38) a message they need to hear and embrace.

Paul's sermon also features various rhetorical techniques that would have been familiar to educated Greeks, notably the delaying tactic of "insinuation" (*insinuatio*). Paul postpones the difficult subject of the resurrection of Jesus to the very end (17:31), after first establishing rapport and building a foundation for understanding.¹¹ The speech is also laced with irony. The recurring theme of human *ignorance* (17:23, 30), for example, would not have been missed in this centre of learning and before a body composed of the intelligentsia of Athens.¹² In addition, Paul's message draws upon the language and ideas of his Greek contemporaries, particularly the Stoic philosophers, in order to establish points of contact with his hearers. He even quotes pagan poets—authorities recognised by his audience—in support of his argument about the relationship of humanity to the living God (17:28). This does not mean that such pagan sources carry the same weight of authority for Paul as do citations from Scripture in sermons to the Jews. Paul, however, can recognise the common ground with the writings of the pagans. He uses them as bridges to his audience, without sanctioning the belief system to which they originally belong. In short, we see Paul at his rhetorical best, making use of whatever persuasive tools are at his disposal in order to engage the Athenian worldview and culture.

Preaching to the Athenian Intellectuals

Initial Point of Contact

The Athenians have no understanding of Christ, or for that matter, the Scriptures, upon which to build. Consequently, Paul's evangelistic approach in Athens differs sharply from his synagogue preaching in Pisidian Antioch (13:16-43) or Thessalonica (17:1-3), where he can

simply assume that his audience accepts the authority of Scripture and knows the biblical story. When he speaks to Jews and Jewish sympathizers, Paul appeals to the Old Testament and takes his listeners on a tour through Hebrew history in order to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Messiah who fulfills the ancient prophecies (see 13:16-41). But such language would have made little sense to the Mars hill set. Instead, the Areopagus address unfolds a classic example of what today we might call “pre-evangelism.”

Paul begins his sermon with an introduction that establishes rapport and credibility with his listeners. It was customary for Greek orators to gain the good will of their audience by opening their remarks with a *captatio benevolentiae* (“currying of favor”), as Paul does in verses 22 and 23. Paul’s initial point of contact is the religiosity of the Athenians themselves: “I see how extremely religious (*deisidaimotesterous*) you are in every way” (17:22b).

Although the term “religious” can at times mean “very superstitious,” it is likely that here Paul uses it in a neutral and non-judgemental sense.¹³ Initially, Paul takes a respectful and somewhat conciliatory approach to his hearers’ pagan religious life. He further engages his audience by highlighting a concrete example of their worship that he has observed, an altar to an unknown god (17:23a). Such altars were probably intended as “safety precautions,” motivated by the fear of offending and incurring the wrath of an anonymous deity.

According to a local legend, during a plague in which no sacrifices had successfully pleased the gods, Epimenides of Crete counselled the Athenians to release a flock of sheep on top of the Aeropagus. Wherever the sheep stopped, altars were erected to unnamed gods, and the city was spared.¹⁴ Although we cannot be sure to what extent Paul was aware of this local tradition, it illustrates a common fear of unknown powers among the Greeks. Paul’s mention of the altar to the unknown God therefore identifies an underlying religious need of his audience. At the same time, it picks up on the theme of “knowledge,” which is highly valued by the Greeks. The Athenians’ worship of the *unknown* serves as a springboard for Paul to launch into his evangelistic message about the one true God who is *known*, because this God has revealed himself. Additionally, the reference to the altar inscription allows Paul to build credibility with his audience by removing the suspicion that he is trying to introduce foreign deities to Athens (cf. v. 18): the God he proclaims is not *entirely* unknown to them.¹⁵

Paul thus begins where his audience is and builds on as much common territory as is possible. Rather than demeaning their belief system or condemning their religiosity, he recognises there is something genuine in their religious aspirations and felt needs, and he uses them as steppingstones for communicating the gospel.¹⁶ There are definite boundaries, however, to the plot of common ground. When Paul says he is about to proclaim to them what they were worshipping as unknown, he is not simply identifying for them the God they had been honouring all along without realising it, as some have claimed.¹⁷ The Athenians are hardly “anonymous Christians.” The wording of verse 23 makes it clear that they have been worshipping a “what” (*ho*), not a “whom”; an object, not a personal God (cf. 17:29). Paul is keenly conscious that their present state of ignorance must be corrected by a *true* knowledge of God through the proclamation of the gospel.

