

Presuppositional Confrontations

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1. CHALLENGE

THE PRECONDITION OF MEANING

Imagine that we are watching a game of tennis on television, although for our purpose it can be just about any kind of game – basketball, football, or even chess. Suppose that I know the rules of tennis, but you do not. And suppose further that we have muted the television, so that we receive no verbal communication from the commentator. Finally, suppose that there is no visual communication, so that not even the scores are shown. Now, my question is whether the game will be intelligible to you at all.

If I pay close attention, I should still be able to follow the game even without any verbal communication, because I already know the rules of the game. Likewise, the players themselves should be able to follow the game without constant assistance from the announcer or the scoreboard. On the other hand, although you are watching the same game, you will not be able to make sense out of what you are seeing, since you do not know the rules.

This means that when you are watching a game, what you observe does not provide its own intelligibility and interpretation.¹ Rather, for a game to be intelligible to you and for you to have the correct interpretation of what is happening, you must bring a considerable amount of knowledge to the act of watching the game, and this knowledge does not come from watching the game itself. If I had explained the rules before the game, or if I explain the rules as we are watching the game, then what you are watching will become intelligible, and you will be able to correctly interpret what you are seeing.

You may argue that it is possible to derive some of the rules by observation. But this is not as simple as most people think. For example, suppose you observe that after every "checkmate," the two players would walk away from the chessboard. What can you infer from this? You cannot infer that one of them won unless you know the rules. Perhaps "checkmate" means a draw. Perhaps it means that the players are bored and decide to give up chess. Maybe it means that it is time for lunch. You need to know that it is a game, that it can be won or lost, and how it is won or lost. Even if you infer that one of them won, where did you obtain the categories of "winning" and "losing" in your thinking? You cannot get them from observing the game itself. You must bring these ideas to the act of observation.

¹ Of course, observation itself must be possible to arrive at this point in the discussion. That is, we are assuming that when you think that you see a tennis ball, you do in fact see a tennis ball. This groundless and irrational assumption can never be established. But we will allow it for now so that our discussion on intelligibility and interpretation may continue.

What about the ideas of time and causation? They are required to make sense of a game, but you cannot derive them from watching the game. You must bring these ideas to the act of observation. Some ethical principles are also presupposed. You must assume that the players would not usually cheat, and that the players cannot get away with cheating, or else the game would not have sufficient regularity for you to derive any rules from it. However, if a person cheats and gets away with it, how will you know that he is cheating, or if his action is just an exception allowed by the rules?

If we take the time to enumerate, we can make explicit dozens, or more probably hundreds or even thousands of presuppositions that are necessary for the game to be intelligible to your observation, when at the same time these presuppositions cannot come from the act of observation. To make matters more difficult, there are thousands of arbitrary elements to every game that are not essential to the rules, although they are objects of observation. For example, if a chess game is played by two men in formal attire, what can you infer from this? Are you to infer that this is an essential rule of chess? And if so, must women also wear men's suits, or are they allowed to wear dresses? Of course, people wear regular clothes when they are playing chess in other settings. But how do you know that they are not in violation of the rules, and that they are just getting away with it? Or do you assume without warrant that if they were indeed in violation, the rules would always be enforced against them?

Without knowledge that comes apart from observation, observation itself can make no sense or communicate any information. The intelligibility and interpretation of observation presuppose knowledge about the objects of observation, and this knowledge cannot come from the act of observation itself. That is, the intelligibility and interpretation of an experience is made possible by knowledge that comes apart from the experience. This knowledge may be something that is innate or something that is received by verbal instruction.

If the mind is totally blank, so that it does not even possess categories such as time, space, and causation, intelligibility and interpretation are impossible. In fact, if your mind is a blank, without any knowledge that comes apart from observation, your world will be to you as a whirlwind of sensations with no way to organize them or interpret them. However, if a prior non-observational knowledge of reality is required in order to properly interpret observation about reality, this means that the order and meaning you observe is *imposed* on what you observe, and never *derived* from what you see. This is another way of saying that the meaning of what you observe is governed by your presuppositions.

Returning to our initial illustration, what happens if you presuppose the rules of basketball or chess when you watch the tennis game? Even if it appears that you are able to make sense of the things that you observe, because the wrong rules are presupposed, your interpretation will be false. Therefore, it is not enough to recognize that non-observational presuppositions precede intelligibility and interpretation, but we must realize that not all presuppositions are equal, and that they can be true or false.

We have established several possibilities regarding what happens when we watch a tennis game:

1. The mind is totally blank, in which case nothing is intelligible, and interpretation is impossible.
2. The mind contains only basic categories with no knowledge of the rules of the game, so that it acknowledges concepts such as time, causation, ethics, and winning. Interpretation is still impossible.
3. The mind applies false presuppositions to the game, so that it may apply basketball rules to tennis. Interpretation is either impossible, or yields false results when attempted.
4. The mind contains the right presuppositions about the universe in general and about tennis in particular. Correct interpretation is possible.

The result is that two people can observe the same thing and come up with contradictory interpretations. However, this does not need to result in relativism, since one person may be correct and the other may be wrong. It depends on which one has the correct presuppositions about the universe in general, and about the object that is under observation in particular.

Here are two biblical examples that illustrate what I have been saying. The first shows that observation is unreliable in the first place, and the second shows that our presuppositions determine the interpretation of what we observe, so that the wrong presuppositions will lead to a false interpretation.

The first example comes from John 12:28-29. As Jesus exclaims, "Father, glorify your name!" the Scripture says, "Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him." The infallible testimony of Scripture says that the voice uttered a complete sentence: "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." Yet some of those who were present, who observed the same event, "said it had thundered." Therefore, observation is unreliable, and the truth can never be discovered by observation.

The second example comes from Matthew 12:22-28, and concerns the authority of Christ to expel demons: "Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, 'Could this be the Son of David?' But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons'" (v. 22-24). Based on their observation of the event, the general audience is prepared to consider at least the possibility that Jesus is the Christ, but the Pharisees, who observed the same event, say that he expels demons by the power of Satan.

However, this does not lead to an impasse, nor does it reduce truth to relative and subjective judgments. Christ's reply indicates that not all interpretations are correct:

Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (v. 25-28)

He first reduces their assertion to absurdity, and then he gives the right interpretation of the event, and concludes with an implication about the gospel.

If the Pharisees truly believed the Scripture, they should have arrived at the same interpretation about Christ as what Christ asserted about himself. But although they claimed to believe the Scripture, in reality they suppressed the truth about it. Although in the Scripture they had access to the right presuppositions or knowledge by which they could correctly interpret reality, because of their wickedness they refused to accept these presuppositions and their implications, and thus they rejected the truth by suppressing and distorting it.

THE SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH

Paul says that this is what humankind has done with their knowledge about God. He states that some knowledge about God is innate, so that every person is born with some knowledge about God, but because man is sinful, he refuses to acknowledge and worship this true God, and thus suppresses and distorts this innate knowledge:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (Romans 1:18-21, NASB)

People often complain that there is insufficient evidence about God and Christianity, but the Bible says that they already know about this true God, only that they are suppressing this knowledge because they refuse to acknowledge or worship him. Knowledge about God is "evident within them," because he "made it evident to them." The problem is not a lack of evidence, but an artificially manufactured set of presuppositions that suppresses their knowledge about God.

Some think that this passage provides justification for empirical arguments that lead to a knowledge of God. However, we have established by our illustrations and by biblical examples that observation can provide no intelligible meaning or information. Therefore, the passage cannot mean that an observation of creation can provide knowledge about God; rather, certain ideas about God are already resident in the mind apart from any experience or observation.

The illustration on watching tennis have also shown that it is insufficient to have only the basic categories necessary to intelligibility, but our innate ideas must contain substantial contents. However, if the innate ideas or presuppositions already contain substantial contents about God, then the knowledge about God does not come from experience or observation at all, but this knowledge is already in the mind prior to and apart from experience or observation. If you know the rules of tennis, watching tennis will not give you additional information about the rules of tennis, but it can only stimulate you to recall and apply the rules as you observe the game. Likewise, experience or observation *at best* can only stimulate you to recall and apply the innate knowledge that you have about God.

More than a few commentators seem to agree with this view to some extent. Here I will cite only Charles Hodge: "It is not a mere external revelation of which the apostle is speaking, but of that evidence of the being and perfections of God which every man has in the constitution of his own nature, and in virtue of which he is competent to apprehend the manifestation of God in his works."² Accordingly, the NLT translates, or rather paraphrases, as follows: "For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts."

A later passage confirms that God has placed some knowledge about himself into the mind of man directly, apart from experience or observation:

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do *instinctively* the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law *written in their hearts*, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14-16, NASB).

Do not misunderstand this to mean that some Gentiles are innocent – Paul's point is that no one is innocent. Rather, verse 12 says, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law."

Paul is making the case that those who have the word of God (but who do not believe what it says about Christ) and those who do not have the word of God are both guilty of sin and subject to condemnation. So he is not saying that some or all men are saved because they already know God, nor is he saying that the innate knowledge about God carries enough content for salvation, if a person will only acknowledge what he knows.

² Charles Hodge, *Romans*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997 (original: 1835); p. 36.

Instead, the point is that men are without excuse for denying the true God because they suppress the truth about God. Therefore, the passage does not justify world religions, but its purpose is to condemn all non-Christian worldviews, especially non-Christian religions.

Our interest at this point is in the innate knowledge about God in the mind of man apart from experience or observation. The NASB has "instinctively" in verse 14, which is good, and the NJB uses the term, "innate sense." But the phrase "a law to themselves" can mislead. It does not mean that the Gentiles, since they do not have the Scripture, determine right and wrong for themselves; rather, it means what is already implied by "innate sense," so that J. B. Phillips translates, "they have a law in themselves." This confirms our contention that there are innate ideas in the mind of man, and that the contents of which consist not only in thought categories, but actual knowledge about God, rendering those who deny him without excuse.

People should indeed "see" God in nature,³ but I am trying to explain why they do not, or why they claim that they do not. Paul is saying that you have to suppress and distort the knowledge that is already in your mind in order to reject Christianity and to affirm a non-Christian religion, philosophy, or worldview. Only Christianity corresponds to what you already know in your mind, so that you will have to suppress and distort what you already know, and indeed deceive yourself, to accept something other than the Christian worldview or religion.

THE SUPERSTITION OF SCIENCE

Some Christians attempt to defend the faith with scientific arguments, such as those based on physics, biology, and archaeology. Along with the unbelievers they assume the reliability of science and attempt to "do science" better than the unbelievers can. If what I am saying is correct – that is, if what Paul is saying is correct – then of course we are able to do science better than the unbelievers, since Christians possess presuppositions that correspond to reality, that tell us the truth about God and his creation.

That said, the scientific method itself precludes the knowledge of truth, so that even with the correct presuppositions, science is totally unable to discover or describe the nature of reality. As Ronald W. Clark writes, "Contemplation of first principles progressively occupied Einstein's attention," and in such a context, he quotes Einstein as saying, "We know nothing about it at all. All our knowledge is but the knowledge of schoolchildren....the real nature of things, that we shall never know, never."⁴ Of course, he could speak only for science and not revelation.

Karl Popper, who has produced a number of works on the philosophy of science, writes as follows:

³ To be more precise, they should be reminded of God when they observe nature.

⁴ Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times*; Avon Books, 1971; p. 504.

Although in science we do our best to find the truth, we are conscious of the fact that we can never be sure whether we have got it....In science there is no "knowledge," in the sense in which Plato and Aristotle understood the word, in the sense which implies finality; in science, we never have sufficient reason for the belief that we have attained the truth....Einstein declared that *his theory was false* – he said that it would be a better approximation to the truth than Newton's, but he gave reasons why he would not, even if all predictions came out right, regard it as a true theory.⁵

Scientists conduct multiple experiments to test a hypothesis. If observation is reliable, then why do they need more than one experiment? If observation is less than reliable, then how many experiments are enough? Who decides? Ignoring this problem for now, W. Gary Crampton explains the difficulty in formulating a scientific law by the method of experimentation:

In the laboratory the scientist seeks to determine the boiling point of water. Since water hardly boils at the same temperature, the scientist conducts a number of tests and the slightly differing results are noted. He then must average them. But what kind of average does he use: mean, mode, or median? He must choose; and whatever kind of average he selects, it is his own choice; it is not dictated by the data. Then too, the average he chooses is just that, that is, it is an average, not the actual datum yielded by the experiment. Once the test results have been averaged, the scientist will calculate the variable error in his readings. He will likely plot the data points or areas on a graph. Then he will draw a curve through the resultant data points or areas on the graph. But how many curves, each one of which describes a different equation, are possible? An infinite number of curves is possible. But the scientist draws only one.⁶

The probability of drawing the correct curve is one over infinity, which equals zero. Therefore, there is a zero probability that any scientific law can be true. This means that it is impossible for science to ever accurately describe anything about reality. Thus Popper writes, "It can even be shown that all theories, including the best, have the same probability, namely zero."⁷

If what is said about scientific experiments is difficult for some people to understand, the problem of "affirming the consequent" may be more easily grasped. Consider the following form of argument:

⁵ *Popper Selections*, edited by David Miller; Princeton University Press, 1985; p. 90, 91, 121.

⁶ W. Gary Crampton, "The Biblical View of Science," January 1997, *The Trinity Review*. Also see Gordon H. Clark, *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God* (Trinity Foundation, 1996).

⁷ Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*; Harper and Row, 1968; p. 192.

1. If X, then Y
2. Y
3. Therefore, X

This form of reasoning, called "affirming the consequent," is always a formal fallacy in logic; that is, the structure of the argument is invalid. Just because Y is true does not mean that X is true, since there can be an infinite number of things that may substitute for X so that we will still have Y. Correlation is not the same as causation – but can science even discover correlation? Thus if the hypothesis is, "If X, then Y," the fact that Y turns up does nothing to confirm the hypothesis.

Scientists, of course, attempt to get around this problem by having "controlled" experiments, but they are faced again with an infinite number of things that may affect each experiment. How do they know what variables must be controlled? By other experiments that affirm the consequent, or by observation, which we have shown to be unreliable?⁸

Bertrand Russell was a celebrated mathematician, logician, philosopher, and wrote much against the Christian religion. So he was not attempting to endorse Christianity when he wrote:

All inductive arguments in the last resort reduce themselves to the following form: "If this is true, that is true: now that is true, therefore this is true." This argument is, of course, formally fallacious. Suppose I were to say: "If bread is a stone and stones are nourishing, then this bread will nourish me; now this bread does nourish me; therefore it is a stone, and stones are nourishing." If I were to advance such an argument, I should certainly be thought foolish, yet it would not be fundamentally different from the argument upon which all scientific laws are based.⁹

Yet many who speak this way refuse to draw the logical conclusion that all science is irrational and without justification.

