

PAUL'S PURPOSE AT ATHENS

and

The Problem Of "Common Ground"

by

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A Discussion of the question of
what kind of common ground with the secular mind is implied
by the Apostle Paul's Areopagus Address in Acts 17.

Originally read as a Paper at the Denver Reformed Round Table,
August 1988, and revised for publication November 1993.

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PAUL'S PURPOSE AT ATHENS

The Problem Defined

What was the Apostle Paul's apologetic methodology as he spoke before the Areopagus? Was it a *search for common ground* on which, together with the Athenian philosophers, he could then approach the intellectual challenge of the Gospel with neutral objectivity? Or was it *some kind of confrontation* in which two incompatible world views touched momentarily, found no obvious bridge between themselves, and then fell apart again, never more to meet? Or is there some *third position* which picks up the advantages of each of these views without their supposed disadvantages?

That this is a live question among Evangelicals today may be gathered not only from the most-used textbooks on apologetics, but also from more popular publications. I once received through the mail a pamphlet called *Common Ground* which is distributed in large numbers to evangelical churches by Search Ministries Inc. This group is concerned with equipping believers with useful ideas and information about personal outreach, apologetics, and friendship evangelism. Their publications are always helpful, but are usually limited to a rather traditionalist form of "evidentialist" apologetics. Rarely do they face the problem of competing world views, based as they often are, on incompatible assumptions about God, Man, and salvation. The August '88 edition however, took "Understanding Worldviews" as its topic. It followed roughly the outline found in James Sire's helpful IVP book *The Universe Next Door*. The tract opened with the example of a Christian having been set back unexpectedly by the sudden awareness that the friend to whom he is witnessing is already possessed of a "world view" very different from his own, as reflected in his pantheistic notion of God. Then, taking their cue from Paul's defense of the nature of God at Lystra (Acts 14:8-20), they moved to a list of important world views mentioned by Sire, and made some useful suggestions about how to respond to world view issues.

I was struck however, by the problem implied by their final piece of advice. They asked, "What kinds of tools would you give to them" (that is, give to the non-Christians you are witnessing to) "that would help them consider Christianity from the vantage-point of their world view?" It occurred to me that *the unbeliever always and inevitably looks at Christianity and at everything else from the standpoint of his own world view, so why would I want to "help him" to do this?* Surely the problem in evangelism is more like trying to get the unbeliever to look at things from the Christian point of view? Should we not be trying to get the unbeliever to see that on the basis of his own world view, *nothing makes much sense at all*, including Christianity? What did the Search writer mean by his question?

More remarkable still, Paul's encounter with the Greco-Roman world view in the Areopagus address in Acts 17 is not even mentioned, while Acts 14 is cited when it only has three verses dealing with the pagan world view. Does Paul look more like he is appealing to "common ground" in Acts 14 than he does in Acts 17? We could compare Acts 14:17 with Matt 5:45, and raise the question of "common grace," but the Search article did not appeal to this doctrine either.

There is little doubt that the Areopagus Address is something of a puzzle to most Evangelicals as they read through Acts. It certainly seems to lack the central themes of the usual Gospel message as commonly conceived. It makes no mention of the Cross, or of the Atonement. There is no reference to being born again, or to faith in Christ, to justification, to the significance of baptism, to the law-grace controversy, to the fulfillment of prophecy, or even to Paul's authority as an Apostle. Nevertheless, his case does move from the nature of the true God to our responsibility as those beings who are morally answerable to him, and finally to the need for particular salvation through a human Judge who has risen from the dead. The four systematic divisions of Theology, Anthropology, Soteriology, and Eschatology are therefore touched on in their correct logical order. Could this pauline presentation be a key to how the great Apostle

wanted the early stages of evangelism to be done? Could we call it, with Francis Schaeffer, "pre-evangelism?" *What was Paul's precise purpose in this lecture?*

Our central concern in this paper is to examine the contention that Paul sought to find and identify a "common ground" within Greek thought, in order to "build a bridge" across which the Gospel could pass. Sir William Ramsey and others have speculated that Paul not only tried to do this and failed, but also that he came to realize that his method of apologetics at Athens was a mistake, and that he had changed his tactics by the time he got to Corinth in Acts 18. At Athens he had tried to speak "wisdom to the wise," while at Corinth he decided to repudiate this method, and sought to preach only "Christ crucified" instead. The first two chapters of 1 Corinthians would then reflect this change of heart. But is this scenario very likely?

Over against this odd theory, it will be our contention here that not only there is nothing in Acts 17 for the writer of 1 Corinthians to repudiate, but rather the opposite. In both passages Paul opposes the pretensions of an autonomous Greek "wisdom." When preaching to pagans, Paul assumed that a definite type of "common ground" already existed, not in the fallen philosophy and religion that so angered him, but in the nature of his hearers as made in God's image. Far from trying to establish any kind of philosophical "bridge" for the Gospel message, Paul was primarily concerned with setting forth *a clear contrast* between Paganism and the Gospel. Acts 17 therefore sets forth as clear a choice as possible between the Greco-Roman world view of the Athenian culture, and Paul's own Christian view of Reality, based initially in the Hebrew Bible. In the Areopagus Address, we see just how complete was the contrast between the Demonic Theoria (Satan's world-view) and the rival Divine Theoria (God's world-view) which Paul brought to the philosophic market-place in Athens.