Constructive and Corrective Engagement

Paul states his basic thesis about the “unknown God” in 17:23, then develops it through various apologetic arguments in verses 24-29. His message to the Athenians is primarily *theocentric*. It focuses on God’s character, revelation in nature and relationship to humanity. This seems to be Paul’s basic approach to people without a biblical heritage (cf. Acts 14:15-

17). Specifically, he is making the unknown God, the God of the Scriptures, *known* to his audience. It is striking that Paul does not respond immediately to the Athenians' specific questions about "Jesus and the resurrection." First he must address them at the level of their basic worldview assumptions, creating a necessary context and foundation for proclaiming the risen Christ.

Scholars disagree over the extent to which Paul accommodates his message to the philosophical ideas of his pagan audience. Martin Dibelius argues that this is a Hellenistic speech about the true knowledge of God that everyone possesses by nature, a line of thought that is "foreign to the entire New Testament."¹⁸ Viewed from this perspective, Acts 17 becomes an example of "overcontextualizing," where Luke's Paul has sacrificed the Jewish Christian gospel at the altar of Greek philosophy in order to win the favor of the Athenians. On the other hand, there are those who think that Paul's categories come solely out of the Old Testament and Judaism, and that he finds no points of agreement whatever with his hearers, only contrasts.¹⁹ Neither of these views fully grasps Paul's contextual approach. While it is true that the speech's theology is firmly rooted in the Old Testament and Judaism, Paul is able to convey biblical revelation in the language and categories of his Greek listeners--without, as N T Wright puts it, travelling "down the slippery slope towards syncretism."²⁰ Paul takes advantage of similarities between the Jewish Scriptures and Hellenistic thought in order to construct apologetic bridges to his listeners. Greek philosophy becomes "a legitimate conversation partner"²¹ in Paul's attempt to contextualize the Jewish Christian gospel for his educated contemporaries.

Paul's strategy involves both constructive and corrective engagement²² of his hearers' beliefs and worldviews. He finds his primary touch points in the Stoic teaching that is familiar to his audience. In fact, Bruce Winter argues that Paul may have consciously followed a conventional outline for a Stoic presentation on the nature of divinity.²³ Not surprisingly, Paul paints the true God in universal strokes as the God of the whole world who has graciously revealed himself to all of humankind through creation. Paul expounds this general revelation in three basic proofs, or arguments, which proclaim (1) God's creation and maintenance of the cosmos (17:24-25); (2) God's providential care of all nations (17:26-27a); and (3) God's immanent relationship to humankind (17:27b-29). Although these arguments reflect an Old Testament background, all three touch upon familiar Stoic themes and terms, as well. Stoics could agree that God is the source of all life (17:25) and that the world is ruled by divine providence.²⁴ Other points of contact include the Stoic ideas that the human race is one (17:26), that God is near (17:27), and that humankind is in kinship with God (17:28). Paul buttresses this final point with a direct quotation from the Stoic philosopher/poet Aratus ("one of your poets"), originally written in praise to *Zeus*. Paul seems willing to travel a sizeable distance in order to identify with his audience and find common ground. In addition, terms like "world" (*kosmos* 17:24), "his offspring" (17:28) and "the divine" (*to theion* 17:29) are characteristic of Hellenistic philosophers, including the Stoics.²⁵ Paul's appropriation of indigenous language, concepts and literary traditions would surely resonate with the Mars Hill crowd.