Most people feel compelled to respect science because of the practical success that it appears to achieve; however, we have noted that affirming the consequent may yield results but not truths. Remember what Popper said about Einstein: "He would not, even if all predictions came out right, regard it as a true theory." The typical college student would disagree, but the typical college student is not Einstein. Accordingly, although science sometimes achieve practical ends, it has no authority to make pronouncements concerning the nature of reality. If the scientist does not know his place, an informed believer should not hesitate to put him back in his place. Theology is the ruling intellectual discipline, not science.

⁸ See Vincent Cheung, "A Gang of Pandas."

⁹ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*; Oxford University Press, 1998.

THE VINDICATION OF CHRIST

This skepticism toward sensation and this low view of science may appear extreme, but anyone who disagrees must explain how knowledge can come from sensation and how the scientific method can discover truth. If you trust in science but cannot provide a rational justification for it, then how can you call Christians irrational and gullible? You may attempt to advance your selective and arbitrary skepticism against Christianity on the basis of science, but if I can successfully apply a broader and deeper skepticism to refute science and all non-Christian religions, and to defend biblical revelation, then you better not dare call Christians irrational and gullible anymore.

It is only because you have been made in the image of God and have an innate knowledge about him that you can even speak of rationality, since without Christ – the Reason of God (John 1:1)¹⁰ – there is no foundation even for logic. On the other hand, from the Christian perspective, rationality characterizes the very structure of God's mind, and the laws of logic describe the way he thinks. Since he has made us in his image, we are also able to use logic, and since the same God who created us also created the universe, logic corresponds to reality. If you reject Christian presuppositions, then on what basis do you use logic, and on what basis do you say that logic corresponds to reality? You attempt to use reason, but you deny Reason itself. You claim to think logically, but you deny the very person who has structured your rational mind in the likeness of his own rational mind. Thus in exalting reason without exalting God, you contradict yourself and incriminate yourself, and show that you have suppressed the truth about God.

Due to the nature of its method, science itself is incompetent and unreliable no matter what foundation you build it on. Nevertheless, if we are correct about the reality of innate ideas and the unbeliever's suppression of truth, then Christians can still do better science than non-Christians, since we explicitly affirm the correct presuppositions, including those that are taught in Scripture but that are not part of the innate ideas present at birth. But at the same time, if we are correct about the innate ideas and presuppositions, then science is in fact a trivial issue when it comes to the conflicts between opposing worldviews.

Our presuppositions determine our interpretation of what we observe, so that we can observe the same things and come up with different conclusions. Non-Christian presuppositions cannot even support non-Christian conclusions, and neither can they support Christianity, because non-Christian presuppositions really cannot support anything.¹¹ Thus instead of engaging the non-Christians on superficial issues, all the

¹⁰ The *logos*, or Word, in John 1:1 can be translated "Wisdom," "Reason," or even "Logic." See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*.

¹¹ Within the context of debate, scientific arguments can be used as *ad hominem* arguments. In other words, their function is not to argue for truth, since science cannot discover anything, but to show that *even if* the assumptions and methods of science are permitted, the unbelievers would still be wrong. Yet it remains that Christians should have higher intellectual standards than the non-Christians, and thus should not build their confidence on something as irrational as science.

while sharing their assumptions or allowing them to remain undefined and undefended, we must attack them on the presuppositional level.¹²

Do not underestimate this insight, which shows that unless the non-Christian can provide a foundation for knowledge without using Christian presuppositions, all his arguments are nothing but noise.¹³ As Paul writes in Romans 1:22, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." Or, more plainly, "They think they are smart, but they are stupid." This is true of every non-Christian. He tries to explain away his innate knowledge that Christianity is true, and that only Christianity is true. But the very act of explanation requires Christian presuppositions. He chooses a non-Christian starting point for his philosophy and tries to convince himself that it is adequate, but he knows better.

This knowledge haunts him, and so he suppresses his conscience and turns to persecute the Christians, since they are external manifestations of what he knows to be true in his heart. But even if he destroys all the Christians in the world, in his heart he will still know that God is the creator and the judge. He cannot escape from this knowledge. Even suicide will not save him from his misery, since it will only finalize his doom, and he knows this as well (Romans 1:32).

If you are a Christian, then God has chosen you and changed you, and he has enlisted you to issue this presuppositional challenge to the world. Paul commands us to hold out the

¹² It is often said that we must "look at the facts objectively." If this means that we should have no presuppositions, then we have shown that it is impossible, and that it even makes the "facts" unintelligible. But if being "objective" means that we should look at the world as it truly is, then this is the very point at issue, and we argue that only when you begin with Christian presuppositions will you look at the world as it truly is. "Facts" do not come with their own interpretations, and any interpretation requires presuppositions. However, not all presuppositions are equal, and thus we return to the point that arguments must be settled on the presuppositional level.

¹³ "The problems of history, politics, and ethics, so it has been argued, require for their solution certain theistic presuppositions....Apparently the best general procedure for one who wishes to recommend Christian theism is to show that other forms of theism are inconsistent mixtures. If some of their propositions should be carried to their logical conclusions, naturalism and eventually skepticism would result; whereas if justice is to be done to possible interpretations of other of their assertions, Christianity would have to be assumed" (Gordon H. Clark, *The Christian View of Men and Things*; Trinity Foundation, 1998; p. 155).

straight standard of "the word of life" in this "crooked and depraved generation" (Philippians 2:15-16). Indeed, non-Christians are "crooked" in their thought and conduct – they are perverse – and they suppress and distort the truth about reality and morality. Nevertheless, God will show mercy to his elect and will convert them, and set straight their crooked paths. But the reprobates will resist and be crushed (Luke 20:17-18).

2. CONFRONTATION

ACTS 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

v. 16-17

According to one account, over a third of the twenty Christian speeches in Acts qualify as defenses, and half of the ten speeches by Paul are of this kind.¹ This chapter studies Paul's Areopagus address in which the apostle speaks to the philosophers and population of Athens about the Christian faith (Acts 17:16-34). We will consider some significant points about this speech as seen from its historical setting, and how the apostolic example should inform and dictate a contemporary approach to apologetics.

The Jews in Thessalonica had caused much trouble for Paul, and the believers there had to send him away to Berea (17:5, 10). The Bereans were more receptive to the gospel message (v. 11-12),² but the Jews of Thessalonica followed Paul to Berea and incited the crowds against him (v. 13), so that the believers there had to send him away again while Silas and Timothy stayed a little longer (v. 14). This time, Paul went to Athens, and those who were with him returned to Thessalonica with instructions that Silas and Timothy were to join him there as soon as possible (v. 15).

Athens was a city given to idolatry. More than a few writers marveled at the sheer number of religious statues there. Pausanias wrote that Athens had more images than the rest of Greece combined. And Petronius remarked that it was easier to find a god than to find a man in Athens. As Paul walked through Athens, he would have seen altars to and statues of various gods, including Ares, Bacchus, Eumenides, Neptune, and of course, the mother goddess of the city, Athena, after which the city was named. On one street there stood in front of every house a pillar with a bust of Hermes. Pliny testified that there were over thirty thousand public statues in Athens, and many more private ones in the homes.

Paul was surrounded by expressions of pagan worship; the streets were lined up with idols. Although Athens was admired for its rich artistic culture, so that "it was also the repository of some of the finest treasures of art and architecture,"³ the apostle did not show any respect for the aesthetic qualities of the buildings and sculptures. He was not positively impressed with the people's culture and crafts; rather, he was "greatly distressed" (v. 16) by their rampant idolatry as he was waiting for his companions to arrive.

Some tourists today who call themselves Christians do not hesitate to visit pagan temples and even bow to their statues. They contend that this is not to worship pagan deities, but merely to show respect for the beliefs of other cultures. Also, they claim to admire the temples and sculptures as works of art and historical artifacts, and not as representations of pagan gods. But these professing Christians are liars. In the first place, the Christian has no right to respect or admire non-Christian beliefs and cultures. Paul was thoroughly disgusted by them. Do these so-called Christians believe that God himself approves of these "works of art," and their preservation and exhibition?

¹ C. Richard Wells and A. Boyd Luter, *Inspired Preaching*; Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002; p. 117.

² See Vincent Cheung, "The Noble Bereans," in *Pure Religion*.

³ David J. Williams, *New International Biblical Commentary: Acts*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1990; p. 302.

Even if some statues are void of religious implications for the modern man, they are still remnants of idolatry and traces of sinful rebellion against the true God. Thus we are not to admire them as works of art, but condemn them as works of the devil. Surely the apostle was much more accustomed to seeing expressions of pagan worship, but he was not desensitized to them as many of us are today; rather, he continued to see them as expressions of sinful rebellion, and accordingly he reacted with disgust and distress. To the extent that we are not distressed and indignant about non-Christian beliefs, we probably do not have a corresponding love toward the true God.

Modern paganism is just as blatant and sinful, and many who call themselves Christians, who would strongly react against traditional idol worship, nevertheless tolerate and even respect contemporary non-Christian thought and conduct. They are horrified by accounts of serial murder and child molestation, but relatively nonchalant when it comes to non-Christian religions and philosophies. They are greatly distressed over acts of racism and fraud, and some even weep over deaths caused by diseases and accidents as reported by the news, but they display no such reaction when someone introduces himself as a Mormon, when someone announces that she will marry a Muslim, or when someone uses the name of God with irreverence. Their morality is man-centered instead of God-centered, but biblical morality is centered on God, with right worship toward God as the foundation and prerequisite for right treatment toward man. Of course, many people care for neither God nor man.

How do you react toward non-Christian religions and philosophies? Do you respond as you should with complete revulsion and unqualified condemnation, or are you so molded by unbiblical influences that you show admiration and respect toward them? If the latter, on what basis do you call yourself a Christian? Are you more horrified by murder and rape, or do not consider it even worse to use the name of Christ as a swearword? Alas, you probably use the divine name as a swearword yourself. Of course, you would never commit the external acts of murder and adultery, or at least that is what you think, but you harbor no special antagonism against a person who denounces Christianity, or one who abuses the name of Christ, or one who affirms heretical doctrines.⁴ Your primary concern is not God's honor but man's welfare. If this describes you, then your fundamental commitment is not biblical but humanistic.

The biblical reaction to non-Christian religions and philosophies, thought and conduct, beliefs and cultures, is not indifference or appreciation, but extreme indignation. I am not opposing merely non-*western* beliefs and cultures, but non-*Christian* or anti-biblical cultures, which can and do exist within western society. Sometimes people neglect to recognize this distinction. Christians should strongly react against anti-biblical beliefs

⁴ A church has no justification in excommunicating a murderer or rapist, but does not at the same time excommunicate one who rejects the infallibility of Scripture. If infallible biblical revelation is the very basis upon which we excommunicate the murderer or rapist, how then, can we excommunicate one who has violated a scriptural principle of morality, but tolerate one who rejects the very authority by which we enforce this scriptural principle? Theological coherence is destroyed unless the church regards a rejection of biblical infallibility as worse than murder and rape, and formulates its policy accordingly.

and practices, in whatever contexts that these are found. Indifference toward and appreciation for anti-biblical religions, philosophies, beliefs, and cultures constitute treachery against the kingdom of God.

There are different ways that one can express his indignation against anti-biblical beliefs, but not all of them are legitimate. For example, it is possible to silence the opposition by violence, but it is in such a context that Jesus says, "All who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).⁵ Some people have misconstrued these words to endorse pacifism or to forbid all uses of physical force. However, Romans 13:4 says that the civil servant "does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." This indicates that some uses of physical force are legitimate. It appears that what Jesus says is a proverb that restates Genesis 9:6, which says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." In no way does the statement denounce the military or other uses of physical force where sanctioned by Scripture.

Although Christianity forbids the use of violence in promoting its ideas, it is irrational to reject a religion simply because it advocates the use of violence, whether or not for the purpose of promoting the religion. A person who says that a religion is wrong *because* it promotes violence presupposes a standard of ethics by which he judges this religion, and it is the truth of this presupposed standard that we need to argue about in the first place. Whether the use of violence is acceptable depends on whether its basis is correct. If a given religion is true, and it allows or commands the use of violence for a given purpose, then its endorsement of violence is acceptable.

For example, we should not argue that Islam is false *because* it allows or commands the use of violence in promoting its ideas; rather, we should argue that it is wrong to promote one's religion through the use of violence *because* Islam is wrong and some other standard is correct that happens to forbid violence for such a purpose. Thus the matter of whether violence is acceptable (for the promotion of religion or some other purpose) must be settled on the presuppositional level.

One may take as his first principle that all uses of violence or some designated uses of violence are wrong, and then evaluate different worldviews and religions by such a standard. However, what is the justification for such a standard? The principle may be arbitrary, self-authenticating, or it must ultimately be based on some principle that is self-authenticating. If it is arbitrary, then it is irrational and cannot be imposed on everyone. If it is self-authenticating, then one must show that it is self-authenticating. Even if it is self-authenticating, it is too narrow to answer necessary questions in the areas of knowledge, reality, and others. In fact, it cannot even provide guidance to many questions within its own category of ethics. If one claims that it is based on something that is self-authenticating, then we return to my point that we must first argue about this ultimate principle, rather than the subsidiary principle of whether violence is acceptable in various contexts.

⁵ The main context of the passage may suggest that Christ is opposing the use of violence in defending personal innocence when falsely accused by the authorities, and not a defense of religion in particular.

Likewise, many people denounce Christianity because it is an exclusive religion; that is, they believe that if a religion claims to be the only truth, then it must be wrong or unacceptable. But what is the justification for this assumption, and by what ultimate standard do they make this judgment? In contrast, we may maintain that if Christianity is true, and it claims to be the only truth, then its claim to being the only truth must also be true. We must first settle whether Christianity is true before judging its claim to be the exclusive truth. The premise that Christianity is the exclusive truth is inherent in its first principle.

One may take as his first principle – or, if there are more than one, one of his axioms by which he deduces subsidiary theorems – that there is no exclusive truth, and then uses it to evaluate every religion. But such a principle is self-refuting, since it claims to be exclusively true that there is no exclusive truth. "There is no exclusive truth" is a proposition that precludes all exclusive claims, but it is in itself an exclusive claim about the nature of truth, so that it *excludes* the proposition, "There *is* exclusive truth." Thus the rejection of exclusive truth cannot be self-authenticating, since it is self-refuting. It cannot be legitimately based on something that is self-authenticating, since the process of deduction merely draws out the necessary implications of a premise, so that it is impossible to derive a self-refuting conclusion from a self-authenticating premise. We must conclude that the rejection of exclusive truth is arbitrary and irrational. It cannot function as the first principle of a coherent worldview, nor can it be used to make any rational judgment about a religion.