World Views In Collision

The occasion of Paul's appearance before the ancient and honorable council of the Areopagus is described in Acts 17:17-21. While he was preaching "Jesus and the resurrection," certain Stoics and Epicureans demanded that he present his credentials to the appropriate authorities, since some thought he was "a propagandist for foreign deities." The names *Iesous* and *Anastasis* are male and female proper nouns in Greek and a superficial hearer might easily have thought that he was announcing a typical pair of foreign gods, a male divinity and his female consort. Gods commonly went about in such pairs, even when they were only symbols of philosophic abstractions. Be that as it may, Paul was certainly setting forth the risen Christ as the solution to the city's problem of idolatry. And certainly the two most popular schools of philosophy, the Stoics and the Epicureans, had failed to wean Athens from extreme superstition, although they had had four or five centuries to do it in. Neither Stoicism nor Epicureanism had any solution to the problem of idolatry, a problem they were quite conscious of, and which they both exposed in their own philosophical writings, as well as in their plays and poetry. Many sophisticated Greeks actually thought that they were "enlightened" by Wisdom herself, and were above the foolishness of idolatry. Paul, it seems, did not think so, but he was willing to avail himself of the opportunity to address the Areopagus council personally. Verses 22- 31 provide at least an outline of what he said.

We shall now examine this confrontation, verse by verse. Recall that we are here looking for evidence of Paul's search for "common ground" and of his "bridge-building."

Verse 22 Paul begins by saying that from his point of view, (*theoreo* means to behold, or view as a whole) the Athenians are overwhelmingly religious, even "superstitious in everything." Religion seems to be the dominant influence in their lives. The Greek adjective *deisidaimonesterous* has 19 letters and must be one of the longest words in the Greek New Testament. It is not very flattering, and corresponds exactly to the Latin *superstitiosus*, and literally means "superstitious" in the sense of being extremely fearful of the gods. It was the term used at the time for "private superstitions" or ethnic religions. It is not enough to weaken the force of this word by rendering it "very religious" as the RSV and other recent translations do. The term is

decidedly not a compliment, even in 25:19, where the noun form refers precisely to a contemptible ethnic religion (the Judaism of Paul's accusers) as distinct from formal and well-mannered reverence for the state religion. The Greeks and Romans both distinguished between formal state religion and the private "superstitions" or religions of the masses, and much disgust could be shown for ethnic religions when they conflicted with official formalities. This was one of the main causes of contempt for Christians (and for the Jews before them) throughout the Empire, that they refused to bow to public idols. They were therefore occasionally accused of "atheism" or rejection of the gods. Since the Epicureans were rather cynically "agnostic" about the gods, believing them to be too high up the chain of existence to be interested in human affairs, while the Stoics believed that their philosophy was a sophisticated substitute for popular superstition, it can hardly be claimed that Paul's opening gambit was a good example of bridge-building! On the contrary, he puts his finger on a well-known sore spot straightaway -- that the pagan philosophers had failed to diminish the abuses of idolatry in Greece, and their culture was still wholly given over to it, as verse 16 indicates. Paul was enraged by its obvious dominance.

Verse 23 Paul opens his explanation by saying that he observed their "objects of worship" (they worshipped *things*, these people!) The images were large and overpowering physical objects, for he says that he had to "gaze up" at them. Those of us who have seen pictures or even the originals of Greek statues in museums have seen just a marble carving. The Greeks however, did not leave the marble bare; they painted their images realistically to look like the real thing. Greek idols therefore combined the art of the sculptor with that of the painter to produce a very powerful piece of art.

But one altar there was devoted by an inscription, "to an unknown god." This, he says, is self-confessed ignorance, which he is there to correct. Far from sounding like a bridge-builder seeking common ground, Paul has stated a very clear contrast, and set up the Athenian religion for a broadside attack. The best the Hellenistic world can provide is about to be challenged on its own home turf! One is reminded of Jesus' statement to the Samaritan woman in John 4:20-23, when she wanted to argue about which city one should worship in; "You don't know what you are worshipping; salvation is of the Jews." If Paul had wanted to establish philosophic common ground in the Hellenistic world view, he would better have begun by complimenting the Athenians on their valid religious insights, and agreeing specifically with certain of their teachings. He could then have moved from the areas of agreement to the more unique claims of the Gospel. In fact, he did the very opposite; it's now time to identify the *true* God.

Verse 24 Not only is the true God knowable says Paul, but he is actually known as the Creator. God is not an unknowable *Theion* (an indefinite divine Being) back behind the appearance of the world, as the Stoics thought, but contrary also to the Epicureans, he is the sovereign Lord, the maker of "the Cosmos and everything in it." This shoots down Greek polytheism, in which various phases of the world are made and ruled by various finite deities. And contrary to the Stoics, God is not merely the rational principle immanent in an otherwise impersonal universe. On the contrary, he is the one infinite-personal character behind the very meaning of the word "being." This offsets Greek pantheism, with its ultimately monistic presupposition that "All is One."

Instead, Paul starts where God's own interpretation of reality starts, with the Creator-creature distinction of Genesis 1:1. Both the visible heavens and earth, and the invisible life of the human soul are God's. He is omnipresent, and therefore cannot be located in a man-made temple. Localization of demonic manifestations was very important to Greek piety. Paul sets this aside as being logically inconsistent with God's creatorial sovereignty over the space-time universe.

Verse 25 Worse still, Paul insists that what we contribute with our human efforts at worship is simply unnecessary. Contrary to the Greco-Roman notion of the gods' needing our spiritual support and ministrations, Paul's God needs nothing. We can add nothing to God's power or value by what we do. Paul is here dismissing the entire panoply of pagan liturgical and temple activity as useless in the search for God.

He indicates that God was utterly complete before he created the world, for he is the sole Origin of all being, life, and meaning. In particular, this includes the entire human race.