Although Paul's discourse has less in common with the Epicureans, Winter notes that they too, could find several points of agreement: that God is living and can be known, that God is self-sufficient and needs nothing from human beings, and that God does not live in human-built temples.²⁶ But despite Paul's efforts to be sensitive to the needs of his audience, an

identificational approach can only go so far. His deeper purpose is to confront and correct their understanding of God at a fundamental level. He does this not by overtly attacking pagan doctrines, but rather by positively confessing the God of the Scriptures. Against the Epicurean vision of the gods as material in essence and blissfully detached from humanity, Paul announces a God who is actively and intimately involved in the world. This God reveals himself as Creator and Lord of the universe (v 24), as providential Ruler (v 26) and Judge (v 31), a God who is near, who desires that all should seek him and enter into a personal relationship of accountability.²⁷

Paul likewise challenges the Stoic vision of God as the all-pervasive and impersonal *logos*, the cosmic principle of reason. In its place, he announces a personal God, the Creator who is transcendent and distinct from his creation, the Lord and Judge who stands over the world instead of being fully expressed within it. And in contrast to the Athenians' claim to racial superiority, fostered by the belief that they had sprung from Attic soil, Paul asserts that all human beings descended from the one man, Adam, who was created by God (17:26). Finally, with a series of three negative statements that expose the misconception of confining God to something humans create (whether a temple, an offering, or an image; 17:24, 25, 29), the speech builds a crushing case against Athenian idolatry.²⁸ Throughout the discourse, Paul uses convergences between Jewish, Christian, and Greek ideas in order to challenge pagan polytheism. This indictment is not simply aimed at the general culture of religious pluralism in Athens; it boomerangs on the philosophers as well, since they too tended to adopt a pragmatic policy of accommodating their beliefs and practices with popular religion.²⁹

The genius of Paul's contextualised message in Acts 17 is that he intentionally uses the philosophical language of his audience, not simply to stake out the common ground, but in order to transform their worldview. Behind this strategy is Paul's deep conviction that the pagan world is capable of being redeemed. Familiar terminology is therefore co-opted and infused with new meaning in light of biblical revelation and the Christ event. For example, Paul resignifies the words of the pagan poet in verse 28. We are God's "offspring," not in a Stoic pantheistic sense, but rather in a biblical sense of being created in the image of God. The quotation then becomes the platform for Paul to launch a critique of pagan idolatry: if the living God has made us in his image, we surely cannot create "gods" out of lifeless objects (17:29). Likewise, in verse 27, "seeking God" is not a philosophical quest through which God could be easily known from examining nature, as the Stoics believed. Rather, Paul views the religious seeking of the Greeks as a groping search, a fumbling in the darkness, which awaits fulfilment in the gospel of the risen One.³⁰ With laser-like focus, he moves them on to the defining revelation of God in Christ.

Evangelistic Appeal

The speech reaches its climax in verses 30 and 31. Paul's conclusion achieves two things. First, it directs his audience to the theological focal point toward which the entire speech has been building—the announcement that Jesus, whom God has raised from the dead, will be Judge of the world.³¹ This fulfils the stated goal of the speech (17:23b) by making the unknown God known, now in a more specific way in the person of Jesus. Second, it appeals to his listeners to take the right course of action. They must repent of their idolatry and be rightly related to God through Christ. To this point in the speech, Paul has taken great care to identify with his audience, highlighting a number of points of contact and agreement. Only

now does he bring the Athenians eye to eye with the crux of the gospel, God's saving action in the risen Christ, as he takes up familiar themes that appear in other evangelistic sermons in Acts (e.g., 2:38; 3:19-20; 10:42). God's new and decisive work in Jesus means that the time of Gentile ignorance is over; "all people everywhere" need to repent (17:30). That includes enlightened philosophers as well as pagan idolaters. Paul's speech, as Robert Tannehill rightly insists, "is basically a call to repentance, a call for the Greco-Roman world to break decisively with its religious past in response to the one God who now invites all to be part of the renewed world."³² As a result, the understanding of salvation at work here is not simply a matter of purifying and redirecting the pagans' natural knowledge of God.³³ What they need is not education, but *transformation*.