When it comes to defending and advancing the Christian religion, Paul writes, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). Our relationship with this world should indeed be characterized by one of warfare, but since the war is spiritual in nature, it is not a contest of physical or military might. Rather, God has given us weapons appropriate for the nature of this conflict, having "divine power to demolish strongholds." What are these "strongholds" that we are to "demolish" with our divine weapons? Verse 5 says that we are to "demolish arguments," and instead of physically subduing our enemies, we "take captive every *thought* to make it obedient to Christ."

Accordingly, Paul reacted to non-Christian beliefs in general, and the rampant idolatry of Athens in particular, by engaging their adherents in rational argumentation: "So he *reasoned* in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17).

I. Howard Marshall alleges that the word translated "reasoned" means to "preach" rather than to "argue" or "debate."⁶ He references Acts 20:7 and 20:9, in which the same word is translated "spoke" ("preached" in KJV) and "talked on and on" ("was long preaching" in KJV). It is unclear whether Marshall intends to eliminate the idea that Paul employed

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000 (original: 1980); p. 283.

argumentation in promoting the gospel, or whether he intends to eliminate only the idea of interaction between Paul and his audience as implied by the words "reasoned," "argue," or "debate."

If it is the former, that is, if Marshall intends to say that Paul did not employ argumentation in promoting the gospel, or that Paul avoided an intellectually combative stance, then he is mistaken. The word in question can explicitly denote the meaning of argumentation. For example, Acts 17:2 says, "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures." Does this mean that Paul preached to them or argued with them? Was it a presentation or a debate? Whatever the case may be, scriptural preaching involves rigorous arguments. The next verse tells us that when Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures," he was "*explaining and proving* that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead." Therefore, whether or not he interacted with them, he was *both* presenting the gospel and arguing for it. Then in Acts 18:4, Luke writes that Paul "*reasoned* in the synagogue, trying to *persuade* Jews and Greeks." The attempt to persuade implies argumentation. Paul "spoke boldly" for the gospel at Ephesus, and that means he was "reasoning and persuading" (Acts 19:8, NASB) people about the kingdom of God.

However, there is an indication that Marshall means the latter, because he contrasts what Paul does against the approach of Socrates: "The description is reminiscent of the activity of Socrates who argued with anybody who would listen to him, although for Luke 'argue' means 'preach' rather than 'debate.'"⁷ It appears he is saying that to translate the word as "argue" or "debate" falsely suggests that Paul sometimes assumes an interactive format when introducing the gospel to his audience. If this is what Marshall means, then he is still mistaken, since both in Acts 17 and other passages, Paul at times appears to engage his opponents in dialogical fashion, arguing and debating with them.

Thayer indicates that although the word in question can mean to "ponder," "argue," "discourse," or "discuss," when it is used in Acts 17:17, it is used "with the idea of *disputing* prominent."⁸ In addition, A. T. Robertson writes that whether the word is used to denote the act of pondering, conversing, discoursing, or teaching by the dialectical method, it always carries "the idea of intellectual stimulus."⁹

Therefore, whatever is Marshall's exact meaning, he is wrong when he writes, "For Luke 'argue' means 'preach' rather than 'debate.'"¹⁰ That is, if Marshall means, "For Luke 'argue' means 'to *present* an argument' rather than 'to *engage* in argument,'" he is still mistaken, but at least he would escape the charge of anti-intellectualism. However, if he means, "For Luke 'argue' means 'to assert without argument' rather than 'to engage in argument,'" then he is not only wrong, but since the error is too obvious, we may also suspect him of

⁷ Ibid., p. 283.

⁸ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; Hendrickson Publishers, 2002 (original: 1896); p. 139.

⁹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. 3*; Broadman Press, 1930; p. 267.

¹⁰ Marshall, *Acts*; p. 283.

having an anti-intellectual bias. But it seems he does not intend this latter meaning. Another possibility is that Marshall himself does not know what he is trying to say.

In any case, the point is that Paul reacted against non-Christian beliefs by rational argumentation, whether in the form of presentation ("preaching") or interaction ("debate"). The word does not mean to preach *rather than* debate. It can mean to preach (a monologue), to debate (a dialogue), or both, and we discern which meaning is intended from the context. But since there is a particular word for preaching that Luke freely uses throughout the Book of Acts, it appears that the word we are examining here more often than not means an argumentative exchange or dialogue rather than preaching in the sense of a monologue.

The word always signifies the use of rational argumentation. For example, although the two verses may be describing a presentation or discussion among friendly believers, even Acts 20:7 and 20:9 give no indication that the situation excludes the use of arguments. The apostles arrived at their conclusions through rational deductions from scriptural and special revelation even in their presentations to believers, as seen from their sermons and letters. The conclusion is that the word can signify either a presentation or a debate, with the emphasis determined by the context of the passage, and even when mere presentation is in view, rational argumentation is a necessary element of what is conveyed. Our verse, Acts 17:17, appears to describe or include a debate.

We cannot be sure if Marshall's exegetical error results from an anti-intellectual bias, but this is a possibility. "Preaching," at least as defined and practiced by many people, sounds pious and harmless, but to "argue" and "debate" sound intellectual and offensive. Many Christians have been indoctrinated by the world on how believers should behave in a non-Christian world, and they assume that we are not supposed to argue with anyone. But Christ and the apostles often argued with people in defense of biblical truth, and they left instructions for us to do the same.

Perhaps some people imagine that every argument involves members of the opposing parties boisterously screaming at one another, but that does not need to be the case. Winning an argument should largely depend on the superiority of what we affirm rather than a domineering personality, so that we may be gentle and polite throughout the entire process; however, scriptural instructions and examples dictate that sometimes regular standards of social etiquette should be put aside. In any case, because the biblical strategies for the evangelism of unbelievers and the edification of believers are intellectual, an anti-intellectual attitude runs counter to the spirit of Scripture and makes one an unfaithful and ineffective Christian worker. Now, if anyone disagrees with all this, he must give me an argument.

v. 18, 21

Although Athens had lost its earlier political eminence by the time of Paul's visit, it remained the intellectual center of the ancient world. Four major schools of philosophy flourished there. They were the Academy of Plato (287 B.C.), the Lyceum of Aristotle (335 B.C.), the Garden of Epicurus (306 B.C.), and the Porch of Zeno (300 B.C.).

Although we may assume that various philosophical viewpoints were represented, Luke explicitly mentions the "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (v. 18), who disputed with Paul. I will take time to summarize Epicurean and Stoic philosophies because they are mentioned here in Acts 17. Lamentably, we cannot also devote the space to explain the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, as well as other philosophical traditions such as Skepticism.

Epicurus (340-270 B.C.) had adopted the atomic theory of the earlier Democritus (460-360 B.C.). The theory asserts that reality consists of indivisible material entities called atoms, moving through infinite empty space. Although the atoms themselves have no inherent properties, they combine in various ways to form objects that have differing properties.

One major motivation for Epicurus' philosophy is to deliver man from his fear of death and of gods. Although the Epicureans formally affirmed the traditional Greek deities, these were seen as part of the materialistic and atomic universe, and irrelevant to human affairs. Because the gods were not interested in human affairs, belief in divine providence is considered superstitious, and religious rituals are worthless. We may call them deists; the Stoics considered them atheists, and indeed they were such in the practical sense.

Democritus taught that the atoms move in all directions through empty space, and it is easy to imagine how they would collide and cling to one another to form different combinations. On the other hand, Epicurus introduced the property of weight to the atoms, and asserted that they are constantly falling downward through empty space. But this generated the problem of how the atoms would ever collide with one another. Epicurus answered that, while falling, the atoms would at times swerve out of their straight downward path and collide with other atoms. He considered this theory successful in maintaining the metaphysical indeterminism, and thus the human freedom, that he desired in his philosophy.

Since everything consists of atoms, even the mind consists of atoms, and there is no soul that transcends physical reality. The atoms that formed a person are dispersed at death, and this committed Epicurus to a denial of immortality, so that he wrote in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, "When death is, we are not, and when we are, death is not." Since there is no immortality, neither can there be a resurrection or judgment; therefore, it is irrational for man to fear death. Although the gods themselves are made up of atoms, because they "live in less turbulent regions,"¹¹ they are not subject to dissolution.

Since there is no afterlife, man should desire only the things of this life. For the Epicureans, pleasure is the highest good, and thus we may categorize their ethical theory as a form of hedonism. Nevertheless, Epicurus himself opposed the crude sensual hedonism of Aristippus (435-356 B.C.), who led a movement called Cyrenaicism and advocated the pursuit of bodily pleasures, living by the motto, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die."

¹¹ Anthony Kenny, *A Brief History of Western Philosophy*; Blackwell Publishers, 2001; p. 85.

Although Epicurus agreed that pleasure is man's highest good, he made distinctions between various kinds of pleasures. Pleasurable experiences may be of differing intensity and duration. Although bodily pleasures may carry greater intensity, they often bring a measure of pain. For example, the pleasure that one obtains from gorging food is canceled out by the negative short-term and long-term effects that may result. The same may be said of the pleasure that one may derive from sexual promiscuity.

Therefore, Epicurus promoted the less intense but the safe and long-lived pleasures of the mind, such as having a conversation with a friend or admiring great art and literature. The general aim is to live a tranquil life. However, since the mind is not distinguished from the body, we are merely referring to different types of sensations, and not mental pleasures as distinct from physical ones. In any case, scholars suggest that by the time Paul visited Athens, the followers of Epicurus had adopted the crude sensual hedonism that the founder of their philosophy took great pains to avoid.

Contrary to Democritus, Epicurus affirmed the reliability of sensations. According to him, the bodies of the objects being observed throw off films of atoms that exactly conform to the shapes of the objects and make contact with the atoms of the soul of the observer. Since the films of atoms coming from the observed objects exactly correspond to the objects, sensations never convey false information, although he allowed that one might make false judgments on the basis of such sensations.

To summarize the philosophy of the Epicureans, in epistemology they were empiricists, in metaphysics they were deists, atomists, and indeterminists, in ethics they were hedonists, and they denied immortality, resurrection, and judgment.

Since Epicureanism is not our main topic, I will not offer a detailed refutation of this philosophy, but we may mention several points. In epistemology, there are numerous arguments and examples against empiricism; in metaphysics, the atomic theory and indeterminism are thoroughly arbitrary, and also unsustainable by their epistemology; in ethics, their theory cannot be formulated on the basis of their epistemology, and there is no authoritative reason to think that pleasure is the highest good. And if the Epicureans failed to establish their view of metaphysics, then their rejection of immortality, resurrection, and judgment were also arbitrary and without foundation.

Other arguments against Epicureanism are more involved, and therefore must be passed over at this time. For our purpose, it is relevant to note that, as with other non-Christian worldviews, Epicureanism is ultimately founded on mere human speculation. It is also relevant to note that many points in Epicureanism are strikingly similar in principle to some of the widely held beliefs of contemporary secularists and scientists, who are still unable to justify these beliefs.

The philosophical tradition of Zeno (340-265 B.C.) was named Stoicism because he had taught in the Porch, or the *Stoa*. Reading a book about Socrates had ignited Zeno's passion for philosophy, and this led him to move to Athens. On his first arrival, he came under the tutelage of the Cynic Crates. His own philosophy would evidence the influence

of Cynicism through his emphasis on self-sufficiency. Early successors of Zeno included Cleanthes and Chrysippus. Panaetius of Rhodes (180-110 B.C.) and Posidonius (130-50 B.C.; Cicero's instructor) contributed to the establishment of Stoicism in Rome, and Roman Stoicism were given expression by Seneca (4 B.C. – A.D. 65), Epictetus (50-130), and the emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180). To adequately summarize Stoic philosophy in several paragraphs is unrealistic, but we must make such an attempt without claiming to be exhaustive.

Probably inspired by Heraclitus (about 530-470 B.C.), the Stoics taught that at first there was nothing but eternal fire, from which emerged the elements that made up the universe. The world would eventually be consumed in an universal conflagration and return to fire, and the cycle of history will repeat over and over again. The Stoic view of history appears to preclude individual immortality, even if there seemed to be slightly different views on this issue: "They denied the universal and perpetual immortality of the soul; some supposing that it was swallowed up in deity; others, that it survived only till the final conflagration; others, that immortality was restricted to the wise and good."¹²

The divine fire that permeates the whole world is a rational fire, and the *logos* or Reason that determines the course of the universe. Some people have the misconception that because Stoicism affirms that every event is determined by Fate, it therefore denies that there is purpose in history. However, since its *logos* is an intelligent fire, Stoicism can indeed affirm a teleological view of the universe. But then people confuse such a view with the biblical teaching on divine sovereignty. This is unnecessary. The Stoics were pantheists, so that their *logos* is not transcendent but immanent. In fact, "man's reason [is] seen as being of a piece with the ever-living fire which permeates the world order,"¹³ leading Epictetus to assert that there is a "spark of divinity" within every man. The universe, men, and even animals are all parts of God, and thus the Stoics were pantheists. God is the universe, and the universe is God. This is opposed to the biblical position.¹⁴

Since man is subject to the immanent forces of the world, he ought to live in harmony with nature. Since Reason permeates and governs the world, to live in harmony with nature is to live in conformity to rationality, and rationality is superior to the emotions. Everything outside of reason should be viewed with indifference, be it pleasure, suffering, or even death. Epictetus wrote that although man cannot control events, he can control his attitude toward events:

Since our bodies are not under our control, pleasure is not a good and pain is not an evil. There is the famous story about Epictetus, the slave. As his master was torturing his leg, he said with great composure, "You will certainly break my leg." When the bone

¹² Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 1*; Hendrickson Publishers; p. 539.

¹³ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready*; Covenant Media Foundation, 2000; p. 242.

¹⁴ Christians should not be disturbed that biblical writers sometimes use terms employed by non-Christian philosophy. In such instances, they never intend to accept the pagan view of things, but rather use the same terms to make apparent a contrast against the non-Christian positions. Examples of such contrasts include John's use of the *logos* in John 1 and Paul's teaching on self-sufficiency in Philippians 4.

broke, he continued in the same tone of voice, "Did I not tell you that you would break it?" The good life, therefore, does not consist of externalities, but it is an inward state, a strength of will, and self-control.¹⁵

"Stoicism gave rise to a serious attitude, resignation in suffering, stern individualism, and social self-sufficiency."¹⁶ We are to demonstrate self-control, self-sufficiency, and emotional indifference amidst life's situations. But if life gets too rough, Stoicism permits suicide.