Verse 26 The whole human race is a unity. Contrary to Greek mythology, all the races derive from one original human being. We are not the physical offspring of a variety of gods who came to earth at various times in the heroic past. In addition, God has sovereignly predetermined the structure and distribution of the migrations of the nations, even down to where they will finally live. God controls history by his own predestination. Contrary to both Greek religion and Greek speculation, nothing happens by mere chance, for God's plan and purpose is back of everything. This not only eliminates human free will as the Greeks understood it, but also the free will of the gods themselves. These finite Greek gods have no power to influence the flow of Reality as foreordained by the Creator.

Verse 27 There is a sovereignly predetermined purpose in all this. God's ontological support of the process of human activity is in order that they might seek him. It is man who needs God, not God who needs man. It remains an open possibility that at least some people might "feel after" God, and even "find him." All human beings have this potential, for surely every human heart is accessible to a sovereign God. And far from only being found after a prolonged spiritual struggle or mystical quest, God is "not far from every single one of us." The Epicureans in particular, were wrong about the gods having no interest in human life. God is close to the individual, and can be known by anyone who wants to know the truth. There is apparently no elitism in Paul's view of spirituality.

Paul's vision of reality was very different from the Greek outlook. Their tradition taught that there were three kinds of people, the fleshly people, enmeshed in their material bodies (called the *sarkikoi*), the soulish or average natural people (the *psuchikoi*), and the innately spiritual people (the *pneumatikoi*), who were the ones most likely to respond to higher truth. The fleshly were thought of as hopeless, being slaves to a material existence. The soulish ones were difficult to convert, but they might come around if they had enough opportunity and education. That is, they were worth pursuing, but one should not waste too much time on them. The "spirituals" responded almost immediately, having more "logos" or "spirit" than the others. In contrast to this spiritual snobbery, for the Apostle Paul there were only two kinds of people, the believers and the idolaters, the saved and the lost. He was clearly committed to what Reformed theologians came to call the "free offer of the Gospel."

Verse 28 For Paul, God's omnipresent being is the ontological support for our finite existence from moment to moment, as his epistles teach clearly. He quotes from the Greek poets in order to demonstrate their contradictory ideas, not because he agrees with them. He quotes Aratus (a Stoic poet) "for we are even his offspring," in order to characterize the *polytheism* so common in even the best Greek thought. It was widely believed that different races and types of mankind owed their differences to their being descended from different deities who mated with humans, so creating the age of Heroes. Epimenides (an even earlier authority appealed to by the Epicureans) supplies an often-quoted line, "in him we live and move and have our being," so identifying the *pantheism* underlying so much of their popular worship. 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 on this occasion rather than philosophers, because the poets were better known. As currently in our own day, the artists and poets mediated the ideas of the philosophers to the popular audience.

Paul could not possibly have agreed with the views of the divine nature expressed in either of these poets in their original context, for he had already excluded these views in the previous few verses. Paul's interest is in showing from their own authorities that the Greek views of God are self-contradictory. He is exposing the internal incoherence of Greek thought by playing polytheism off against pantheism. More technically, he is forcing his audience to confront the "One-and-Many" problem as it applied to their

ultimate source of meaning, their gods. He demonstrates from their own literary sources that the world by its own wisdom, "knew not God." No doubt there is a search for truth to be followed in Greek thought, and some Greeks must have had clear intimations of what God must be like. Perhaps it may be a dubious "feeling after," and a very approximate "finding," but it was real enough in the religious experience of paganism, and deserved the clarification that only a fresh *theoria* could provide. The Athenians needed a completely new "beholding," an alternative "world view," in order to have a workable truth about God. Archimedes had said that all he needed was "a place whereon to stand," (*pou sto*), and he could have moved the earth with a lever. But where can a mere mortal stand to move the world, much less to grasp God? The Greek seeker is likewise looking for a fixed reference-point in the flow of Being, but how can it be found in Heraclitus' ever-flowing river? Meanwhile, the discovery that one's basic outlook is internally contradictory is a powerful reason for seriously considering another viewpoint.

Verse 29 Paul then proceeds to argue that the Greek theory and the Greek practice are also inconsistent with each other. If our nature is derived from God, as his sons and daughters, how can God's nature be like these physical idols the Greeks adore? "You made these things yourselves! How can an infinite and eternal Creator be compared with mere bits of his finite, temporal creation? Idolatry is a crock! There is no great Scale of Being in which both God and the creation together participate! Mere human meditation will never reach the true God." Paul is not only arguing that their worship reflects a lower view of God than their theology would warrant, but also implies that the natural human tendency is to make a god in the image of human ideas. Starting with man, we do not reach God, but we arrive finally at something even less than the worshiper himself. This is an important step in Paul's thought, and exactly reflects the highly accusatory material of Romans 1.

Verses 30-31 Paul now moves to the conclusion, reminding them on the way, of the admitted ignorance he had started with. It is really no wonder that the Greek world view and worship were so inconsistent, he says, for they were both based on ignorance. The whole project of arguing from the creation to the nature of the Creator is a failure; "natural theology" (first invented in the West by the Greeks) does not work, even though there are revelatory implications in the structure and details of the Creation, sometimes referred to by theologians as "general revelation," and referred to by Paul in Romans 1. The real solution to knowing God is to hear him identify himself to us in *a divine Word from himself, directly given as a historical event*. God has announced that this ignorance of his real nature must come to an end in a specific historical verbal revelation, requiring not more speculation, but repentance before the sovereign Creator himself. This revelation comes as an announced command to all men everywhere to repent, to change their minds about the source of religious truth. The Truth is to be found in a specific historical Messiah, who was not even a Greek, let alone an Athenian! And God has identified this particular man in time and space by the most startling miracle conceivable; by raising him from the dead! The term '*apangelo*' translated "commandeth" in the KJV, means to make a public announcement, such as the proclamation of the legal decrees of a king or of the governor of a city, or the orders and commands of a general transmitted to the army through a subordinate officer. That is, God's revelation in Christ is an authoritative command that must be obeyed. Everyone must change his mind about it all, and accept God's own interpretation of reality as their epistemological starting-point. Fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of Wisdom, of Knowledge, and of Instruction (Prov 1:7, 9:10, 15:33), not a conclusion developed by the autonomous Greek intellect.