The themes given in verse 31 as the reason the Athenians need to repent are end-time judgement and the resurrection of Christ, both of which pose a firm challenge to Greek thought. The concept of a divine judgement at the end of history subverts the Stoic picture of the cosmos moving perpetually in cycles. As Daryl Charles puts the matter, "The Judeo-Christian understanding of history, which begins and ends with divine fiat, marks a radical discontinuity with the world view of Paul's audience."³⁴ In addition, the notion of judgment in righteousness implies that Paul's hearers are morally accountable before God. Their "ignorance" (17:30) is clearly not bliss. They must respond to the knowledge of the Creator they have received with repentance and conversion.³⁵

The address concludes with the assurance that God will righteously judge the world by "a man" whom he has appointed and raised from the dead (17:31). Paul waits until the very end of the speech--after carefully laying the proper groundwork--to return to the controversial and easily misunderstood subject of "Jesus and the Resurrection" (cf. 17:18). The rhetorical "proof" (*pistis*) that God has been revealed in the One who will judge the world is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That Paul's proclamation of the Christ story in Acts 17 highlights the resurrection and not the cross is entirely appropriate in the context, since it is the former that the Athenians questioned him about specifically (17:18-20).³⁶ The notion of "resurrection from the dead," which implies a bodily resurrection, was alien to Greek thought. The Greeks generally assumed a dichotomy between spirit and matter (including the body), and for many the body was a prison from which to escape at the time of death. Epicureans, for their part, denied the reality of an afterlife altogether, and Stoics had a vague concept of the future that involved the soul's mystical absorption into the cosmos. To make matters worse, within their worldview, "resurrection" would have meant the disgusting resuscitation of a dead corpse--anything *but* good news.³⁷ Nevertheless, Paul will not water down the gospel in order to make it taste better to the Greeks. Despite his painstaking efforts to contextualise his message for a Greek audience, the gospel's inevitable offence must stand. Paul's apologetic approach in Athens is to interest, to engage and to confront.

The Response

Paul's sermon gets mixed reviews from the audience (17:32-34). Both in the marketplace and before the Areopagus, the dissonance between the worldview of the Athenians and that of the gospel is so great that it prompts incomprehension and scorn. Luke underscores in verse 32 that the central truth of a resurrected Savior was the stone over which these Greek intellectuals stumbled. On the other hand, Luke is careful to point out that the speech was not

without positive results. Some were prepared to hear more, and others embraced the message and became believers.

Implications for Ministry in a Pluralistic Europe Today

Although some have judged Paul's attempt to adapt his message to the philosophically-minded Athenians as a sell out of the simple gospel of "Christ crucified"—a mistake which he later corrected in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-2)—there is simply nothing to support this view in the text.³⁸ All indications are that Luke regards the Areopagus speech, not as a misguided failure, or as some kind of temporary experiment, but as a model of missionary preaching to an educated pagan audience. But what about us? Can Paul's approach instruct Christians in Europe in the twenty-first century, as well? Or to paraphrase Tertullian's classic question, "What indeed has Athens to do with Manchester or Munich or Madrid?" A good deal, I think. Acts 17 has been rightly characterized as "a classic of intercultural communication applicable to our own increasingly pluralistic world."³⁹ I am becoming more and more convinced that "intercultural communication" relates not just to missionaries who enter a "foreign country," but also to those of us who are trying to articulate the good news in the midst of our own complex cultures. Certainly that involves communicating to people of different religions and cultural backgrounds who live among us. But it also applies to our witness to people from a different generation, socioeconomic background, or worldview, such as postmodernism.⁴⁰ There seems little doubt that reaching unchurched people in pluralistic, postmodern, and "post-Christian" settings in Europe will require careful contextualisation of both our message and methods. True, we live in a different age and cannot slavishly imitate Paul's specific approach. But I believe Luke's story of the Apostle and the Athenians conveys some profound implications for the church's mission in our *agora* settings today.

