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BUILDING ON A “FIRM FOUNDATION”: THEOLOGICALLY INFORMED EVANGELISM

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SYNOPSIS

In order to present Jesus to people in a culture marked by religious and philosophical pluralism, Christians need to understand core biblical truths. We need to be able to present a clear message in language understandable to unbelievers today about who God is and how God is at work in history. Paul provides a model for us to follow in his speeches codified in the Acts of the Apostles, especially his proclamation to the intelligentsia at Athens (Acts 17:22–31). Paul’s speech to the court of the Areopagus affirms the existence of the one true God, that God is the creator of everything outside Himself, that God is working out a redemptive plan for humanity in history, and that God has clearly revealed Himself in nature (“natural revelation”) and ultimately in Jesus the Messiah, who is unique as the resurrected man appointed to judge everyone at the consummation of history.

Imagine that you found yourself in a foreign country that you had never visited before. You want to evangelize the people you encounter, but there is a problem; no one has ever even heard of Jesus the Messiah, let alone known anything about Christianity. They might have some knowledge of Judaism, but nothing more. To make matters

worse, your potential audience embraces a worldview that is quite alien to the gospel. How would you present the message about Jesus to these people? What would you need to know about them and about your own faith to begin the conversation? Paul had answers to those questions when he arrived in Athens, the reputed intellectual center of Greek thought and the birthplace of Greek philosophy. Looking at Paul's example in evangelizing at Athens will help us answer these questions in our day and culture.

One of Luke's goals as he wrote the Acts of the Apostles was to show Christians models of presenting the good news about Jesus in various contexts. Luke provides two examples of preaching to Gentiles who lack significant knowledge of Judaism. The first is Paul's effort to evangelize Gentiles in Lystra (Acts 14:6–20). The region of Lycaonia in which Lystra was located was known for its sheep. This was not an intellectual center of the Greek world. The picture that Luke offers of the people referring to Paul and Barnabas as the gods Hermes and Zeus respectively, and then of the high priest of Zeus in the city preparing to offer sacrifice to them, suggests that Paul's audience for his speech in Acts 14:14–17 was truly "pagan" in the sense of being devoted polytheists and perhaps even superstitious. Paul's speech to them focuses on nature and the ways that nature provides evidence of the one true God. This would be Luke's model for how to present the good news about Jesus to those who are not part of the intellectual elite and are unaccustomed to discussing ethics or epistemology. Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were not major cities, which Paul often went to, such as Corinth or Thessalonica. The places in Acts 14 were definitely "out-of-the-way towns."¹

In Athens, Paul takes a different approach. There he was seeking to convince people who were intellectuals and proud of it. Athens had the reputation of being one of the three great intellectual centers of Paul's day, along with his own Tarsus and Alexandria in Egypt. Athens is where famous Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Epictetus taught. Paul himself fit in here because he had grown up in Tarsus and clearly had training in Greco-Roman rhetoric,² the expected rules that a public speaker was to use. His speech to the court of the Areopagus demonstrates his skill as a speaker and also his knowledge of Greek philosophy and religion. This knowledge played a key role in Paul's speech. However, his speech, recorded in Acts 17:22–31, is built on a clear theological foundation that came largely from Paul's Jewish background. The only reason he could present the marvelous speech he gives in Athens is because of that theological foundation.

It is evident from his speech, filled with scriptural themes and language, that Paul knew Scripture, from Genesis to the Psalms to the Prophets.³ Paul knew the Bible well, apparently in both its Hebrew and Greek forms. Paul's knowledge of Scripture, combined with Jewish theology, plus his knowledge of what God had done through Jesus the Messiah, enabled him to offer his speech to the Athenians.⁴ It is worth noting

that Christians have inherited from Judaism many of our key beliefs about God and His activity in the world. Before we look at Paul's theology, however, there is one more thing that needs to be said up front.