Critics sometimes attempt to undermine the uniqueness of Christianity by pointing out its apparent similarities with Stoicism. For example, both worldviews emphasize "indifference" and control over the emotions. The typical reply against this is that Christianity does not share such an emphasis at all, not even on the surface, so it is often denied that Christianity teaches emotional indifference and control. However, these attacks and replies are both misguided, and betray an ignorance of both Stoicism and Christianity.

One example comes from Philippians 4:12, where Paul writes, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." On the surface, the Stoics may have agreed with this statement, and the word "content" is indeed the Stoic word for indifference. Scripture does not allow the emotionalism encouraged by many contemporary believers, whose opinions on this issue are formed more by modern psychology than by biblical theology, so that they advocate the free expression of one's emotions without regard to the biblical teaching on self-control and inner transformation.

However, verse 13 makes all the difference: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Christianity indeed teaches spiritual, emotional, and social self-sufficiency, without rejecting the legitimacy of community; however, this *self*-sufficiency is only relative to other human beings, and not to God, so that we are always in need of him. The verse indicates that the Christian's inner power is linked to a conscious affirmation of Christianity and dependence on God. This God is not a pantheistic immanent rational fire that is part of the universe, but a transcendent rational mind that is distinct from the universe and that is the creator of the universe. God is not *in* the universe; God *made* the universe. He is immanent in the sense that he chooses to exercise his power in human and natural affairs, but he is not part of this creation, nor is he bound to it. And contrary to Stoic philosophy, no matter how difficult our lives get, there is no justification to commit suicide.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *Ancient Philosophy*; The Trinity Foundation, 1997; p. 308.

¹⁶ Bahnsen, *Always Ready*; p. 243.

¹⁷ See Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Philippians, Godliness with Contentment*, and "The Secret of Contentment" in *Reflections on First Timothy*.

This difference is not superficial but fundamental and essential, since it is based on a view of metaphysics that contradicts the Stoic view of metaphysics. Christianity teaches a God who is both transcendent and immanent – metaphysically aloof but makes himself near by what he does – who makes distinctions between individuals, who regenerates some and not others, who makes decisions and effects communications, and who strengthens his people so that they may overcome the world. The Christian's inner resources come from God, who is distinct from the Christian himself, while the Stoic sought to achieve absolute self-sufficiency, and not the relative self-sufficiency of the Christian. We overcome the world and fulfill our purpose not by our own human strength, but by the power of God, which so powerfully works in us (Colossians 1:29). Therefore, although there may be superficial similarities between Stoicism and Christianity, in reality these similarities have behind them fundamental and irreconcilable differences between the two worldviews.

Besides what has been stated above concerning their metaphysics and ethics, the Stoics had developed detailed theories on epistemology. They held to a form of empiricism, but not the Epicureans' naïve acceptance of sensation. In any case, both Epicureanism and Stoicism failed to provide a constructive epistemology that makes knowledge possible, although skepticism is not an option because it is self-contradictory.

Despite apparent similarities that may confuse the uninformed, Stoicism and Christianity are opposed to each other concerning every ultimate question. In epistemology, again, the Stoics were empiricists, in metaphysics they were pantheists, in ethics they held to a view of reason and virtue very different from Christianity, and they denied immortality, resurrection, and judgment.

Like the Epicureans, their philosophy is arbitrary, inconsistent, and founded on mere human speculation. One writer thinks that the Stoics have their counterparts in contemporary pantheists and followers of New Age philosophy.¹⁸ Although it may appear to be so, and it may be true in a sense, this assertion must not be pushed too far. Present-day pantheism and New Age philosophy often do not have developed theories of logic and ethics based on which we may make comparisons with Stoicism. Nevertheless, there are philosophers today who claim to have inherited the Stoic tradition.¹⁹

Bringing our attention back to Acts 17, it is important to keep in mind that Paul's audience consists not only of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, although these two groups are referred to by name (v. 18), but the crowd also includes other people, probably of various philosophical persuasions. Verse 17 says that Paul speaks about the gospel "in the marketplace day by day *with those who happened to be there*," and verse 21 indicates that the audience includes "the Athenians and the foreigners."

Due to the intellectual background of Athens, it would not be surprising to find representatives of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Skepticism, and other perspectives in the audience. We may assume that there are differences of opinion even among the

¹⁸ *Life Application Bible Commentary: Acts*; Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999; p. 300.

¹⁹ Lawrence C. Becker, *A New Stoicism*; Princeton University Press, 1999.

Epicureans and the Stoics. Adherents to the various schools of thought often made major modifications to the philosophies of their founders, so that Frederic Howe is justified in saying that there is a "rather broad spectrum of vantage points on hand."²⁰

Because the audience consists of people representing different philosophical traditions, not every point in Paul's speech will apply equally to each hearer. For example, although Paul refers to the Athenians' rampant idolatry and an altar to an unknown god to form a point of departure for his speech, the Epicurean philosophers had wanted to remove what they perceived to be superstitious devotion to the gods. Thus Lucretius rejected the Athenians' appeal to the "unknown gods." Nevertheless, Paul's choice of this point of departure for his speech is appropriate. As Howe writes, "Doubtless the *predominant* group of hearers included bystanders and those who enjoyed hearing the exchange of ideas often presented there."²¹

Therefore, we must keep in mind that Paul is addressing a diverse group of people with diverse philosophies and perspectives. It follows that we should not expect every detail of his speech to apply with equal force to every person in the audience. However, a major point of this study, and with it comes a major insight for apologetics, is that by the time he is done, Paul would have offended and contradicted every non-Christian present – not on superficial issues, but on the most fundamental level and on every major philosophical subject.

Verse 18 says that the philosophers *disputed* with Paul. Contrary to what this implies, some scholars claim that the Areopagus episode illustrates Paul's appeal to a philosophical "common ground" that his Christian faith shared with the philosophers. John Sanders writes:

Interestingly, Paul does not refer to the Old Testament in his speech. He quotes only from pagan poets and uses the ideas and vocabulary of Greek philosophy in his attempt to reach these people. Yet all of Paul's points can be found in the Old Testament, because there are affinities between general and special revelation.²²

This comment betrays a dismal grasp of both Greek philosophy and Christian theology. It exhibits astonishingly inferior reasoning skills, and a misunderstanding of Luke's intention in the passage.

Although Paul quotes from Greek poets in his speech (v. 28), this does not mean that he agrees with what they say. Right now I am quoting from Sanders, but I am doing it to declare his error, and to make him an example of inferior scholarship. Likewise, Paul quotes the poets not to express his agreement, but for another purpose. I will say more about this when we discuss verse 28. Using the "vocabulary of Greek philosophy" also

²⁰ Frederic R. Howe, *Challenge and Response*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1982; p. 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²² John Sanders, editor; *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*; InterVarsity Press, 1995; p. 41.

does not imply agreement with Greek philosophy, just as I can use the vocabulary of evolutionary science to illustrate how Christian theology opposes evolution. Or, I can address the thought categories that interest the secular psychologist, only to fill them with Christian content in order to illustrate the biblical opposition against non-Christian theories.

As for using the "ideas...of Greek philosophy," Paul employs the thought categories to address the ultimate questions that interest the philosophers, but he fills them with Christian content in *opposition* to their non-Christian philosophies. The Bible itself discusses these ultimate questions, so that when Paul uses philosophical terms and fills them with biblical content, he is doing the opposite of what Sanders alleges. Who says that those ideas originated with the Greek philosophers in the first place? And who says that these thought categories belong to them the unbelievers? Non-Christian scholarship hijacks and distorts ideas and categories that originated from God and that belong to him, given to us through our innate knowledge and biblical revelation. The fact that non-Christians share some of these ideas and categories illustrate their culpability, that they have distorted and suppressed the true knowledge of God, so that all of them are without excuse and come under divine condemnation.

Sanders writes, "Paul does not refer to the Old Testament in his speech....Yet all of Paul's points can be found in the Old Testament." His thinking appears to be that instead of quoting from the Old Testament, Paul quotes from the Greek poets (which reflect Greek philosophy), yet his points are found in the Old Testament; therefore, Greek philosophy agrees with the Old Testament, at least on some essential points. However, this kind of reasoning begs the question. Instead, we should say that since all of Paul's points are found in the Old Testament, therefore he is speaking from the Old Testament even without directly quoting it, showing that he confronts human speculation with biblical revelation. All of Paul's points are *found in* the Old Testament because all of his points are *taken from* the Old Testament.

As for the Greek poets, he quotes them to show that they could not suppress the innate knowledge of the true God, even though they have distorted this knowledge such that it serves only to condemn. Further, this inescapable knowledge of God contradicts their explicit philosophies on every major issue, and thus illustrates that conversion will demand their thorough repentance, so that they must turn from their futile thinking and speculation. Another possibility is that the quotations do not agree with the Old Testament at all, but Paul is citing them only to expose how Greek philosophy contradicts itself. We will see the reason he quotes the Greek poets when we come to verse 28.

This general understanding of Paul's speech is in agreement with what he writes in Romans 1:18-32; therefore, we have a biblical basis for such an interpretation. On the other hand, on what basis does Sanders assert his interpretation? Lacking a biblical justification, it seems that his basis consists of nothing more than a desire to make Christian and non-Christian thought appear less disagreeable. But according to Scripture, this is an ignoble and sinful desire. Some scholars are so biased that they claim Acts 17 contradicts Romans 1! This is sufficient ground for excommunication. For those who

affirm biblical infallibility, the fact that these scholars believe that Acts 17 can contradict Romans 1, or any other part of the Bible, is in itself a refutation of their position. The two passages only appear to contradict if they force Acts 17 to say what it does not say.

The correct interpretation recognizes that Acts 17 *illustrates* Romans 1. Of course it is true that, in the words of Sanders, "there are affinities between general and special revelation," but Sanders draws a different conclusion from this than the apostle Paul. Sanders thinks that because "there are affinities between general and special revelation," therefore Christian and non-Christian thought contain substantial agreement. However, this is the opposite point that Paul makes in Romans 1, where the apostle states that since God has made himself plain to everyone through general revelation (v. 19), those who suppress the inescapable truth about God does so in wickedness (v. 18), and are left without excuse (v. 20). That is, pagan philosophies do not agree with general revelation, and this is a basis for their condemnation.

God charges non-Christians with culpable "ignorance" because they *disagree* with special revelation, while they *ought to agree* with special revelation if they were to think in line with what God has already shown them in general revelation. In other words, God has provided enough information about himself through man's innate knowledge and the created world so that non-Christians *ought to* agree with special revelation (the Scripture), but non-Christians in fact *do not* agree with special revelation, and therefore none of them can escape condemnation. Sanders affirms a position that subverts the intent of Romans 1 and Acts 17. If he is right about Acts 17, he would make nonsense of Romans 1. But we can affirm that Romans 1 helps us make sense of Acts 17.

Whose interpretation does Luke favor? Throughout the passage we find an emphasis on the disagreements between Paul and the Athenians instead of a merely incomplete agreement between them. Luke and Paul nowhere give any indication that the philosophers are "on the right track."²³ Instead, Luke introduces the philosophers by having them "dispute" with Paul, and by placing emphasis on how they misunderstand and insult the apostle. Frederic Howe correctly observes that Paul's speech stresses the ignorance of the Athenians rather than what Paul thinks they were doing right.²⁴

Additional disagreements between Paul and the philosophers will become evident as we continue this study, but the above is sufficient to discredit the interpretation that the Areopagus speech illustrates that there is substantial "common ground" between Christian and non-Christian thinking. The sermons and letters of the apostles in general, and this passage in particular, do not support this "common ground" perspective. The philosophers themselves disputed with Paul, and Paul in turn stressed their ignorance. It is the interpreters who wish to discover and emphasize this non-existent common ground with unbelievers, and neglecting proper scholarship, they have imposed such a view upon this and other biblical passages.²⁵

²³ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁴ Howe, *Challenge and Response*; p. 42.

²⁵ The real common ground that the Christian has with the non-Christian is that they are both made in the image of God. However, the non-Christian suppresses and denies this common ground in his explicit

Misunderstanding and disparagement characterized the philosophers' reaction to Paul's initial presentation of the gospel. Although it is likely that they made other comments, Luke specifically recorded two. One statement implies that they had misunderstood key elements in the apostle's presentation, and the other statement is meant as an insult against his intellectual competence (v. 18).

Some of the philosophers remarked that Paul appeared to be "advocating foreign gods" – that is, more than one. Luke explains, "They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about *Jesus* and the *resurrection*." They may have understood "Jesus" as the personified power of Healing, since the name meant something like this in the Greek, and "resurrection" (*anastasis*) as the goddess of Restoration. The Greeks had raised altars to abstract principles such as Modesty and Piety, and so it was possible that they misunderstood the apostle in this manner. Since "Jesus" is in the masculine and "resurrection" is in the feminine, they could have also misconstrued Paul as introducing a new divine couple.

This illustrates how the presuppositions of non-Christians distort the way they interpret information about the true God when it is presented to them. The Bible shows us that non-Christians presuppositions are adopted in rebellion against God, and these presuppositions in turn reinforce their denial of God by distorting and suppressing the information about God presented to them through general revelation and special revelation.

The Athenians' non-Christian presuppositions, and the resulting misunderstanding toward the gospel message, afforded the hearers a temporary delay in having to confront the truth about God, even when it is clearly presented to them. The same problem exists when preaching to non-Christians today. Their unbelieving intellectual backgrounds have conditioned their minds to distort and reject the Christian message, so that even in societies where biblical information appears to be pervasive, there remains widespread misconceptions about what Scripture teaches and what Christianity affirms.

We must not allow non-Christians to get away with having a misunderstanding of the Christian faith, and then consider themselves justified in rejecting Christianity by finding fault with this false representation. Therefore, we must strive to present the faith with accuracy, and continue to correct misconceptions regarding what the Bible teaches and what we believe. Misconceptions can form quickly, but they are often difficult to change. We can be certain that Paul presented the gospel in a clear and accurate manner, but the philosophers' reaction exhibited their failure to grasp the basic points in his message. How much more, then, are we to share the apostle's desire: "Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should" (Colossians 4:4).

philosophy. Therefore, in terms of our explicit philosophies, there is no common ground between the Christian and the non-Christian. But the knowledge of God is inescapable, and surfaces in distorted form at various points of the non-Christian's philosophy. Thus the Christian argues that the non-Christian already knows about the true God and denies it, which means that the non-Christian is without excuse and subject to condemnation.