First, we can learn from Paul's sensitivity to the Athenians and their beliefs. Paul shows an understanding of their culture that gains credibility and earns him the right to be heard.⁴¹ He meets and interacts with them in their marketplace. He keenly observes their religious beliefs and practices. He shows familiarity with their ancient literary and philosophical traditions. He engages their felt needs. In short, he "listens" to the context and the culture, and we must as well. Particularly in a postmodern culture, any religious claims must be anchored in personal credibility and respect for the listeners if they are to be taken seriously.

Second, like Paul, we cannot assume that Europeans today understand the biblical story or its language. In a contemporary pluralistic context, no less than that of ancient Athens, many people are biblically illiterate and carry significant misunderstandings about the Christian message. In such a setting, Paul is careful to prepare the soil. He begins by affirming that which is universal and is shared human experience—God's creation and general revelation. Likewise today, the basic question of who God is and how God has revealed himself, as well as our shared creaturehood as people made in the image of God may be necessary starting points in addressing non-Christian people within a pluralistic world.

Third, Paul's narrative approach to theology and apologetics seems to be particularly suited to engaging a postmodern culture with the gospel. When Paul addresses the Athenians, he does not offer formal proofs for God's existence or communicate the gospel as a string of logical propositions. Instead, he tells the grand story of a God who created the world and

humankind, who has answered humanity's search to know him through the risen Christ, and who will judge all people on an appointed day in the future. Likewise, most Europeans today are more likely to be open to a story of a living, personal God than to rational arguments for the reliability of the Bible or to programmed methods of evangelism. A narrative approach is also important for establishing dialogue with people from non-Western backgrounds. We must tell the grand, glorious story. But we must make it clear that the story we tell is not simply one choice at a smorgasbord of competing narratives. It is *the* defining story, a story that invites us to become a part of the narrative—to let the story shape our lives. Like Paul, we must invite our listeners to see the world in light of God's story, rather than the other way around.

Fourth, we can learn from Paul's willingness to adapt his approach to his audience and their circumstances. He carefully engages their worldview and culture, drawing upon familiar language, literature, images and concepts to communicate the gospel in culturally relevant ways. As N T Wright observes, the Areopagus address exemplifies Paul's own principle of "taking every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor 10:5).⁴² In Athens, Paul sings the gospel story in a new Achaian key. The church must always understand the culture in which it is ministering and draw upon that culture's internal resources if it hopes to herald the gospel in a credible and convincing way. Might, for example, popular culture and media—television, movies, music, websites, art—be a modern-day "altar to an unknown god" that offers postmoderns an apologetic contact point for hearing the gospel?

Fifth, at the same time, Paul refuses to compromise the gospel message or its truth claims, and neither must we. Paul engages Greek culture and its worldview with the goal of their transformation. There are non-negotiables to Paul's message that confront the prevailing assumptions of his audience--the sovereign lordship of the Creator and Ruler of the nations (which requires there are no other gods or paths to ultimate reality), the universal need for repentance (which presupposes sin and guilt), the reality of a future judgement (which implies moral accountability), and the ultimate revelation of God in Christ, validated by Jesus' resurrection from the dead (which flies in the face of Greek notions of death and immortality).⁴³ Such core convictions continue to challenge worldviews that either deny the truth of the message of God in Christ (as in modernism) or question its ability to be true for *everyone* (as in postmodernism). The gospel is in some ways counter-cultural to every culture. Taking our lead from Paul, we must critically engage a pluralistic world, while at the same time offering that world an alternative vision of reality.