Eschatology is found in all religions, but the Jewish tradition spoke of a coming Judgement Day foreordained by God himself, at which his Messiah would judge the whole world. Thus Paul's religion was no national or localized *superstitio*, no merely privatized opinion, but an all-embracing, comprehensive religious world vision, with a universal moral claim on all mankind, both Jew and Gentile, (on "all men everywhere . . . in the inhabited earth.") The unity of the human race is a remarkable theme in this sermon, and embraces not only the material on human origins in Genesis (such as 9:19) but the notations on human unity found in the book of Revelation too (such as the "earth-dwellers" in 3:10, etc.)

Epistemologically, God's verbal revelation is to be made the starting-point for answering the question of how we know reality. Paul seeks to show the Athenians that they have begun in ignorance, and ended by worshipping objects made by their own hands.

Then, *Ontologically*, God himself as the Creator is the starting-point for understanding Being. There are only two levels of being, not one; they are the Creator and his creation. Nothing exists outside these two categories.

Ethically, we are then told that God's own righteousness is to be the standard for judgement. Contrary to Socrates, the Good is good because God himself is the standard; God does not approve of the Good as Socrates thought, because it is good independently of himself.

Finally, or *Teleologically*, God has had a purpose in it all. History is not merely a meaningless series of cyclic returns, for all is moving towards the great historical climax. History is linear, not cyclic, and so God controls the future too! Time is moving on from the Age of Ignorance to a coming Age of Truth, and you Athenians must move with it. Far from each immortal soul being finally reabsorbed into the One (as Socrates imagined), everyone will be raised an individual with an immortal body to be personally confronted by God in Jesus at the final judgement.

The reference to a resurrection of the body was the final straw for this sophisticated audience. At last it dawns on the listeners what "*anastasis*" really is. This Resurrection is not a goddess, but a real event in history! In fact, it is the objective ground for identifying God's Chosen One, a proof offered publicly to all. Against Greek analytical skepticism, Paul asserts that it is possible to recognize an adequate ground of certainty, and this he identifies with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The Greeks held that we are part chaotic matter, and part immortal soul. The body tends toward decay, finally to be dropped altogether in death, as the soul glides up the Chain of Being to immortal union with the unknowable divine One. The last thing the soul needs is to be tied to a physical body again. For a true philosopher to point to a physical resurrection as a mark of divine approval was the height of absurdity. The higher reaches of the evolving Chain of Being have no need of the material body. This is an error repeated over and over again in our own day, on *Star Trek* (both the original series and in the "New Generation") in which higher beings without physical bodies, and barely distinguishable from demons, are always assumed to be more "evolved" than we mere humans are, with our dreadful material bodies. In one episode, Captain Picard is actually addressed by a bodiless entity as an "ugly bag of mostly water"! This quaintly literal description of a human body was intended to emphasize how far above us the entity was on the great scale of evolving Being. Many of these "higher life-forms" are also presented as having evolved *beyond good and evil*. The same claim was habitually made for the Greek deities.

Verse 32-33 At this point, Luke reminds us that the preaching of the Gospel is a divisive affair. He leaves us with an important paradigm in his noting the three responses to the preaching. The first is derision; "This babbling is crazy after all." They laughed and walked away. A second group realized that they had just encountered the most earth-shattering, comprehensive intellectual challenge to the Greek *Theoria* ever heard in Athens, and they could not let it drop. They were captivated, threatened, and puzzled all at once; "We will hear you again about this stuff" they guardedly said. But there was a third small group who clung to Paul and believed. One was Dionysius of the Areopagus council itself. Another was probably a visiting foreigner, a woman named Damaris, in town on business or pleasure. There were others, but not many. Sadly, Paul never had an occasion to write a "Letter to the Athenians." But on that fateful day before the Areopagus, half a dozen among the hundreds of Athenians heard a challenge which gripped them with irresistible power, and opened up to them an entirely different universe of reality. By God's grace they stepped into a new and saving world view, and that forever. These were the third group, those that believed, and for them, the adventure of eternity had begun.

All preaching of the Gospel of Grace has ever since this time, divided the audience into these three groups, with a few small variations and sub-categories. And Apologetics, the clearer the distinction is made between Christian and non-Christian world views, produces the very same effect.

The Methodology Implied

No doubt Luke has given us only a brief summary of the full presentation that Paul would have made to the Athenians. Perhaps Luke took notes, or Paul was later asked to give a summary. But we may be confident that the essence is all there, as to both fact and argument.

First, Paul seeks to contrast the Hellenic world view with that of the Bible, with respect to God's nature (*to Theion*, verse 29), the world's created dependence (verses 24-26) and our uniform moral responsibility (verses 30-31). He begins by showing that the presuppositional under-structures of these two world visions are incompatible.

Second, Paul sought to make men's ethical divergence from God's character to be at the heart of the problem, not mere ignorance or finitude. The issue is sin and this can only be addressed by changing one's mind about the ultimate ethical reference-point, which is God in Christ as Judge. If sinners will not receive Christ as Judge and Savior now, they will be left with Christ as a Judge only, in the future.