Ancient Athens may seem like a place that was "a long time ago in a land far, far away." Historically and geographically, that may be true. In other ways, however, we all live in Athens. The Athens of Paul's day prided itself on learning, and you do not have to be a student at a major research university to know that our culture prides itself on being educated. Even if your Athens is not a college campus where students are taught that religion is outdated and irrelevant, you still doubtless encounter people who think they understand reality. On any given day, your favorite coffee place has many people who are discussing views on life, even if their "teacher" was Oprah.

The western world has become like a buffet where people pick and choose what they want for a deity. You are as likely to encounter someone who is a professing Hindu, Sikh, agnostic, or atheist as you might be to meet a professing Christian or someone who wants to be "spiritual" without being "religious." Similarly, ancient Athens had Epicurean philosophers who believed in gods, but the gods were far away and totally disinterested in human affairs, like the god of the more recent Deists. There were Stoic philosophers who believed that everything was the divine Logos, or god—similar to modern pantheism. There were those who still believed in the Greek gods. Athens had a huge temple for the goddess Athena, as well as temples and idols for many other deities like Zeus, Apollo, and even the Roman emperors. Many probably had a belief in magic as well. Mystery religions from the east, such as Mithraism, also found a home in Athens. There were also many who sought to combine two or more of these options. Athens, then, like our culture today, was extremely pluralistic.

Paul's background and approach are relevant to us right now. Let's look at the central themes Paul proclaims at Athens, which serve as a guide for us in our pluralistic world.

There Is Only One God. Fundamental for all Jews is the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel. Yahweh our God.⁵ Yahweh is one" (Deut. 6:4).⁶ There is only one true God. Anything else that is worshiped or portrayed as a god is a "fake" god. In the Greco-Roman world, almost everyone believed that there were many gods and goddesses. The Romans took over the Greek pantheon, changed the names (such as *Zeus* to *Jupiter*), and added more of their own. Not only had the Roman senate declared Caesar Augustus a god but also Livia his wife a goddess. This was abhorrent to any Jew. The Jews knew only too well from their own history that idols could help no one, and trusting in deities other than Yahweh was both foolish and forbidden by the Mosaic Law.

God Is the Creator of All Things. Paul also knew that the one true God was the creator of everything outside Himself. All of nature was made by God (Gen. 1–2). Since God made everything, everything owes allegiance to Him, especially human beings. To worship anything else violates that expected allegiance. When God established a covenant with Israel, the first two requirements for the Israelites were that they have no other god before Yahweh (Exod. 20:3) and that they make no images or statues of anything as though it were a deity to worship (Exod. 20:4–6). This means not only that we are to hold God as the highest deity but also the *only* deity, and we must not give ultimate allegiance to anything but the Lord. This was not the case in Athens.

In our day, the gods have changed, but there are still many things that clamor for our allegiance ahead of the Lord. Exodus 20:5 states that God is a “jealous” God. Envy or jealousy is usually considered a bad thing. However, it is only proper that I be jealous for my wife if some man is flirting with her. How much more proper is it for the Creator of everything, who brought Israel out of Egypt by His own power and entered into a covenant relationship with her, to require Israel to love Him alone? The forest of idols and temples for false gods in Athens was not a demonstration of allegiance to the one true God.

God Is Judge of All. Many Greeks believed that the world always was and always would be. Many also believed that their destinies were set by Fate, giving their lives little meaning. Paul had a very different story to tell. God the Creator made a good universe. So the world had a beginning. God made humans in order for them to know God and have a relationship with Him. Human life is not simply subject to the arbitrariness of fate, but is intended for a purpose. It is God who gives us life, breath, and all things (Gen. 2:7; Acts 17:25, 28), and it is within God’s creation that humans are to live out the image of God to the rest of creation. Furthermore, as both the Old and New Testaments proclaim, there will be a final day of consummation, when life as we know it will end, and humans will be judged for their response to the light they had (Rom. 1:18–23).