Sixth, the cultural and intellectual shift from modernism toward postmodernism in the West confronts us with a world that is in important ways moving closer to the one Paul encountered. Not unlike the Athenian "*agora* culture," it is fascinated with novelty and multiple perspectives (cf. 17:21). It is more open to spiritual reality than is the modern world. A whole laundry list of "spiritualities" has appeared on the scene, including a resurgence of paganism in Europe, with its Stoic-like fusion of God and nature and its view of history as an endless repetition of cycles without goal or purpose.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the challenge of religions that do not share a Judeo-Christian heritage is a fact of life in Europe today. In this new context, Paul's attitude toward the pagans of Athens becomes all the more relevant.

It is striking that although Paul is distressed about the idolatry of Athens, he refuses to flatly condemn the pagans or their religious and philosophical systems. Instead, he recognises that the Athenians, their past, even their religious yearnings, have been touched by the grace of God. The speech affirms that all human creatures are made in the divine image, that God has created them for the purpose of seeking him. This groping search may reflect humanity's sincere response to God and desire to know him, prompted by God's seeking grace. Consequently, Paul does not hesitate to look for points of intersection with Christian truth in the Athenians' religion and philosophy. Realising that God's prevenient grace is at work among people of other faiths and worldviews, drawing them to himself, will keep us from treating them as adversaries to be "conquered." It will encourage us to look for where God is already at work, to recognise "signs of grace" wherever they are found.

Seventh, we can learn from Paul's patient and non-coercive approach to apologetics and evangelism. He spends time personally dialoguing with the Athenians in the *agora*. He engages in pre-evangelism, telling the sacred story of God and humans in contrast to their culturally based stories. Paul does not attempt to manipulate them or to rush them into a premature decision. He persuades, but he does not coerce. As with the Athenians, embracing the gospel for most Europeans will require a true "paradigm shift," which will involve learning a new conceptual language, the language of the Bible, and embracing a new community and social identity.⁴⁵ There will most often be a period of considerable deliberation before people determine to embrace Christ, and then they will require extensive nurturing in the new way of life. We must be willing to lead people patiently and sensitively, as the Spirit works, through that process. "Conversion" involves more than a moment.

One important difference between our context and Paul's is that whereas Paul was speaking to a *pre-Christian* setting where people had heard virtually nothing about Christianity (and there are people in Europe today in that category, as well), the Europe in which we serve is increasingly *post-Christian* (or at least, "post-Christendom"). Most Europeans know *something* of Christianity, and many *think* they are Christians already. Unfortunately, many secular Europeans' perception of Christianity and the church is negative, and, unlike the Athenians in the *agora*, they aren't necessarily interested in knowing more. But whether we move from a pre-Christian or a post-Christian starting point, there are misperceptions to be overcome. Apologetics is still essential, but the good news must be offered in relational, community-oriented and noncoercive ways. Furthermore, we need to be reminded continually that it is ultimately prayer and the power of the Spirit, not our clever arguments, that will make the greatest difference in peoples' lives.

Conclusion

Luke's story of Paul's ministry in Athens models a magnificent balance between an "identificational" approach that proclaims the good news in culturally relevant forms on the one hand, and a "transformational" approach that resists compromising the gospel's integrity in a pluralistic world on the other. This reflects what Robert Wuthnow refers to as the problem of articulation—how to let our message and practice remain enough a part of our culture that it will not come across as being irrelevant, while at the same time maintaining enough distance from the culture so that we are in the position to shape and maybe even subvert it from within.⁴⁶ Our Wesleyan theological heritage positions us well to maintain such a critical balance. We can look expectantly for God to already be graciously at work in

our cultures and in peoples' religious and spiritual yearnings, whatever their backgrounds. We can joyfully discover points of intersection for the gospel in a worldview such as that of postmodernism. At the same time, we need Spirit-inspired wisdom to discern where the gospel defies and deposes the idols of our age. This is our task as a missional, Wesleyan church in a pluralistic European mission field. If we truly learn from Paul, we will seek to enunciate the good news, under the guidance of the Spirit, with a passion for both imaginative relevance and courageous fidelity to the transforming word of salvation. In short, we will learn to sing the old, old story in a new key.