Third, Paul sought to show that the Christian world view focuses on two equally historical events, the past incarnation and death of Christ on the one hand, and the future second coming of "this same Jesus" as final Judge. It is the resurrection that links these together. Between these two events and moving towards the second, are all of mankind, whether Jews, Greeks, or Barbarians. History is God's story before it is ours. The world's diversity manifests God's plan, and its unity reflects the coherence of his creatorial sovereignty. Its future direction fulfills God's purpose comprehensively.

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 opinions from the Hellenistic religious and philosophical world-view. 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 world view is meticulously subverted, and a coherent substitute is offered in its place, based on the Bible's Creator-creature distinction. 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 finally they demand different expressions of worship.

Specifically, the Hellenic world view is internally inconsistent with itself in both its theory and its practice, and the practice does not even reflect what truth there is in the illogical theory. That is, Paul applies the Coherence Test to Greek thought, and it fails. Further, it cannot cope with either the facts of history (such as the unique life and death of Jesus), or the acts of God (such as Christ's resurrection). That is, it stands in sad need of a divinely-given reference-point, a place to stand for handling the ancient and vexed problem of how an ultimate unity can relate to an ultimate diversity. Paul therefore also made use of the Correspondence Test.

Paul was not looking for a class of innately spiritual people who he could encourage to autonomously evaluate and accept his Gospel, to evaluate and pass judgement on the truth of God, to pass a "verdict" on the "evidence." God commands all men everywhere to "repent," not to "judge for themselves" autonomously. He knows quite well that the fallen consciousness is making false judgements "for itself" on the basis of their fallen presuppositions every moment of the day. He therefore spoke openly to all in the

marketplace, and offered Christ freely to all. For Paul, anybody at all might be a potential convert. After all, even a nasty little fanatical Jewish theological student could be thrown off his horse on the road to Damascus and brought to his senses spiritually! Did not Paul know of such a case?

Paul's methodology in this address is primarily one of describing the contrast between his own world view with the non-christian vision of reality, as it happened to be expressed at that moment in history in the Hellenistic world view. He makes the basic religious concepts of salvation and worship depend as personal responsibilities upon correct specific concepts of both the divine and human nature, with the divine nature being the origin of the meaning of the human. Strato of Lampsacus was simply wrong to imagine that the principles (axioms, presuppositions), for understanding the world must be found in the world itself, rather in a God outside the world. Thus Paul also raises the issue of the *Location of Ultimacy*, which is the test of one's ultimate Presuppositions.

Further, he is anxious to point out the self-contradictory nature of the non-christian world view as well as its inability to cope with historical facts which tell against it. The non-christian world view is up against both logic *and* fact. It cannot bring them together, and it cannot make them intelligible separately.

Again, the non-christian world view produces absurd results (such as idolatry) despite what degrees of sincerity and the desire for God the heathen can muster. Heathen religion, far from lifting man up to connect with God, debases God to the level first of human intellectual failure, then below man to animals, and below that again to material images. From this, the idolater proceeded to violate his own body (Rom 1:24-26). This is the Test of Ethical Fulfillment.

The cause of this whole debacle is the non-Christian's fallen starting-point. Presuppositions function as one's ultimate reference-point, and they control everything across the board, much like the rules in a game of chess. They predetermine what is "possible" for every move on the board. The dilemma is that while not to have presuppositions is to not even begin the interpretational enterprise at all, to begin with unacknowledged axioms is quickly to become a slave to the unknown. One's presuppositions must be knowable, they must actually be known, and they must be self-consistent. And since we all must begin with ignorance, we must either get our axioms from God himself by revelation, or we must set up our own arbitrary absolutes. These absolutes will then function for us like epistemological gods, and they will always demand an obedience they do not deserve. Paul was happy to raise the spectre of the test of Presuppositional Adequacy.

For the Apostle Paul, it was much more important that his hearers recognize that they have been significantly challenged, than it is to search out a "common ground" in their own views to build on. It is absolutely vital for this evangelist that his hearers know that they have confronted a significantly different vision of reality when they turn their backs on Christianity, and that they know what they are rejecting when they reject it. For Paul, preaching the Gospel must involve a real choice between alternatives, and not just a comfortable intellectual adjustment along a common spectrum of mere probabilities and plausible reasonableness.

Common Ground Assumed, Not Sought

There is an even more fundamental reason why Paul shows no interest in finding a "common ground" within the Athenian religious culture, which we must now explore. *Paul does not seek common ground because he already assumes a type of common ground, which is only understandable from within the Christian's Theoria.* This Pauline perspective is made explicit in such passages as Romans 1, and in those parts of the epistles that mention the intellectual results of sin, and the regeneration of the intellect in the renewal of the image of God in the believer. Although we cannot give a full exposition of these issues now, the following points are crucial;

1) *All of us confront God in every fact and moment of awareness.* We can neither escape his omnipresence, nor reach up to apprehend the divine being. The movement to save us must come from God to us, and not from us to God. This is a corollary of the doctrine of "grace alone." This, indeed, is the "Augustinian center of gravity" of the Reformation itself, and to ignore it is to revert to a Semi-pelagian apologetic methodology.

2) *Salvation is a divine accomplishment, not just the result of a human struggle.* It is by grace through faith in a sufficient Savior, not the achievement of a religious or cultural elite. All need God's undeserved grace both to initiate and then to consummate the drama of salvation. As Augustus Toplady's most famous hymn puts it, "Thou must save, and Thou alone."

3) *All start out as rebels* who must be subdued and turned around to face their Origin of Meaning, who is also their Judge. The sinner must sooner or later confront God in Christ personally (Phil 2:9-10). If Christ is not received as Savior in this life, he will be met as Judge in the next. These are the only alternatives in the long run, and we are unfaithful to our charge if we do not preach this as part of our apologetic. Apologetics grows out of the Gospel itself, and is not independent of it.