While some philosophers misunderstand Paul's message, others insult him, saying, "What is this babbler trying to say?" The word "babblers" comes from *spermologos* in the Greek. Since *sperma* means seed and *legō* means to collect, the word literally means "seed-picker" or "gutter-sparrow." It had been used to describe loafers who picked up scraps of food in the market, and then it became an Athenian slang referring to those "who had acquired mere scraps of learning."²⁶ It is in this last sense that the philosophers use this word to speak about Paul – an insult that conveys "supreme ridicule."²⁷ There is a parallel from Shakespeare:

This fellow picks up wit as pigeons peas,
And utters it again when Jove doth please.
He is wit's peddler, and retails his wares
At wakes, and wassails, meetings, markets, fairs.²⁸

It is not really Paul's learning that is at issue, but the content of his message. Although on this occasion the philosophers belittle Paul's learning *on account of* what he says, on another occasion Festus blames the apostle's great learning *to account for* what he says! Festus says, "Your great learning is driving you insane" (Acts 26:24). So which is it? Paul indeed had an extensive education, but unbelievers will find things to criticize no matter what credentials we have. The root of their hostility is sinful rebellion against God.

They call the apostle a collector of scraps of learning, but Luke observes, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21). Paul's beliefs come from God, who reveals himself through the prophets and the apostles. On the basis of revelation, Paul speaks from a position of knowledge, and he is not looking to hear something new. On the other hand, with all of their speculation, the philosophers could not settle upon the truth, and it is they who ended up being collectors of scraps of learning. As with the unbelievers of today, the Athenians were "open-minded" because they were ignorant of the truth, but of course, many of them quickly became close-minded when confronted with the exclusive truth of Christianity.

A. T. Robertson writes, "[Paul] was the real master philosopher and these Epicureans and Stoics were quacks. Paul had the only true philosophy of the universe and life with Jesus Christ as the centre (Col. 1:12-20), the greatest of all philosophers as Ramsay justly terms him."²⁹ I am glad that Robertson includes this remark, since many Christians today would not even consider Paul an intellectual, let alone a "master philosopher." But Paul was a different kind of philosopher, because his philosophy was not founded on human speculation but divine revelation, so that Christ was the center or foundation of his philosophy. This is an excellent perspective on Paul, although it is unusual, and many

²⁶ Marshall, *Acts*; p. 284.

²⁷ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Vol. 3; p. 281.

²⁸ *Love's Labor's Lost*, v., 2. See Vincent, *Word Studies*, Vol. 1; p. 540.

²⁹ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Vol. 3; p. 282.

Christians today are resistant to it. Anti-intellectual Christians would insist that Paul was not a philosopher, nor was he interested in philosophical debate. They would rather make Paul a mystic than an intellectual.

Christians today are embarrassed by the intellectual challenges thrown at them by the unbelievers. Although we are not divinely inspired like the prophets and the apostles, if we will wholly depend on the revelation of Scripture, we will indeed be the master philosophers of this world. Because we have revelation as the foundation of our philosophy, unbelievers are not in fact competing against our own wisdom, but the very wisdom of God. Thus if we will only learn to apply divine revelation with skill when answering their challenges, there can be no real contest, but we will destroy every unbelieving argument, and embarrass the gainsayers.

Non-Christians prize the idea that they are intelligent, and they find comfort and security in the idea that Christians are irrational. The biblical apologist shatters their illusion, and shows them their true condition, that they are stupid and sinful, and that they are the intellectual quacks of this world. Their only hope is in Christ, and since, although they believe that they possess autonomy, it is also an illusion, it is not even in their power to produce faith in Christ to save themselves; rather, faith is a gift of God, and salvation depends on the sovereign mercy of God alone.

v. 19-20

Paul is then taken to the Areopagus, where he is asked to elaborate on his beliefs: "Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.'"

The Areopagus, or the Hill of Mars, received its name from the mythological account of the trial of Mars for the murder of Neptune's son. The Court of Areopagus (or "the Areopagus") was a council consisting of probably around thirty aristocratic Athenians, and exercised jurisdiction over matters of religion and education. By the time of Paul, the Areopagus probably met on the hill itself only to hear cases of homicides. Ordinary meetings were held in the Royal Portico (*stoa basileios*), located in the northwest corner of the Agora, the marketplace in Athens.

Socrates (470-399 B.C.) was arraigned and condemned by this council several hundred years before. Although by the time of Roman dominance, the authority of the council had been greatly reduced, it was still the chief judicial institution, and had the power either to censor and silence new speakers, or to grant them freedom to teach. Cicero once induced the Areopagus to invite a philosopher to lecture in Athens. So the council exercised some control over the circulation of ideas within the city, and had authority to grant or withhold teaching licenses.

One important theme Luke pursues in the Book of Acts is that Paul was often brought before a court, but that this had never resulted in a guilty verdict against him. Here Paul is once again brought before a court to come under examination, and it is likely that Luke

intends for the Areopagus episode to be another example of Paul appearing before a court without resulting in a guilty verdict. Although for Luke the word translated "they took him" (v. 19) is more often than not meant in the sense of seizing and arresting someone (16:19; 18:17; 21:30), it is not always used this way (9:27; 23:19).

The context seems to show that Paul was not under arrest in Athens, but he was asked to appear before the Areopagus either to give him an opportunity to expound on his philosophy, or it was for the purpose of determining whether he would be permitted to propagate his ideas in the city: "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.' All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:19-21). Formal charges probably could have been brought against Paul, but in the end the council took no legal action against him (v. 33).

v. 22-23

Paul does not begin his speech by establishing what many consider to be "common ground" with the unbelievers; rather, he begins by underscoring their ignorance. He says, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23). It is important to understand Paul's intention here, since it will affect how we will interpret the rest of the speech. Nevertheless, the rest of the verses in this speech have their necessary meanings, so that the usual false understanding of these two verses will prove to be inconsistent with some crucial points in the subsequent verses.

The word translated "religious" can be meant either in a good sense, as in "pious," or in a bad sense, as in "superstitious." One commentary says, "Some suggest that Paul's statement was derogatory rather than complimentary, but the latter is most likely the case."³⁰ Then it continues, "He chose a starting point, a place where they could agree, rather than starting with their differences." If this is given as a reason why we should believe that the word "religious" is used in a positive sense here, then it begs the question, since if the word is used in a negative sense, then Paul is in fact beginning his speech by emphasizing their differences.

The same commentary then contradicts itself by saying, "The term translated 'very religious,' however, is a combination of Greek words *deido* (to fear or revere) and *daimon* (evil spirits), which may contain a subtle rebuke concerning the spiritual realities behind their religion." But if it is a rebuke (subtle or not) directed against the very "realities behind their religion," then Paul is not choosing "a place where they could agree" as his starting point. So is Paul starting with his agreement with them (if he agrees with them on anything at all), or is he starting with a rebuke about their religion? Which one is it?

³⁰ *Life Application Bible Commentary: Acts*; p. 301.

The commentary contradicts itself when it says that Paul begins his speech from a place of agreement with his hearers, and then turns around and says that Paul begins with a rebuke about the very realities of their religion. But it commits a factual error on the latter point, since although *daimon* is the word from which we derived the English *demons*, it does not necessarily mean the evil spirits often referred to in the Gospels. Rather, Robertson is correct when he says that *deisidaimon* itself can be "a neutral word," with *daimon* signifying the idea of "deity."³¹

But then Robertson commits his own error, and says, "It seems unlikely that Paul should give this audience a slap in the face at the very start."³² This again begs the question. If the word is used in a negative sense, then this is evidence that Paul would indeed "give this audience a slap in the face at the very start." Why could he not begin with an insult, or by emphasizing the differences? Marvin Vincent writes, "Paul would have been unlikely to begin his address with a charge which would have awakened the anger of his audience."³³ Unlikely according to whom? They are saying that this statement cannot be an insult because Paul could not have started with an insult. But why not?

If this statement is an insult, then we know that Paul indeed could have started with an insult. But the commentaries rule out this possibility without deriving their interpretation from this statement or other verses. It is very disappointing and frustrating to read such an arbitrary assertion in the commentaries without anyone giving a reason as to why Paul could not begin with an insult. Unless these scholars give us a reason for this assertion, they are imposing on the verse their arbitrary view of what Paul could or could not have done.

I. Howard Marshall likewise asserts, "Paul begins by commending the Athenians for being *very religious*....It is most likely that Paul meant it in a good sense, to provide a way in to his address that would engage the attention of the audience."³⁴ Nonsense! Does he mean to say that Paul would have lost the audience's attention if he had started with an insult? In fact, if the apostle had started with a clear insult or rebuke, the audience probably would have paid much closer attention to what he was saying than if he had started with praise. Either way, we have no right to simply assume. Then, Marshall undermines his own case with the following admission: "Nevertheless, Luke also uses the corresponding noun in what is perhaps a slightly derogatory sense in 25:19, and it is likely that he intended his readers to perceive the irony of the situation (*cf.* verse 16). For all their religiosity, the Athenians were in reality thoroughly superstitious and lacking in knowledge of the true God."

So is Paul's statement still a compliment? When Marshall says that Paul is "commending the Athenians," he gives a non-biblical reason, one that is based on Marshall's own assumption about the best rhetorical strategy for the situation. But when he says that Paul's statement may in fact be saying that the Athenians are "thoroughly superstitious

³¹ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Vol. 3; p. 284.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 285.

³³ Vincent, *Word Studies*, Vol. 1; p. 543.

³⁴ Marshall, *Acts*; p. 285.

and lacking in knowledge," he uses a biblical argument. Marshall is suppressing biblical evidence *that he knows* to give way to his own prejudice about what Paul should do in this situation.

David J. Williams, on the other hand, may be closer to the truth than the above commentators: "Perhaps Paul deliberately chose the word with kindly ambiguity so as not to offend his hearers while, at the same time, expressing to his own satisfaction what he thought of their religion. They would learn soon enough what his opinion really was."³⁵ To assert without good reason that Paul is trying not to offend his hearers would again be begging the question, since if Paul intends for the word to express an insult, then he also intends to offend his hearers. However, Williams is wise to add "perhaps" before his comment. Even if Paul intends to preserve the ambiguity inherent in the term, if he is at least truthful and competent, so that he uses the right words to express his thoughts, we can be sure that the word in question is at least effective in "expressing *to his own satisfaction* what he thought of their religion."

Since Paul would soon contradict his hearers' religions and philosophies at every major point, or as Williams states, "They would learn soon enough what his opinion really was," this suggests that Paul uses the term in a negative sense, so that it truly expresses his opinion, although he is aware that it would be sufficiently ambiguous, so that his hearers could not be sure that it is intended as an insult or rebuke. Conrad Gempf agrees: "Paul used very guarded and ambiguous phrases, and on reflection even his introduction becomes a veiled attack."³⁶ It is possible that Paul is saying that his hearers are very involved in religious matters, without stating whether this is good or bad. Of course, whether it is good or bad depends on whether their religious beliefs are true or false, and we will see that Paul thinks they are false. In any case, an exposition of verse 23 will illustrate that Paul does not intend for "very religious" to be a compliment, even if he does not mean something as clearly negative as "very superstitious."

To illustrate what he has just said, Paul continues, "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (v. 23). Right away Paul contrasts their ignorance with his knowledge. In philosophical terms, he begins his speech by claiming a superior epistemology. Since what is recorded in Acts 17 is likely to be a condensed version of what Paul delivered in Athens, as is the case with other speeches in the Bible, we may look to what Paul has written elsewhere to inform our understanding of his speech to the Areopagus.

As mentioned earlier, there were many statues and altars in Athens, but Paul finds one altar especially appropriate to use as the point of departure for his speech. That is, there was an altar dedicated to "an unknown god." The Jerusalem Bible translates Paul's statement as follows: "Well, the God whom I proclaim is in fact the one whom you already worship without knowing it." But it is a grave error to understand what Paul says in this manner and to translate the verse this way.

³⁵ Williams, *Acts*; p. 304.

³⁶ *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*; InterVarsity Press, 2000; p. 1093.

The Athenians had erected altars to "unknown gods" to ensure that no deities were left out in their worship. They did not have any definite idea as to who or what these deities may be, nor did they have any definite information about them. Now, if a person were to say, "I am a worshiper of Zeus, but just in case there are any other gods, I will acknowledge them too," the true God of Christianity would not accept that as worship. Thus neither can Paul be conceding that the Athenians were worshipping the God of Christianity, and that they merely needed to know more about him.

Rather, the point is that they did not know the true God at all. They may realize that there may be a divine existence beyond and other than what they were worshipping, and so constructed altars to these "unknown gods" just as a safety measure. One cannot conclude from this that they were already worshipping the God of Christianity. In fact, the point is that they were *not* worshipping the God of Christianity. Their altars to "unknown gods" merely constitute an admission of ignorance, and Paul's statement intends to exploit this admission without conceding anything positive about their way of worship.

This understanding agrees with what Paul says in Romans 1, where he teaches that although pagan worshipers already possess an innate knowledge of the true God, they suppress and distort the truth about him in their explicit philosophy, resulting in all kinds of idol worship and sinful practices. An altar to an "unknown god" is just one more example. Sin has blinded the spiritual eyes of every human person, so that unless God reveals himself through special revelation, man cannot rightly know him.

We obtain additional confirmation from 1 Corinthians 1:21, which says, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." Paul says, "the world through *its wisdom* did not know him." The true God is as the Scripture reveals him, but the non-Christians fail to obtain explicit knowledge about this true God by their non-Christian epistemology.

Gordon Fee puts it this way: "As he will elaborate in Rom. 1:18-31, left to themselves mere creatures cannot find out the living God. The best they can do is to create gods in the likeness of created things, or, as so often happens, in their own distorted likeness."³⁷ Since both 1 Corinthians 1 and Romans 1 begin by stressing the failure of non-Christian philosophy to arrive at the truth about God, the most natural interpretation of the beginning of Paul's Areopagus speech is that there he is also stressing the intellectual impotence of non-Christian philosophy. To say that Paul acknowledges that the Athenians were already worshipping the true God without knowing it would make the apostle contradict his own stated position in 1 Corinthians 1 and Romans 1.

Therefore, we may agree with the following comments about the beginning of the Areopagus speech:

³⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987; p. 72.