Notes

¹ The literature on Acts 17 is immense. In addition to the major commentaries, see, e.g., Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven (London: SCM Press, 1956), 26-83; B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1955); Hans Conzelmann, "The Address of Paul on the Areopagus," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 217-30; G. L. Bahnsen, "The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens," *Ashland Theological Bulletin* 31 (1980): 4-40; D. Zweck, "The Exordium of the Areopagus Speech, Acts 17.22, 23," *NTS* 35 (1989): 94-103; C. J. Hemer, "The Speeches of Acts II. The Areopagus Address," *TynBull* 40 (1989): 239-59; J. D. Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16-34)," *TrinJ* 16 (1995): 47-62; Yeo Khiok-khng, *What Has Jerusalem To Do with Beijing: Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 165-97; L. A. Losie, "Paul's Speech on the Areopagus: A Model of Cross-cultural Evangelism: Acts 17:16-34," in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. R. L. Callagher and P. Hertig (Maryknoll: NY: Orbis, 2004), 220-38. Parts of the following discussion appear, in modified form, in Dean Flemming, "Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul's Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication," *Missiology* 30 (2002): 199-214.

² Zweck, "Exordium," p. 103.

³ Apparently Luke wants his audience to draw a parallel between the experience of Paul and that of the great Athenian philosopher Socrates, who also engaged in dialogues in the *agora* and who was put on trial for the introduction of other new divinities (Plato, *Apologia* 24B; cf. 17:18). This association of Paul and Socrates would no doubt provide a point of contact for Luke's Hellenistic readers and encourage a favourable disposition toward Paul's Areopagus address. See Walter G. Hansen, "The Preaching and Defense of Paul," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. E. H. Marshall and D. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 310.

⁴ The Greek term *anastasia* is feminine, and may have been taken as the name of the female consort for the male god "Jesus." This interpretation goes back to John Chrysostom (*Hom in Acta* 38.1).

⁵ There has been extensive discussion over whether the term *Areopagus* refers to the judicial and administrative Council or the hill near the Acropolis from which it derives its name. Although there are good arguments on both sides, in light of the reference to Dionysius the Areopagite in 17:34, the former meaning is more likely.

⁶ Robert C Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts 2* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 216-17.

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 44, n. 156.

⁸ Zweck, "Exordium," 101.

⁹ This follows the basic outline of Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 518. With minor differences, see Zweck, "Exordium," 97; Yeo, *Jerusalem*, pp. 169-70.

¹⁰ Zweck, "Exordium," 95; Yeo, *Jerusalem*, 168. G A Kennedy argues that the Paul's adversarial situation calls for judicial rhetoric, the rhetoric of accusation and defence, but he admits the aim of the speech is ultimately deliberative *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 129.

¹¹ Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 518. For examples of other rhetorical techniques in the speech, see Yeo, *Jerusalem*, 173.

¹² Charles, "Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind," 54.

¹³ Dean Zweck is probably correct to see an ironical twist to the statement for Luke's Christian readers ("Exordium," 102). Paul's distressed reaction to Athenian idolatry in 17:16 makes it clear that his audience's religiosity is not entirely favorable (cf. Acts 25:19).

¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius 1.110. Cf. Hemer, "Speeches of Acts," 245-46.

¹⁵ Zweck, "Exordium," 102-03.

¹⁶ See Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 479-81.

¹⁷ So, e.g., Raimundon Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 168. Cf. John Sanders, who insists that "in some clearly imperfect but nonetheless genuine sense, the Athenians did worship the true God...His preaching was a success in that those who were believers became Christians" (*No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 246-247).

¹⁸ See Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts*, 57-58, here, 71.

¹⁹ E.g., Bahnsen, "Encounter," 33-34; cf. B Gärtner, who stresses similarities between Paul's Areopagus speech and Hellenistic-Jewish apologetic writings (*Areopagus Speech*).