4) *All know the true God innately* by virtue of their consciousness having been created as a finite image of the divine self-awareness. To know the self is to know that God is there in that same moment of awareness. This awareness of God's reality is then suppressed in the fallen by the sin of nature, by the sin of choice, and by sins of habit. Sinners approve of the Fall, and are thrilled to bits to be sinners. That is, until they encounter the concept of God as Righteous Judge. Then suddenly sin becomes a "problem" of the philosophy of religion, like God himself, to be analyzed and evaluated like any other hypothesis.

5) *All fell wholly* in Adam, and so no part of human nature, including the will, can rise above sin's thralldom by itself. Because created, we are not autonomous, and because we are sinners we are not morally free, but are slaves to our sin. Sinners therefore have their slavery in common. Those of us who are "being sanctified" (Heb 10:14), remember what it is experientially to be a rebel. We can therefore sympathize with sinners without approving of their sin any more than we approve of our own.

6) *All share the need for divine revelation,* the sinner to get started, and the saint to continue on the path of life. The ultimate environment of the sinner is not the world, but its Creator.

7) *All have an awareness of, and a capacity for, the Good.* The unbeliever's consciousness of God as the ethical standard of righteousness (the "conscience") may be compared to an ungraduated thermometer. It can tell the difference between hot and cold, but not the exact temperature of either. The believer's conscience however, has been marked with graduations by God's revelation of New Covenant law (that is, the text of the New Testament itself), so that he can tell not only the difference between good and evil in general, but also what specific acts are good or evil. The image of God within us includes also the unavoidable awareness of God as the origin of ethical meaning, and so of moral standards particularly.

8) Because God is fully sovereign, *no human heart is inaccessible to him.* At the same time, the rebel is in existential (moment by moment) confrontation with the reality of God merely because he exists in God's creation. The Jewish existentialist Franz Kafka once said of Christ, "He is an abyss of light. We must close our eyes lest we fall into it."

So the Prodigal Son is afloat in his little boat upon the Great Sea of Being at midnight. In the distance he can still see the lighthouse, the visible beacon which his father built near his house by the shore, from which the escape to the far country was planned. In order to be certain that he is going away from the shore and not towards it, he must keep the lighthouse in view even as he pulls away from it with his oars.

For it is the only flicker of light in the primeval darkness, a darkness which threatens every moment to engulf him. Eventually as he pulls away, the distant beacon slips below the horizon, and the rebel is alone in the Void.

Paul assumes then, that all of us have the *imago Dei*, the Image of God, in common, and with it the elements of self-consciousness, rationality, and an ethically sensitive conscience that God built into it from the beginning. But he cannot assume that we have world views in common, or the meaning they provide, for our presuppositions differ from those of the unbeliever, and so facts and logic sustain different relations to each other in the outworking of the two world views. As a result, the more consistent the unbeliever is to his fallen assumptions, the further will he remove from the reality of God's world into the nightmare of his own meaninglessness.

When Paul quotes Epimenides and Aratus, it cannot be that he agrees with their intended meaning in context, for neither the polytheism of the one nor the pantheism of the other are even possible on Paul's basis. The quotations merely document the fact that the Greeks were well aware of the problems which both Stoics and Epicureans sought to answer, and that the various non-Christian answers are actually in conflict with each other. Paul then gives a meaning to the two quotations which brings them together intelligibly. It is clear then, that these quotations mean different things according to which world view they are placed in. Far from trying to "build a bridge" from heathen "common ground" to the Gospel, Paul redefines the question so that only the Christian world view allows the possibility of Truth. Did not Jesus do the same thing in his Parables? How else can we understand his claim that "I AM the Truth?" and, "Unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins" (John 14:6, 8:24).

A Paradigm Of "Pre-Evangelism"?

In 1899, Dr. Robert Flint, one of the great apologists of Scotland during the previous century, gave an address on "Some Requirements Of A Present-Day Christian Apologetics." The very first thing he says is that the vindication of Christianity "seeks not merely to defend some portion of Christianity, but to justify it as a whole." His justly famous studies of theism and atheism (1876 and 1877) had made clear to Flint that Christianity cannot be defended piece-meal, but must be set forth and defended as a totally comprehensive world view. Sadly, the evangelical world did not listen to Flint, any more than they listened to his more popular (slightly later) contemporary in London, Frank Ballard. Cornelius Van Til was even more consistent than the other two, and modern Evangelicals have carefully ignored him as well. Francis Schaeffer himself excluded all references to his extensive debt to Van Til in his apologetic writings.

It is the contention of this essay that the task of constructing a fully comprehensive strategy is precisely illustrated by what Paul was doing at Athens. When placed in the larger context of Paul's views of God, Man, Sin, and Salvation as found in his epistles, the Areopagus Address exhibits how the Christian story confronts and negates the non-Christian mythical visions of experience in such a way that Christ is seen to be *the only intelligible answer* to the human dilemma in the areas of *being, knowing, acting, and purpose*. It was never enough for Paul to seek merely to show the unbeliever that Christianity is "more logical" or "more probable" than the non-Christian account of things. To claim that Christianity is "more logical" than, say, Hinduism, is to claim that it is not 100 % rational, and that there are probably some valid arguments in favor of Hinduism. To claim that Christianity is merely "more probable" than, say, Buddhism, is to also say that Buddhism is also "probably" correct to the degree that Christianity is not, and that at least some of the "facts" tell against the Gospel, in telling in favor of Nirvana as a solution to human suffering.