Of course there was no connection between this god and the God whom he would proclaim. He was not suggesting for one moment that they were unconscious worshipers of the true God, but was simply looking for a way of raising with them the basic question of theology: Who is God? (David J. Williams)³⁸

Under these circumstances an allusion to one of these altars by the apostle would be equivalent to his saying to the Athenians thus: "You are correct in acknowledging a divine existence beyond which the ordinary rites of your worship recognize; there is such an existence. You are correct in confessing that this Being is unknown to you; you have no just conceptions of his nature and perfections." (Marvin R. Vincent)³⁹

It appears to some readers he was saying that these pagans were doing well – that, in their ignorance, they were worshiping the right God all along and didn't know it. This is, however, far from the intent...Secondly, the translation is misleading. The emphasis in the sentence is not on the identity of the "unknown god" but on the ignorance of the worship. Paul, in the city of "the lovers of wisdom," focused on the ignorance they admitted about the identity of God. (Conrad Gempf)⁴⁰

The vital principle here is that the point of contact for Paul's statement of clarification was *not* a common knowledge of the true God of Scripture that these hearers were encouraged to discover, as if to say that they all along had really worshiped the true God. Far from it! Paul's real principle is that their acknowledged ignorance is to be met with accurate information! Their ignorance rather than their worship is stressed. (Frederic R. Howe)⁴¹

In other words, about the only thing that Paul concedes to the Athenians is their ignorance. An altar to an "unknown god" is not evidence that they are already worshiping the true God without knowing it, but it is an admission of ignorance. Paul accepts this admission of ignorance as true, and claims that he is able to supply the information about God that they lack.

However, if non-Christian philosophy has failed to reach God, on what epistemological foundation does Paul so confidently proclaim this God to them? In other words, if man cannot know God by his own wisdom, how did Paul obtain his knowledge about God? We may return to 1 Corinthians 1:21 for the answer: "For since in the wisdom of God the

³⁸ *Acts*; p. 305. However, if we are correct, then Paul is doing more than just raising the question about God, but also declaring their admitted ignorance about him.

³⁹ *Word Studies, Vol. 1*; p. 543.

⁴⁰ *New Bible Commentary*; p. 1093.

⁴¹ *Challenge and Response*; p. 42.

world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of *what was preached* to save those who believe."

Although the KJV has, "the foolishness of preaching," the word *kērygma* refers to the content of preaching rather than the act of preaching. It is by means of the content of apostolic preaching, the content of the Christian faith, that God saves "those who believe." Since faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8), we may say that God saves those whom he has chosen by producing faith in them by the content of the Christian faith, whether conveyed by speaking or writing. What was being preached is called "foolishness" because this is how it is regarded from the perspective of worldly "wisdom": "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Corinthians 1:18). But it is through what this world regards as "foolishness" that men are saved, while what the world regards as "wisdom" keeps men in spiritual blindness, resulting in their damnation.

In contrast to non-Christian religions and philosophies, the foundation of the Christian worldview is not human wisdom or speculation, but divine revelation, delivered to us through the prophets, the Lord himself, and the apostles: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe....This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him" (Hebrews 1:1-2, 2:3). Paul testifies that what he preaches came to him not by human wisdom, tradition, or speculation, but by divine revelation: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12).

Paul declares that whereas his hearers are ignorant, he will "proclaim to them" the truth. He does not operate on the same intellectual level as his opponents; he does not try to construct a better system than theirs while standing on the same foundation of human speculation. Instead, Paul declares the truth to his hearers from a position of final knowledge and ultimate authority, and he is able to do this because he stands on the intellectual foundation of divine revelation. He speaks and functions as one who clearly perceives reality by the grace of God, and not as one who gropes around in epistemological darkness.

Commenting on our passage, F. F. Bruce writes, "[Paul] does not argue from the sort of 'first principles' which formed the basis of the various schools of Greek philosophy; his exposition and defense of his message are founded on the biblical revelation of God."⁴² Every system of thought must begin with certain first principles on which the rest of the system is based. If the first principle of a system is self-contradictory, too narrow, or otherwise inadequate, then the system fails at the starting point, and the rest of the system crumbles. Paul has been converted by the sovereign grace of God, and thus he has adopted biblical revelation as the foundation or first principle of his system of thought.

⁴² F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1959; p. 18.

Compared to those of the non-Christian philosophers, Paul's first principle is not merely a different one of the same kind, but it is of a different kind altogether.

Sinful man builds his system of thought on a man-centered foundation with the assumption that he can obtain knowledge of the truth by his own power. But Paul rejects the anti-Christian assumptions of human autonomy and sufficiency; rather, he teaches that man is bound by mental finitude and moral depravity. The non-Christian is trapped by his inferior intelligence and evil disposition. If man is to know the truth – any truth – he must depend on God. Christian epistemology is superior because instead of trying to find out the truth by our own power when we have no such power, it accepts biblical revelation as the only way to ground and obtain any knowledge. Non-Christian philosophy is founded on human speculation – wild guesswork and fantasy – but Christian philosophy is founded on divine revelation. In non-Christian philosophy man pretends to find the truth by his own power, but in Christian philosophy the omniscient God tells us the truth, making it plain by his omnipotence.

Following the apostle Paul, when we confront non-Christian belief systems today, we do not need to begin by accepting their first principles or basic assumptions, since these are the very premises that we are arguing against. Instead, by demonstrating the failure of non-Christian religions and philosophies, and by holding forth the self-authenticating revelation of Scripture, we confidently declare to unbelievers the truth about God. They will try to force us to accept their presuppositions, and they will try to bully us with empty arguments and sarcastic insults, but if we can show that their presuppositions make knowledge impossible and lead to absurd conclusions, why must we accept them? By their presuppositions, they can know nothing, but by divine revelation, we can know the truth about God, about his creation and his commands, and receive the knowledge that leads to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

When we take this approach to apologetics and evangelism, we avoid the mistake of pitting our mere human wisdom against their mere human wisdom; rather, we are pitting the wisdom of God against the wisdom of man. They may think that the gospel is foolishness, but even the "foolishness" of God is greater than the wisdom of man (1 Corinthians 1:25), and there is no real contest between the two. Divine revelation will always be superior to human speculation at every point and on every issue. We who profess the Christian faith must confidently rely on the content of Scripture; it is able to tear down all non-Christian religions and philosophies, exposing them to be sinful attempts to know truth without submitting to God. Therefore, we announce that the Christian worldview has an absolute monopoly on truth, and that every non-Christian religion and philosophy is false. As it is written, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:31).

Paul does not "dialogue" with the Athenians to see what they can learn from each other. He has no respect for their religions and philosophies. Instead, he says, "What you do not know, I am going to tell you," and he proceeds to tell them in verse 24. Although what follows is almost certainly a condensed version of Paul's speech, it contains enough to

inform us of the content and scope of what he says, from which we can derive a biblical approach to apologetics and evangelism.

Paul first underscores the ignorance of the non-Christians, and in contrast, he claims to speak from a position of knowledge and authority. After this, he moves on to address the nature of God and the nature of creation – that is, he expounds on the biblical view of metaphysics, or the theory of reality. He begins by saying, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands" (v. 24).

Contrary to the philosophy of the Athenians, the world – not just the planet earth, but the *kosmos*, or the entire universe – and everything in it have not always been in existence; rather, this one God that Paul preaches created the universe and everything in it. Against the Epicureans, Paul declares that the universe was not formed by the random collision and combination of ever-existing atoms. Against the Stoics, Paul declares that God and the universe are not identical, but that God is distinct from the universe, and that this God does not only animate the universe, but he created the universe.

Contrary to the religion of the Athenians, there is not a god for this and a god for that. There is not a god for war, a different god for love, a different god for wisdom, and a different god for harvest. Rather, this one God that Paul preaches is the Lord of hosts, and the Lord who provides. He is love and he is wisdom, so that there is no true love and wisdom apart from him. He is "the Lord of heaven and earth," the *kurio*, the possessor of all that exists, the ruler of every sphere of physical existence and intellectual contemplation. This is the God that the Athenians did not know, and since this true God is the sole deity, the mere fact that they worshiped other "gods" necessarily implies that they were not worshiping this true God.

God is transcendent, meaning that he is distinct from the universe, although he is also immanent, since he has created the universe, and now sustains it and causes every event in it. On the other hand, the mythological gods of the Athenians were part of the universe. Contrary to this, Paul states that the true God "does not live in temples built by hands" (v. 24), and that "he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything" (v. 25). Paul deals with the nature of God with his particular emphasis because he is addressing the Greek popular religions in particular. The rest of the Bible provides us with enough information to know that our view of God disagrees with all non-Christian religions and philosophies, and we need to adapt our remarks to them when we address them in order to make the disagreements apparent. Of course we contradict the atheists and the Hindus on their views of God, but even some professing Christians deny that we radically differ with the Mormons and the Muslims. These people are ignorant of both Christian theology, which condemns all other religions, and non-Christian religions, which contradict biblical revelation on all major points.

The Mormons are not even monotheistic, claiming that Elohim is the god of only this world, that there are many gods for many different worlds, and that a man's "salvation" is his attainment of godhood to rule a particular world. They make Elohim and Jehovah into

different entities, so that Jesus is Jehovah, who was created by the sexual union between Elohim and Mary. Christians may chuckle at the Mormon claim that the Garden of Eden was located in what is now Independence, Missouri, but when they make Satan the brother of Jesus, both Christians and non-Christians ought to have enough sense to note the differences between Christianity and Mormonism. But of course stupid people still insist that the two are in essential agreement. Doubtless some Mormons will say that this is a misrepresentation of their beliefs, but they probably do not know what Mormonism really teaches.⁴³ In any case, since the Christian faith has been "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3), then it is not subject to revisions or additions; therefore, Joseph Smith was a false prophet. Will the Mormon agree with this assessment? If not, Christianity is not in agreement with Mormonism.

As for Islam, Allah is certainly not the same as the God that the Bible describes. The person who says that Allah is just another name for the Christian God must also show that Allah is a trinity, because this is what Christians affirm, that God is one in terms of godhood and three in terms of personhood, that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit all participate fully in the divine attributes. No true Muslim agrees with this. In addition, Robert Morey argues that Allah was in fact a pagan moon god.⁴⁴

Because Muslims consider the Hadith just as inspired and authoritative as the Koran, they must therefore venerate its teaching about Muhammad's psychological obsession with urine and feces. In vol. 1, chap. 57, no. 215 and vol. 2, no. 443, Muhammad says that people who soil themselves with urine will be tortured by hellfire, but a contradiction occurs in vol. 1, no. 234, when he ordered people to drink the milk and urine of camels as medicine. Muslims must accept and defend the claims that Adam was ninety feet tall (vol. 4, no. 543), that "Satan stays in the upper part of the nose all night" (vol. 4, no. 516), that Satan urinates into the ears of those who fall asleep during prayer (vol. 2, no. 245), that Allah will refuse to hear those who pass wind during prayer (vol. 1, no. 628; vol. 9, no. 86), and Allah will reject your prayers if you have bad breath (vol. 1, nos. 812, 813, 814, 815; vol. 7, nos. 362, 363), among other strange and vulgar teachings.⁴⁵

It is true that some professing Muslims, probably embarrassed by the Hadith, choose to reject its status as divinely inspired. But when the discussion is about whether Christianity agrees with Islam, the Koran alone supplies enough information to establish radical differences between the views of the two religions on all major doctrines, such as the nature of God, the status of Jesus Christ, and the way of salvation. I have already mentioned the Trinity as an example – Christians insist on it, but Muslims reject it. No one can say that the two religions worship the same God.

⁴³ An adherent of a non-Christian religion may not know the official teachings of his own religion. When you tell him the ridiculous things that his religion teaches, he may say that you have misrepresented it, not because he really knows what his own religion teaches, but because the official doctrines of his religion seem ridiculous even to him, and thus he assumes that his religion cannot possibly teach what you allege that it teaches. When this happens, then you should either cite the official authority of his religion, or challenge his personal beliefs. Of course, most professing Christians also lack knowledge of Christianity, and this is why theological education must be our first priority.

⁴⁴ Robert Morey, *The Islamic Invasion*; Christian Scholars Press, 1992; p. 211-218.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177-208.

Since this study is not specifically about Islam, we will not document its many problems here; nevertheless, we will mention one error in the Koran about the Trinity, since we have already brought up the topic. Muhammad (Sura 5:73-75, 116) thought that Christians worshiped three gods: the Father, the Mother (Mary), and the Son (Jesus). The Koran makes the mistake of saying that Christians believe Jesus to be the "Son" of God in the sense that he was the product of sexual relation between the "Father" God and Mary. However, the Bible affirms that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Christ. If Muhammad was a prophet of God, we would expect him to at least understand the basic doctrines of Christianity when he commented on it.⁴⁶

Although some professing Muslims are also embarrassed by the Koran, so that they reject both the Koran and the Hadith as divinely inspired, they should not be called true Muslims, just as professing Christians who reject the Bible are not true Christians. In cases where professing adherents to a religion reject the official authority of that religion, they are not true adherents to that religion, and we must deal with them as individuals and ask about their personal beliefs. Our approach to apologetics and evangelism toward them is the same, so that unless they are already true Christians and explicitly biblical in their worldview, their beliefs concerning all major issues will contradict biblical revelation, and ultimately the conflict will be settled on the presuppositional level.

Every attempt to rob Christianity of its uniqueness by allegedly exposing (but in reality imposing) its similarities with other worldviews, philosophies, and religions have been refuted.⁴⁷ But the spirit of Babel lives on, and so non-Christians (including false Christians) continue to force incompatible worldviews together. Deep down in their minds they know that Christianity is the only truth, but they think that if they can neutralize the biblical worldview, they will not have to obey the only true God or confront his revelation. As John the apostle writes, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19-20). To achieve unity at the expense of their rationality or even their sanity seems to be a small price to these people, but in the end it will cost much more than that, because they are still sinful men, and they will be condemned to suffer extreme torment in hell forever.

v. 24-25

Since God is the creator and ruler of all that exists, he is also distinct from and greater than the universe. It follows that he "does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything" (17:24-25). Positively, verses 24

⁴⁶ One explanation of Muhammad's misunderstandings on the Christian faith is that he had consulted extra-biblical sources that were heretical from the Christian perspective, and mistakenly thought that they represented the Christian faith. But that means he was not infallible, and that he was a false prophet. The Koran contains many errors about secular history, Jewish history and religion, Christian history and religion, as well as many self-contradictions.