²⁰ N T Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 81.

²¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 319.

²² I borrow this phrase from William Larkin, "The Contribution of the Gospels and Acts to a Biblical Theology of Religions," in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions*, ed. E. Rommen and H. Netland (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1995), 85.

²³ Bruce W. Winter, "In Public and in Private: Early Christians and Religious Pluralism," in *One God, One Lord*, ed. A.D. Clarke and B. W. Winter (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 131, 136. For example, Cicero in his work, *De natura decorum*, II.3, outlines the established sequence as follows:

"first they prove that the gods exist; next they explain their nature; then they show that the world is governed by them; and lastly, that they care for the fortunes of mankind."

²⁴ See Winter, "In Public and in Private," 131-35.

²⁵ For references, see Hemer, "Speeches in Acts," 244.

²⁶ Winter, "In Public and in Private," 136-37.

²⁷ See Larkin, "Contribution," 86.

²⁸ On the significance of the negative statements, see Tannehill, *Luke-Acts*, 215-16.

²⁹ Winter, "In Public and in Private," 139-40. No doubt Paul's rejection of religious pluralism would have been all the more offensive in the context, since, as Eckhard J. Schnabel observes, "the cultic veneration of deceased emperors was an essential and

increasingly important element of Roman culture in the larger cities” (*Early Christian Mission. Volume 2: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 140.

³⁰ See Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 528.

³¹ Hansen, “Preaching and Defense of Paul,” 317.

³² Tannehill, *Luke-Acts 2*, 218.

³³ Against Paul Vielhauer, who claims that “[t]he repentance which is called for consists entirely in the self-consciousness of one’s natural kinship to God” (“On the ‘Paulinism’ of Acts,” in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 36).

³⁴ Charles, “Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind,” 59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 59, 61.

³⁶ Due to the abbreviated nature of Luke’s account of the Areopagus speech, he no doubt concentrates on those elements of Paul’s preaching that are distinctive to the setting and audience. In light of other examples of early Christian preaching in Acts, it is likely that Paul’s preaching of the resurrection in Athens was linked to his announcement of the death of Christ.

³⁷ Yeo, *Jerusalem*, 186.

³⁸ Most modern commentators have rejected this once popular interpretation. Paul’s statement that he decided to know nothing among the Corinthians but the crucified Christ (1 Cor 2:2) reflects an entirely different background. In that case, Paul is not reacting to his poor results in Athens, but rather drawing a contrast between his gospel and the worldly wisdom of the Corinthians.

³⁹ Hemer, “Speeches in Acts,” 255. See also Lars Dahle, “Acts 17:16-34: An Apologetic Model Then and Now?” *TynBull* 53 (2002): 313-16 and Yeo Khiok-khng’s stimulating attempt to apply Paul’s rhetorical approach in Acts 17 to a contemporary Taoist context in China (*Jerusalem*, 190-97).

⁴⁰ “Postmodernism” here refers to the ideology and spirit of the new period of time that seems to be upon us. Although it is hard to be precise about the meaning of the term, since it stands for no single, clearly articulated worldview, it has emerged out of a deep suspicion of “modernism,” with its belief in the inevitability of human progress through rational and scientific knowledge. Postmodernism, among other things, rejects objective knowledge and universal truth claims as forms of power that abuse and oppress. Instead, it recognizes the validity of an endless variety of particular points of view. See further, David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Assessment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Leonard I. Sweet, *Post-modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000).

⁴¹ See Charles, “Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind,” 60.

⁴² Wright, *Saint Paul*, 80-81.

⁴³ See Charles, “Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind,” pp. 60-61; Williams, *Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 309.

⁴⁴ See Marc R. Spindler, “Europe’s Neo-Paganism: A Perverse Inculturation,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11 (1987), 8-11. The sanctioning of pagan weddings as official marriage ceremonies in Denmark is one recent case in point.

⁴⁵ See Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 47-64.

⁴⁶ Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3-5.