Can anybody who has read Paul's epistles really imagine Paul thinking such things? Paul sought to challenge the non-Christian world view *in toto*, rather than piece-meal, for neither logic nor facts have any bearing on the outcome as long as the question of presuppositions is ignored. Unless the Christian starting-point is repentantly accepted as the precondition of intelligibility, the facts cannot be related to each other,

and logic cannot connect with the facts. For only if we have a sufficiently comprehensive reference-point to make the questions intelligible in the first place, can we know whether any particular answer is relevant. This is surely implied in Jesus' claim to be himself "the way, the truth, and the life." Facts are fine, but they must be interpreted. Logic is fine, but it is worse than useless if our presuppositions are wrong. The facts mean nothing alone, and until they are interpreted, as Kant admitted, they are "mute." Paul's reference-point for their interpretation is the infinite-personal Triune God of the Bible, existing eternally in himself as an ultimate Unity, and as an ultimate Diversity, and therefore as a sufficient reference-point for interpreting the finite one-and-many of his creation.

The non-Christian's presuppositions must be challenged from the start. Trying to lead up to them after developing "common ground" leaves it too late. The Gospel is only relevant if it is *the only possibility*, for only then is repentance the true correlative of faith. If Christianity is allowed to remain merely the "best" answer among many, then the sinner is allowed to remain with Eve, to play the final arbiter of whether God or Satan is right about the future, and the sinner's apostate autonomism remains unchallenged. His fallen presuppositions about reality remain inviolate.

The ultimate aim of pre-evangelism must be to conclude with a choice between Christ, or the Void. People must be *convinced* of this, in order that they may be *convicted* of it. We must therefore pray continually that the Holy Spirit will take our valid arguments and impress them on the soul of the seeker to His own glory.

To Convict *And* To Convince

We come now to a complaint which continues to be voiced in the background of any apologetic endeavor, and which can only be silenced by appeal to Scripture itself. It is continually objected against apologetic efforts, that "you can't argue people into the Kingdom," and so we must "just preach Christ and him crucified" without arguing with unbelief. We have already noted that some commentators have forwarded the claim that Paul's lack of success at Athens led him to abandon the attempt to dress the Gospel up in human philosophical terms, and that he reverted to "Christ and him crucified" at Corinth and thereafter. But once it is realized that Paul at Athens made no concessions to Greek philosophy, and no compromise with the Greek religious world view, and that instead of trying to find common ground, was much more interested in offering a really different alternative to the seekers among his hearers, this "problem" falls away as simply irrelevant.

At Athens Paul was actually demonstrating by contrasting the two world views so clearly, that he would be fully justified in his negative estimate of Greek philosophy and rhetoric by the time he reaches the situation addressed in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16. The Paul of that epistle is intellectually identical to the Paul who before the Areopagus, had challenged in person that "wisdom" which "knew not God."

Much of the uncertainty about the relationship between apologetics and evangelism is caused by anti-intellectualism. Believers who have little grasp of what the Bible actually teaches about the human intellect, often think that their faith operates somehow apart from their minds. They often speak of "mere human logic" and insist that spiritual things are finally of "the heart" rather than of "the head." Such people behave as if truth were a luxury unconnected with personal holiness, that God is more concerned with how we feel than with the intellect, that in fact the intellect is not really involved in regeneration, being a purely "natural" thing for which the believer has no particular responsibility. Yet if any of these crass absurdities were true, Christianity would be just another arbitrary superstition. A brief glance down the concordance list of the occurrences of "heart" in the Bible soon confirms that the Greeks never associated the Head with the intellect, but that "Heart" and "Mind" are virtual synonyms in the biblical parlance. Not realizing this, sincere unbelievers turn away from the Gospel without ever coming to see what it really is.

One common manifestation of this anti-intellectualism is the pious insistence that because "you can't argue a person into the Kingdom," there is no point trying to convince a person that Christianity is true, since what they "really" need is to be convicted by the Holy Spirit. This "conviction" is supposed to be of "the heart," while to "convince" someone would be merely of "the head." The difficulty with this pseudo-spiritual nonsense, is that in the original text, the words translated "convince" and "convict" are the very same Greek word! Even in English, a moment's thought reminds us that a defendant is convicted in court only when the judge and jury are convinced by the facts and arguments of the prosecutor that the person is guilty. In a law-court, the conviction is merely the judge's proclamation that the jury is convinced of the defendant's guilt. In fact, the Greek word *'elencho* and its cognates means to convince a person he is wrong by pointing out his error, and is best rendered "rebuke" or "reprove" in almost all instances. There is therefore no biblical ground for the popularly imagined disjunction between being "convicted" of sin, and being "convinced" intellectually of the truth. In the Bible, they are at the very least, two sides of the one coin. We shall now attend to some of the evidence in Scripture for the close relationship in the apostolic practice between gospel proclamation and apologetic argument.

Paul's Methods Or Ours?

A glance at the occasions and descriptions of preaching the Gospel in the book of Acts soon shows how far removed from the apostolic practice are our modern methods. The Apostles both courted and encouraged questions and dialogue with their audiences, and rare was the time when they got no verbal response at all. The following samples from the middle of Acts are representative, and the list could easily be doubled from the rest of Luke-Acts by including the practice of Jesus himself.

Acts 14:15-17; Paul and Barnabas contrasted the common facts of God's mercy and providence with the pagan practices of the Lystrans, to convince them not to worship them as gods. And the argument worked.

Acts 15:5-21. In response to the false teaching of the judaizers, the Apostles Paul and James used carefully-reasoned theological arguments and convinced the apostolic council to correct the errors by letter.

Acts 17:2; Paul for "three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures."

Acts 17:17 he disputed with the Jews.

Acts 17:22-31 is the Areopagus address, an extended argument.

Acts 18:4; Paul reasoned and so persuaded.