⁴⁷ See James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*; Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and The Greeks*; Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*

and 25 set forth the Christian view of God and his relationship to the universe. Negatively, what Paul says here subverts the Athenians' whole religious and intellectual foundation, and their very way of life. He tells them that they are living a big lie, that their entire culture and their deepest beliefs are false.⁴⁸

Paul has set up the situation such that to maintain their way of life with intellectual integrity, the Athenians must destroy Christianity in argumentation, or else have their ultimate commitments be destroyed by Christianity. Those who cannot resist the truth of Christianity, but desire to maintain their non-Christian commitments, choose the route of self-deception, telling themselves that they have the right to maintain their non-Christian beliefs without refuting this biblical worldview that challenges and contradicts every aspect of their thought and conduct. This translates into greater condemnation against them.

Following the apostle, our approach to apologetics and evangelism must avoid finding ways to agree with anti-biblical thinking. We must clearly expound the faith so that all who hear will understand that the biblical worldview disagrees with all non-biblical worldviews on all issues. They cannot avoid us or compromise with us, but they must destroy us or be destroyed. The apologist then takes the additional step of demonstrating the impossibility of non-biblical worldviews, leaving the non-Christians no intellectual foundation on which to support their resistance toward the Christian faith. Contrary to the approach taken by some Christians, biblical evangelism does not just add Jesus on top of non-Christian belief systems, but it destroys their entire belief systems and replaces them with the biblical worldview. Anything short of this is unworthy of being called biblical apologetics or evangelism.

We need to recover the offensiveness of the gospel rather than to settle for a "seeker-friendly" message so diluted that non-Christians can agree with it without a genuine and complete conversion. The non-elect ought to be offended by the gospel, and say, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (John 6:60). But when confronted with the plain truth, the elect, or those whom God has chosen for salvation, will say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (v. 68-69). The gospel message, when properly preached, should draw the elect and repel the reprobates (John 10:27). The word of God divides the sheep from the goats, and the wheat from the weeds (Hebrews 4:12). Even then, in the wisdom of God, he has ordained that some will appear to rejoice at the word of God, only to fall away at a later time (Luke 8:13). Therefore, let us work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12); let us test our faith so as to remove false assumptions about our standing with God (2 Peter 1:10).

If we, as Sanders does, grant that non-Christians are intellectually "on the right track," then we have distorted both the Christian and the non-Christian positions. It is because they are on the wrong track that Scripture commands them to repent, which means that

⁴⁸ Some commentators continue to insist that the philosophers would agree with some of Paul's statements, but we have seen that this is impossible. By verses 24 and 25, Paul is talking about another kind of God altogether. How then can the two parties agree on what follows?

they must change their minds. For example, we must not say that unbelievers are fairly good scientists, and that if they will only do a little better, they would approve of the Christian faith; rather, we must say that they are extremely poor scientists, and that they have rejected the truth from the start. We must not say that unbelievers are quite ethical, but that they are just not good enough; rather, we must say that they are thoroughly corrupt, and that they have not even started being ethical. They are intellectually inferior and morally depraved. Christianity does not call people to merely improve their lives based on their present foundation, but it calls for genuine and complete conversion.

In addition, conversion is not about changing only several aspects of your life, but it results in a comprehensive transformation. If your "conversion" does not produce such a change, or the beginning of such a change that will clearly lead to continued growth in the correct direction, then you have not been converted. The life of God is not in you, and you remain in death and darkness.

When Paul says that God *does not* live in man-made temples and that he *is not* served by human hands (v. 24-25), he in effect declares his rejection of all popular religions in Athens. He does not state any point of agreement he has with the unbelievers, but he states his denials – what God is *not* like and how he is *not* served, that it is *wrong* to think of God a certain way and that it is *wrong* to serve him a certain way. This alone suffices in showing that apostolic teaching denies that there are many ways to God, since here it is stated that God is not like some of the conceptions that people have of deity, and that he is not served in some of the ways that people perform their worship.

Of course, Paul is speaking to a particular audience, and therefore he adapts his comments to address the beliefs and practices of his hearers. Since the rest of the Bible provides us with enough information to rule out all other ways to God except Christianity, those who claim to be Christians must either reject this biblical claim, in which case they are no longer Christians, or they must accept it, and in turn cease to be embarrassed about the exclusivity of the Christian faith. We should boldly admit, "Yes, Christianity teaches that all non-Christian religions are false, and all adherents of all non-Christian religions will suffer endless and extreme torment in hell. If you disagree, then this is why we are debating."

Some time ago, I came across a review of a Christian book. The review was written by a woman who implied that she was a Christian. Although she liked the book in general, she objected to the book's criticisms of Mormonism, and wrote that only God has the right to judge whether a religion is true or false. Since she implied that she was a Christian, this objection made no sense. It is true that God alone has the right to judge whether a religion is true or false, but this should not stop us from speaking against non-Christian religions, because he has made his thoughts known to us through his verbal revelation.

When she said that God alone has the right to judge religions, and used this as an objection against criticisms of Mormonism, she implied that God had not made a judgment about Mormonism in particular, or even non-Christian religions in general. Or, if he had already made such a judgment, he had not made it known to her. But God has

already pronounced his judgment through Scripture, and all religious and non-religious propositions that contradict what has been revealed in Scripture must be considered false by the Christian.

Thus this reviewer either had such a poor knowledge of Scripture as to disqualify her from critiquing a Christian book, or she had rejected the divine inspiration of Scripture, in which case she had no justification for claiming to be a Christian – she was merely a non-Christian stating her disagreement with the Bible. God alone has the right to judge the various religions – of course this is true – but he has already judged them, and he has made his judgment plain to us through the Bible. We can agree with him and be saved, or disagree with him and perish.

Paul continues in verse 25, "He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." God does not need us, but we need him. As David says, "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chronicles 29:14). Since "life" (*zōē*) was popularly associated with Zeus, the supreme Greek god, and since the triad of "life and breath and everything" reflects terminology current to his hearers, it is possible that Paul is again deliberately contradicting their religion. He is saying, in effect, that the Christian God, who does not live in temples and who is not served by human hands, is the author and sustainer of life, not Zeus. His statement contradicts the religion and philosophy of the Athenians, who attributed life to another source.

v. 26a

Continuing with this theme that it is the one true God who gives life to man and all living things, Paul elaborates on the biblical view, and says in verse 26, "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth." The Athenians believed that they were indigenous, having sprung from the earth, so that they were different from and superior to all other peoples, whom they considered to be barbarians. Paul's statement contradicts not only the religious and philosophical explanations of the Athenians, but it attacks the belief that was the source of their ethnic pride.

Since the Greek does not state who or what the "one" is, various suggestions have been given, but "from one man" seems most suitable to the context. The main thrust of the phrase is that God created mankind from one starting point, which Christianity asserts to be Adam, the first man. Different races and nations of men originated from one man, and not many. Since all races and nations of men originated from one man, there is no justification for the belief that any race or nation of men is inherently superior or more privileged than another, at least not in the sense that many believed themselves to be superior or privileged. Even if there are some differences between the races and nations, at least all human beings have been made in the image of God.

Non-Christian science and philosophy have no basis from which to affirm the unity and equality of the races. Apart from biblical revelation about the origin of man, from what authoritative principle can you assert that genocide and cannibalism are immoral? Why is it wrong for one race to destroy another, or for the people of one race to slaughter the people of another race for food? Science cannot demonstrate that we all came from one

man.⁴⁹ If these questions seem to dispute the obvious, then non-Christians should have a ready answer for them. However, apart from biblical authority, no principle can provide an adequate foundation on which to ground moral judgments about these issues. By what universal and absolute moral authority do you impose your morality upon me, forbidding me to commit genocide and cannibalism? Is something morally "wrong" for me to do just because you do not want me to do it? Unless moral principles have biblical revelation as its foundation, they will all be annihilated when challenged.

Since I have given my argument against evolution elsewhere, I will not repeat it here.⁵⁰ But I mention evolution to illustrate an earlier point. As on all other topics, on the subject of human origin, we should not say that non-Christians are doing good science, that they are brilliant and honest scholars, and if they will just be a little more careful, then they will come to believe in divine creation. No, they are not brilliant; they are not honest; and they are not doing good science. To come to a knowledge of the truth, it would not suffice for non-Christians to simply do science better, but they must change their first principles or foundational axioms, and not just their secondary beliefs. This requires a sovereign work of God in their hearts, and if it does not happen, they will remain in spiritual and intellectual darkness.

Non-Christians may tell you that they are intellectually neutral. Do not believe them, because there is no such thing as intellectual neutrality. You are either for Christ or against Christ. A person who claims to be examining the arguments for Christianity to determine whether it is worthy of belief is against Christianity while he is examining the arguments, and he will not be for Christianity until God changes his heart. Unbelievers are prejudiced against God. They have taken up presuppositions that preclude the truth as revealed by Scripture. Yet they claim that they will follow the facts wherever they may lead, and then they will challenge you to prove that the facts lead to your conclusions using *their* presuppositions and methods. Christians should not fall into this trap.

Nevertheless, although our first principles differ from that of the non-Christians, it is not futile to argue with them. As our negative case, we can challenge their presuppositions; as our positive case, we can present the self-authenticating principle of biblical revelation. Unless they can provide an adequate first principle to justify their subsidiary claims, they do not even have the right to present their subsidiary claims to us for consideration, as in the case of evolution.

v. 26b

God is not only the creator and sustainer of mankind, but he is also the ruler: "He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (v. 26).

⁴⁹ Science cannot prove anything. But for the sake of argument, even if science can demonstrate that we all came from one man, there is still no justification against genocide or cannibalism, unless there is a divine interpretation of the moral implication of this fact, disclosed to us by verbal revelation.

⁵⁰ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*. Briefly, since biology presupposes cosmology, and both biology and cosmology presupposes epistemology, unless the evolutionist can make explicit his epistemology and metaphysics, and show that both are justified and coherent, we do not even need to hear about his theory on biology.

There are two possible interpretations for the words, "He determined the times set for them." One takes the phrase to mean that God controls and maintains the seasons and natural cycles of life that are crucial to human survival and development, as in Acts 14:17. The other takes the phrase to mean that God determines the course and periods of human history, as in the rise and fall of nations. Scripture supports both assertions about God, but the question is which one Acts 17:26 intends to convey.

Either interpretation would contradict Greek religion and philosophy. Besides proclaiming a God totally unlike the irrelevant deities of the Epicureans, Paul is "setting his own belief in divine providence over against the fatalism of his Stoic auditors."⁵¹ But he is doing more than that, since he is presenting a view of divine providence to which no non-Christian would give consent. Only Christians affirm that God – this God and no other – having created the universe, now sustains life and determines history. Paul asserts a biblical view of divine providence as an explanation to the whole of human history that no one else agrees with.

God *determines* the *exact* territories of nations; his control is exhaustive and precise. Some professing Christians can tolerate mention of divine providence as long as we are talking only about his control over groups of people, and this is indeed the main emphasis of the verse. However, some of these same people, who claim to be Christians, put up tremendous resistance when it is pointed out that the Bible speaks of God's control over individuals in the same way.

Since I have defended divine sovereignty over human individuals elsewhere,⁵² I will not repeat the arguments here; however, I will at least point out that if one affirms divine omniscience, as every Christian must, then to acknowledge God's sovereignty over groups of people obligates him to also acknowledge God's sovereignty over individuals. This is because an omniscient being does not think of a group of anything without knowing every individual object that makes up the group.

To illustrate, when I use the word "trees" without setting a limit on the word, as in "these trees," I am using it as an universal, as in "all trees." But I do not know all trees, I have made none of them, I have determined none of their properties, and I do not even exhaustively know any one tree in particular. So do I know what I am saying? Not on the basis of empiricism. On the other hand, when God uses the word "trees," he says it as one who has made and who knows all of them. His knowledge of all particular trees corresponds to his use of the universal "trees." When I say "trees," the actual content of my knowledge does not include all trees, although I intend to refer to all trees by the word. When God says that all trees are a certain way, he has in mind every tree, that every tree is a certain way, and not just trees in the abstract without the actual content of all trees. Because God is omniscient, to him "trees" must mean the sum of all individual trees, and not trees in the abstract.

⁵¹ Williams, *Acts*; p. 307.

⁵² See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Commentary on Ephesians, The Author of Sin, and Blasphemy and Mystery*.

If you have two children, named Tom and Mary, then every time you say "my children," you are in fact referring to Tom and Mary in particular. You would not intend to mean "my children" without the actual content of "Tom and Mary." The words, "my children," represent for you "Tom and Mary." Suppose that you are omniscient, but you do not have children yet. In this case, "my children" would still mean "Tom and Mary," since you know for certain that you will have these children in the future. Therefore, an omniscient being never uses a designation of a group without conscious awareness of all the members of that group. The universal term always represents the sum of all the individuals belonging to the group. A being who lacks omniscience uses the universal term without knowledge of all the individuals in that group, but a being who possesses omniscience uses the universal term with a conscious awareness of all the individuals in that group. This is a necessary implication of omniscience.

Accordingly, when God thinks of a nation, he is also thinking of all the individuals comprising that nation at any given time, since a nation is the sum of all those individuals whom God has chosen to belong under that nation, and he has exhaustive knowledge of every individual. Indeed, he creates each individual to be included in the nation he has chosen for that individual. It is not as if God decides to enforce a given policy toward a certain group, such as male humans, and then allow each human being to volunteer to become members of that group. Instead, God creates all human beings, and groups them together as he pleases.

Therefore, it makes no sense to say that God exercises absolute sovereignty over a group, such as a nation or the elect, without also affirming the necessary implication that he exercises absolute sovereignty over each individual within that group. It makes no sense to say that God elects a group for salvation without determining which individuals would be in that group, or that he controls a nation without controlling the individuals within that nation. The individuals do not make themselves. The point is that even when the Bible is only talking about God's sovereignty over groups, his sovereignty over individuals is implied. That said, the Bible also contains many passages that assert God's absolute sovereignty over individuals, and not only groups or nations.⁵³

v. 27

Verse 27 proceeds from divine providence to its implication for religion, and therefore it is crucial to Paul's presentation. But since it is frequently misunderstood, we must study it with care: "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." The word "this" refers to what he says in the previous verse, so here he means: "God [determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live] so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

There are two main interpretations of this verse. One says that God intends for men to find him apart from special revelation, and that he makes this *possible* by his works of providence. The other says that God makes it impossible for men to find him apart from

⁵³ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

special revelation, but that he makes it *obligatory* to do so by his works of providence. In other words, the first has verse 27 say that divine providence stirs men up to seek God, and that he intends to be found apart from special revelation, but the second understands verse 27 to say that divine providence makes seeking God a moral obligation, although no one can actually find him without special revelation. The first interpretation immediately appears inconsistent with the previous verses; nevertheless, we will offer several reasons for rejecting the first view and accepting the second.