Like the Epicureans of Paul’s day, many nominal theists today (they believe in a god but he/she/it conforms to their parameters) reject the notion that God will judge people. This latter group, including many nominal Christians, sees God as a kindly grandfather figure who will let offenses go by because, after all, God loves us. There are at least two problems with this view. First, it stands in contrast to clear biblical statements about future judgment. John in the Book of Revelation sees a great white throne and “the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. And books

were opened...and the dead were judged from what was in the books according to their works" (Rev. 20:12). Paul predicted a future in which Jesus, when He returns, will carry out punishment on all those who have not known God (2 Thess. 1:8).

Second, a god that would not judge fairly violates what we feel deeply. Most people, even from a very young age, understand the idea of fairness. No one has to teach a small child that it is unfair when a bully takes her toy from her in the sandbox. We long for fairness—or, more strongly, justice—that each person be given her due. It's not fair that women are sexually assaulted. It's not fair that those who use power for evil are often very rich, while those who seek to do good are often relatively poor. So anyone who wants this doting- grandfather deity should be asked the question, "Do you really want to live in a world in which Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler are treated equally? A world in which the victim of sexual trafficking and the one who sells the victim to 'customers' are treated equally by this god?" Most people would recoil in horror from such a thought. Whatever people may say in the abstract, it seems they don't want to live in a world without justice.

God Reveals Himself in Jesus the Messiah. This brings us to a very important reason why we need to know core Christian theological truths. If you ask someone, "Do you believe in God?" and the person says, "Yes," you cannot and must not assume that he means the same thing by "god" that you mean by "God." Paul and the Stoics could agree that there was only one god, but what they meant by *theos*, the Greek word for "G/god," was very different. Paul used the word for a personal Being who was separate from His creation, while the Stoics meant that all of nature, including themselves, was part of this one pantheistic "god." The well-known New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has written about this problem. He tells of a time when he was a college chaplain and met with all new students. Many would say that they did not believe in God. When asked what god they did not believe in, they often replied with something like, "You know, the one who sits up in the sky and looks down on us, ready to club anyone who tries to have a good time." Wright would startle students by saying he did not believe in that god, either. He would tell them that he believed in the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.⁷

We need to know Christian theology well enough to be able to distinguish the God of the Bible from both the gods of other religions and false versions of the biblical God. This requires understanding God as presented in Scripture and affirmed in traditional orthodox teaching. This is the historic faith of the church, which virtually all segments of Christianity—Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism—affirm. More may be necessary than the creeds of the early church, but we cannot say less.⁸ We need to be able to explain to nonbelievers who the God

revealed in Jesus of Nazareth is—without using theological language that our listener has never heard. This may well require that we first deal with caricatures of God in order to clear the table for the biblical view. This might include ideas like, “God hates women/homosexuals/whoever,” or “God only wants our money.” It also requires that we reject the “doctrine” that I have read from “emergent” folk, and from students in my classes, namely, that all doctrine is bad—the dogma that dogma is bad. One of the problems with this view is that if you believe that someone who lived two thousand years ago is alive today and we should follow Him, you believe a doctrine—yes, a dogma—about Him. After getting rid of false notions of God, we can offer a valid portrayal of God’s nature.

God Reveals Himself in Nature. Paul also believed and asserted in His speech that God’s existence is revealed in nature (“natural revelation”). Paul asserted at Lystra and Athens that we can infer God’s existence from the natural world. Nature—which includes not only creation but also conscience, human experience, and reason—is valuable evidence for God. However, it is possible to reject what can be seen in nature as evidence. God provides enough evidence for sincere seekers to find Him, but not enough evidence to force people to believe in Him. God is also not at our bidding. He does not perform magic tricks (e.g., “God, I’ll believe you exist if you cause me to win the lottery next Tuesday”) to convince those who are not truly seeking Him. In his speech in Athens, Paul speaks of God being findable by those who seek Him (Acts 17:27). This is a core teaching of Scripture. In 2 Chron. 15:2, Asa, the king of Judah, and those with him are told by the prophet Azariah that if they seek Yahweh, He will let Himself be found by them.⁹