Acts 18:11; "teaching the word of God." Does any one really think that this teaching was merely the bare recitation of facts without the accompanying reasoning and arguments he always included in his letters?

Acts 18:13; "persuading men."

Acts 18:19; "reasoned with the Jews."

Acts 18:28; "he mightily (thoroughly) convinced the Jews."

Acts 19:8; "disputing and persuading boldly."

Acts 19:9; "disputing daily" in Tyrannus' philosophy school.

Acts 19:26; "persuaded. . .many people."

Acts 19:33; "defended" himself by stating his case (his "apologia") in public.

Acts 22:1; Paul "makes his defense" or apologetic in court.

This list can be vastly expanded by inclusion of such terms as persuade, give assurance, prove, etc., as well as by examples of reasoned argument and apologetic discourse from Jesus and Paul's Epistles. Both Romans and Hebrews contain sustained apologetic arguments, some going on for whole chapters together.

To convict then, we must also seek to convince. Anything less ignores the New Testament model, and is simply intellectually irresponsible. It creates an unbiblical disjunction between apologetics and evangelism in our churches. In the meantime, here as elsewhere, what God hath joined together, let no anti-intellectual (even if he is a theologian!) put asunder. We should leave the "whole counsel of God" whole!

Conclusions

When the tract called "Common Ground" said that the witnessing Christian should try to help his unbelieving friends to "consider Christianity from the vantage point of their world view," we must press for an answer to the question, "But why?" Are they not already doing this? Is this not their fundamental error? From the vantage point of the biblical world view, is not the fact that the unbeliever looks at things from his own point of view *the very thing he must give up* in order to accept *God's* interpretation of reality? Does not the very essence of repentance from sin involve a change of view-point, of reference-point, of one's basic presuppositions, a relocation of ultimacy in God instead of in the world?

We have demonstrated in this essay that Paul had no need to seek or establish "*common ground*" in Athens by trying to find things in the Greek world view that he could agree with and borrow to build an epistemological bridge from the agreed-upon things to the unique truths of the Gospel. On the contrary, from his epistles we know that he believed in an ontological common ground identified in Scripture as our being all made in God's image. The "common grace" of General Revelation guarantees that both the sinner and the saint confront the true God in every moment of consciousness. All human beings encounter God in all the facts and relations of the created world. The unregenerate sinner continually suppresses this revelatory awareness in order to maintain the illusion of his own autonomy.

Further, in creating humanity in his own image, God guarantees an epistemological common ground in our capacity for knowledge based on our encounter with God's orderly creation, coupled with our innate capacity for language and logic. Unfortunately, this situation is not in practice as optimistic as it sounds at first. In practice the sinner only thinks logically when he thinks his reasoning supports his personal autonomy from the all-encompassing sovereignty of God. And logic is no help anyway, if one is controlled by false presuppositions. The more logically consistent the sinner is with his fallen presuppositions, the further he removes himself from the truth as God sees it, and the less capable he becomes of recognizing and admitting God's reality. This is the progressive state of affairs outlined so clearly by Paul in Romans 1. The sinner will abandon both facts and logic without hesitation if his autonomy is threatened by its required conclusions. *Sinners have an axe to grind*, as Cornelius Van Til used to say.

Again, God has implanted an ethical awareness in each of us, which, like a plain, ungraduated thermometer, can tell that cold tap water is cooler than hot coffee, without telling us exactly how hot they are. The conscience can tell the general direction of good and evil without being clear on what particular actions are acceptable to God. And unregenerate sinners will suppress this data also when it suits them.

Teleological common ground is also found between believer and unbeliever; we all want to be comfortable and fulfilled and have a secure future. Everyone wants "to go to Heaven." We may even agree

that "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever," but no sooner do we begin to define the terms in the statement, than the underlying and essential divergencies become apparent. We cannot agree about what God is like, what counts as glorifying to him, or how to go about it. We cannot even agree which mountain our diverse paths are supposed to meet at the top of, for it is really the nature of Ultimacy itself which is the thing in question! The blind men are not even looking at the same elephant. Some of them seem to be examining a platypus.

Confrontation is therefore inevitable between the Christian and the non-Christian visions of reality. The really pressing question is the one avoided by the Search article. Should we have the confrontation at the outset, putting all the cards on the table from the start, and to proceed to compare world views and presuppositions as the essence of the differences between believer and unbeliever, or shall we create an artificial common ground, and then wait until the papered-over gulf rips open from the tensions generated from incompatible axioms, and yawning unbridgeable before us, precipitates the by now heavily compromised dialogue into the Void?

Acts 17 shows that the Apostle Paul adopted the first of these alternatives. He demonstrated by example that *the Divine Theoria and the Demonic Theoria represent two distinct universes of discourse*, like two pyramids each standing under its own apex. In this way, the Athenians knew exactly where they stood. The choice between the Christian and the non-christian world views was not between two more or less factual and probable positions, but between Christ and the Void. *In the final analysis, its Jesus or nothing, the Christ or the Void.* If the unbeliever will not accept reality as God sees it, he cannot have it at all. In the meantime, while judgement awaits, the unbeliever has at his disposal a great deal more of reality than he deserves, or can logically retain on the basis of his own fallen presuppositions. Finally, "even that which he hath shall be taken from him" (Mat 13:12, Mk 4:25, Lk 19:26, etc.), when at last he will face that Resurrected Man whom God has appointed for that coming Day (Acts 17:31).

In other words, Common Grace stops at the gates of Hell; "Abandon hope, all Ye who enter here." In the meantime a gap in the history of judgement remains graciously open for the healing of the sinner.

*All that the Father hath given to me shall come to me,
and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.*

This remains the promise of the Lamb upon the Throne (John 6:37-44).

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