Jesus’ Death and Resurrection Are Central to Human History. Finally, Paul not only believed the teachings of Scripture and Jewish interpretation of Scripture but also believed the gospel concerning Jesus the Messiah. It has been common in the United States for many years to preach to people that they need to ask Jesus into their hearts. That’s the message that I heard the night of my conversion. However, this is not the good news as Paul knows it. Paul tells us explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15:1–5 what the good news is that he received and then passed on to the Corinthians. The gospel message is “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4). To explain the gospel, we need to understand what Paul means when he says that Christ died for (the sake of) our sins and what Paul means when he says that Christ was raised from the dead.

In Paul's world, "resurrection" referred only to bodily resurrection, contrary to the claims of some modern writers. It is only because Jesus rose bodily that we as believers can have hope of a future resurrection in renewed physical creation. In Paul's speech at Athens, he presents a picture of the true and only (unknown) God, the God of Scripture. This God created everything, including humans. He needs nothing from us but gives life, breath, and all things to us. We can find Him if we seek Him. He cannot be represented by any idol or image, and to attempt to do so does not make any sense. Finally, God will hold all people accountable for their idolatry, and at the end of history they will be judged by "a man," who is Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus Is Unique. Among the pitfalls to avoid in leading people to Jesus is to use relativism in the effort to build their trust. Instead, you need to be honest in presenting the uniqueness of Christ. It will ultimately hinder your efforts if you present Jesus initially as just one of many ways to God.¹⁰ Paul did not compromise his theology to be "relevant" or inoffensive. He proclaimed Jesus, the crucified and resurrected Messiah. This is a unique status, and "you need to be clear in your own mind what is unique about Jesus. It will be hard to walk with your friends into the Jesus Revolution if you don't know yourself what is revolutionary about Jesus."¹¹

We cannot present the gospel in a way that will be truly meaningful to a listener if we do not ourselves understand the God whom we are presenting and can distinguish Him from false imitations.

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NOTES

- 1 Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, 3:1–14:28* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2114.
- 2 Unlike our modern western world, in which the word "rhetoric" usually has a negative sense, as when a politician uses "rhetoric" to get people to support her in the next election, in Paul's world, "rhetoric" was a core part of education for those who could afford it. Failing to follow good rhetorical practices would have caused Paul and his speech to be viewed poorly.
- 3 For a detailed description of the way Paul used Scripture in his speech, see Kenneth D. Litwak, "Israel's Prophets Meet Athens' Philosophers: The Function of the Scriptures of Israel in Acts 17:22–31," *Biblica* 85, 2 (2004): 199–216. Available online at <http://www.bsw.org/biblica/vol-85-2004/israel-s-prophets-meet-athens-philosophers-scriptural-echoes-in-acts-17-22-31/165/>.

- 4 For a more detailed description of Paul's theology that enabled him to offer his masterful speech before the Areopagus court, see "Paul's Gospel for the Educated," chapter 7 in Paul Copan and Kenneth D. Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas: Paul's Mars Hill Experience for Our Pluralistic World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 93–113.
- 5 Hebrew is built around consonants, and the symbols used for vowels were not developed until after the first century AD. God's name, used thousands of times throughout the Old Testament, is spelled YHWH. The Israelites doubtless knew the vowels that go with these consonants, but we are not sure. The available evidence points to the correct vowels to make the name of God: Yahweh. English translations generally use the word LORD for God's name.
- 6 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are those of the author.
- 7 N. T. Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998): 44.
- 8 This averts, incidentally, any claim that Christians don't agree on anything, and that therefore there's no reason to believe what I'm saying about God. Virtually all Christians affirm the authority of Scripture, the Trinity (there is one God who exists in three "persons," the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), the deity of Christ, Jesus as God incarnate, the need for Jesus to atone for our sins, and so forth.
- 9 See also Deut. 4:29; Prov. 8:17; Isa. 55:6–7; Matt. 7:7–8.
- 10 Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost: What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us about Their Path to Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 44.
- 11 Ibid.