Henry Alford writes that the expression translated "perhaps" (NIV) or "if perhaps" (NASB) "indicates a contingency which is apparently not very likely to happen."⁵⁴ On the other hand, Rendall proposes that it should not be translated "perhaps," but rather "indeed," so that the verse would read, "if they might indeed feel after him."⁵⁵ He takes this to convey a real intention on God's part to have people seek after him and find him apart from special revelation. However, when Rendall himself admits that the optative mood of "to reach out" and "to find" points to "the fact that this intention had not yet been realized,"⁵⁶ his exposition suddenly amounts to saying that what God intends to happen can fail to happen. If so, then the full force of all the biblical arguments for God's sovereignty now stand against him; therefore, his interpretation is impossible. Even if the verse should read, "if they might indeed feel after him," it does not necessarily convey a real intention for the accomplishment of something, but rather an imposition of a moral obligation.

We do not have to settle this with arguments about the fine points of grammar. Instead, we may look to another passage in Paul's writings to determine the meaning of the verse in question. Earlier we have cited 1 Corinthians 1:21, which says, "For since *in the wisdom of God* the world through its wisdom did not know him, *God was pleased* through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." Pay attention to the words, "in the wisdom of God" and "God was pleased." To paraphrase, Paul is saying, "God, in his own wisdom, has determined that man will never come to know God by man's own wisdom – that is, by human philosophy and science – but God is pleased that the chosen ones will come to know him by the content of his verbal revelation." Accordingly, the GNT reads, "For God in his wisdom made it impossible for people to know him by means of their own wisdom."

What does this say about God's intention in Acts 17:27? Did he intend for people to find him by their own wisdom, although 1 Corinthians 1:21 says that he made it impossible? No, God never intended for sinful men to seek him and find him on their own. Besides contradicting 1 Corinthians 1:21, to say that God intended for men to find him on their own is to suggest that he intended for men to do something while he did not know the outcome and did not know what to expect, and he was later disappointed that men failed to seek him and find him. In other words, since the Bible says that men failed to seek and to find God, then to say that God intended men to seek and to find him is to say that

⁵⁴ W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. 2; Hendrickson Publishers, 2002; p. 375. See Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*; Lee and Shepherd Publishers, 1872; 2:198.

⁵⁵ Ibid. See Psalm 14:2-3 and Romans 3:10-12.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

God's intention was frustrated. This contradicts the omniscience and sovereignty of God. If something did not happen, then God did not intend for it to happen. However, God's works of providence did impose the moral obligation upon men to seek him and find him. Romans 1 shows us that, rather than doing what they were morally obligated to do, men have suppressed the innate knowledge that they had about God, and worshiped idols instead.

With this in mind, let us read the verse again, this time paying attention to the final portion: "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, *though he is not far from each one of us.*" Since God displays his power and goodness in providence, men ought to seek him; however, men have failed to seek him and find him, even though he is not far, and therefore all who do not know God are subject to condemnation. This is the thrust of the verse. Again, it is a statement that opposes the religion and philosophy of his audience. It does not comfort or compliment them in any way, nor does it indicate that they are already "on the right track." Rather, they are heading toward the opposite direction that God commands them to go, and that is why they need to repent, and not merely improve.

The statement, "He is not far from each one of us," is highly relevant for contemporary philosophy of religion. It also provides an apt illustration for the biblical approach of apologetics and evangelism, which in turn exposes the misguided method of today's Christians. Unbelievers in both academic and non-academic circles have voiced the objection that the evidence for God and Christianity are unclear or unconvincing. They claim that if there is a God, if he really wants people to believe in him, and if he will punish people for not believing in him, then should he not provide clearer and better evidence than what we have so far witnessed? Should not the existence of God and the truth of Christianity be less ambiguous?

This is called the problem of "divine hiddenness." The typical approach taken by Christian theologians and philosophers is to first admit that God hides himself from us, and having agreed to this, they then provide arguments as to why God is justified in hiding himself, even though he wants people to believe in him. Many of those who attempt to answer the problem of divine hiddenness never challenge the assumption that God is hidden.

However, this is an anti-biblical approach, since the Bible itself denies that God is hidden at all. Instead, it says that "He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27) and that "What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them" (Romans 1:19). Christians who attempt to answer "divine hiddenness" by first agreeing that God is hidden have adopted non-Christian assumptions and principles without argument. Why scramble to defend God for doing something when the Bible says that he has done the opposite? Why be so hasty to defend God's alleged hiddenness when the Bible says that he has made himself plain and evident to all? Why admit that God is hard to find when the Bible says that he is not far from each of us? Many of those who claim to be Christians are too quick to think like non-Christians, and in doing so, even when they think they are defending the biblical faith, in reality they have denied it from the

start. If even Christians think that God is hidden when the Bible asserts the opposite, how will non-Christians ever be confronted with a biblical approach to apologetics and evangelism?

According to what standard of epistemology or what definition of evidence is God hidden? Non-Christians must justify their epistemology and their idea of evidence before they say that God is hidden to them or that the evidence for Christianity is unclear. Suppose a person claims that he will believe in God if he sees God as a great ball of light. But since the God that we affirm is invisible, he is not a ball of light. Therefore, if God manifests a ball of light in front of a man, he is not revealing his own person, but only producing something for that man to see. It is true that a non-Christian may demand a more complex manifestation, but that is irrelevant, since the point is that if he holds to a false epistemology, then any evidence that satisfies him will not be evidence that reveals the truth.

If the man nevertheless accepts this as evidence, then he has made an irrational leap from the ball of light to the existence of God. And does this "evidence" compel him to conclude that the *Christian* God exists? Similar problems exist with miracles or apparitions. The problem is that empiricism cannot justify any belief, regardless of what it admits as evidence. And since no necessary implication follows from observation, one who relies on an empirical epistemology can always avoid the conclusion he dislikes. But then the person is to blame, and not the evidence.

Of course, there are other non-Christian epistemologies besides empiricism, and we use empiricism only as a prominent example. But if only Christian epistemology is true, then non-Christian epistemologies rule out the truth from the start, and when they demand evidence that will satisfy them, they may not come to the right conclusion even if provided with the evidence that they want, since they have wrong theories on the meaning of knowledge and the method by which to obtain it. And since their epistemologies oppose Christian first principles, the evidence that they demand will contradict the nature of our claims. For example, God is invisible, but they may demand visible evidence, so that any evidence that satisfies them does not reveal the true nature of God.

There are indeed visible evidences for Christianity, and even if we assume non-Christian first principles for the sake of argument, we can show that Christianity remains the most rational. But the effect of such an approach is always limited by the unbeliever's false epistemology, and we must not be satisfied with it if we were to honor God in our apologetics and evangelism. In other words, we must not be satisfied with showing that Christianity is only more probable or more rational than other worldviews; rather, we must argue for what the Bible actually claims – that is, Christianity is the only possible and the only true worldview. Other worldviews are not merely less probable, but foolish and impossible.

Christian presuppositions provide an intellectual framework that renders the existence and nature of God perfectly clear – so clear that he is inescapable. Non-Christian

presuppositions prevent such clarity about God, and indeed prevent clarity about anything. But why must we answer the non-Christians on the basis of their presuppositions unless they can justify these presuppositions and defend them against our attacks? Of course, they may demand justification for our presuppositions, and this is why we must learn to argue about them. The lesson is that we must refuse to be bullied into using non-Christian presuppositions, when presuppositions are the very things that we should argue about. But once we have pushed the debate to the presuppositional level, then we have already won.

The solution to divine hiddenness is simple. First, we deny that God is hidden, since the Bible states that he is not far and that he has made himself evident. Second, it remains for us to explain why so many people fail to acknowledge God. To find the answer, we will begin with Acts 17:27, and then refer to Romans 1 again.

The words "reach out for him" in the NIV is translated "grope for Him" in the NASB. The expression precludes the picture of sharp-minded non-Christians attempting to discover the truth about God through sound procedures; instead, it paints the picture of stupid and confused people groping around in the dark, desperately trying to make contact with reality, but never attaining knowledge of the truth. The same language had been used by Homer when referring to the blinded Cyclops, and by Plato when referring to vague guesses at the truth. This is Paul's opinion of the non-Christian thinking of his day. What is your opinion of the non-Christian philosophy and science of today? Do you admire the pagan mind? But we have the mind of Christ.

Paul's presentation in Acts 17 is consistent with his explanation of pagan thinking in Romans 1:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who *suppress the truth by their wickedness*, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but *their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened*. Although they claimed to be wise, *they became fools*. (v. 18-22)

Just as Acts 17 says that God is not far from each one of us, Romans 1 says that what can be known about God is plain because God has made it plain. But the question of divine hiddenness comes up because not everyone acknowledges him. What is obviously implied in Acts 17 is here explicitly stated in Romans 1, namely, that the reason non-Christians do not make a conscious affirmation of God is not because the "evidence" is unclear, but because non-Christians "suppress the truth," and they suppress the truth because of their "wickedness." Consistent with the idea that non-Christians are groping in

the dark, Romans 1 says that "their thinking became futile," that "their foolish hearts were darkened," and that "they became fools."

Therefore, while the first part of the biblical answer to divine hiddenness is to deny divine hiddenness, the second part of the biblical answer exposes the real problem, namely, that non-Christians are sinful fools. The real problem is not divine hiddenness but human blindness. It is not that God is hidden, but that non-Christians are dishonest and stupid. God is so clear that non-Christians already know about him; in fact, they are born with knowledge about him. But because they are sinful, they suppress their knowledge about him and push their awareness of him to a level below their immediate consciousness. They refuse to worship him even though they know about him.

Non-Christians deceive themselves into thinking that they do not know him and that the evidence about him is unclear. However, since they should know better than to think this way, and since they only think this way because of their sinful rebellion, God has determined that they will also suffer endless torment in hell for such stubborn wickedness. Atheists and other non-Christians – such as Muslims, Catholics, Mormons, and Buddhists – do not differ in this regard, in that they are all guilty of refusing to worship the true God, although he has made himself evident to them. Peter teaches that non-Christians "deliberately forget" the power and judgment of God (2 Peter 3:5-7).⁵⁷ Biblical apologetics represents our refusal to let them get away with it.

Just as you would not accept an insane person's diagnosis of your mental condition, you should not accept a fool's opinion of your religion. Of course the non-Christian refuses to admit that he is stupid, but you should not accept his opinion. He is intellectually blind, and he is intellectually incompetent to judge anything. He will insist that the Bible is wrong about him, but since biblical revelation is our first principle, we will take his denial as another sign of his blindness and self-deception. Again, it is evident that this conflict can only be settled on the presuppositional level.

How do we settle an intellectual confrontation on the presuppositional level? I have discussed this earlier, and also in greater detail elsewhere.⁵⁸ At this time I will emphasize only one point: Any statement a person makes implies presuppositions concerning epistemology, metaphysics, logic, linguistics, and sometimes things like ethics and history.

When I make an objection against any non-Christian worldview, I speak from an intellectual framework formed by biblical presuppositions, so that the intelligibility of my objection depends on the coherence of these principles. If an opponent challenges me, I will need to demonstrate the coherence and the self-authenticity of my first principles. If I

⁵⁷ The NASB says, "it escapes their notice," and obscures the meaning of willful ignorance. Marvin Vincent maintains that the words literally means, "this escapes them of their own will" (*Word Studies, Vol. I*; p. 704). It appears that many modern translations are able to grasp this, so that the NRSV says, "They deliberately ignore this fact," the ESV, "They deliberately overlook this fact," and the GNT, "They purposely ignore the fact." See also Barclay, Lattimore, Phillips, and Wuest.

⁵⁸ Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*.

can make a satisfactory answer on the basis of Christian theology, then I have successfully defended the worldview. Or, the Christian worldview has successfully defended itself by the sheer truth and coherence of its content.

But I also have the right to challenge the truth and coherence of non-Christian presuppositions. Whatever my opponent affirms, and whatever objection he raises against Christianity – whatever he says at all – I have the right to demand him to reveal and defend the intellectual foundation by which he makes his statement intelligible and plausible. If his statement is an objection against Christianity, then I have the right to demand him to reveal and defend the presuppositions that make this objection intelligible and plausible before I begin to answer it. If his objection is not intelligible, then there is nothing to answer. If his presuppositions cannot make the objection plausible, then there is no reason to answer.

If the objection is that, "The resurrection of Christ was impossible," I have the right to demand, "From what intellectual foundation or framework are you making this statement? Is your statement even intelligible and plausible on the basis of this foundation or framework? Base on what principle do you decide what is possible and what is impossible? And what is your justification for believing such a principle? What is your view concerning this universe, within which the resurrection of Christ was impossible? And what is your justification for believing this view of the universe?"

The opponent cannot say, "Just answer the question!" This is because my position is that the biblical framework is the only true intellectual framework from which to view reality, and from this framework, the resurrection of Christ was both a possibility and a historical fact. But my opponent does not believe that the biblical framework is true. Since the resurrection poses no problem within my intellectual framework, then my opponent must be making his objection from within another intellectual framework, and I need to know the characteristics of this framework before I can answer him and before I am required to answer him. And if his intellectual framework makes no sense, and if he cannot defend it, then he cannot make his objection in the first place.

If God has revealed himself through the Bible, then it begs the question to say that we cannot believe the Bible because God has not revealed himself. If the Bible is what it claims to be, then verbal revelation is the best means of divine disclosure, and if the Bible is what it claims to be, then we have no right to demand anything else. Therefore, any objection against Christianity based on divine hiddenness presupposes a rejection of Scripture, and since Scripture is our ultimate authority and first principle, the conflict goes to the presuppositional level. It is obvious, then, that nothing can be settled without presuppositional confrontations, because it is impossible to argue about anything without presupposing an intellectual foundation or framework, which in turn determines the direction and content of our arguments.

Now, since I believe that the biblical framework is the only one that is true, and that all non-biblical frameworks are false, I cannot sincerely assume the non-Christian's framework in order to demonstrate a Christian claim. However, I can often reduce the

non-Christian's framework to absurdity, showing that his presuppositions logically lead to ridiculous conclusions, ones that even he will refuse to accept. Or, I can demonstrate that the Christian view is more rational even if I were to assume his presuppositions for the sake of argument. But unless the non-Christian demonstrates that biblical presuppositions are false, he cannot force me to assume his presuppositions in order to prove Christian claims, since that is precisely the point in dispute – the argument is about whose basic principles are correct. And if he indeed tries to refute biblical presuppositions, we return to the question of what intellectual foundation he stands on when he makes his arguments and objections.

Some people deny that they have any presuppositions, but this only means that they are unaware of them. Most people have never examined the basic assumptions and principles of their thinking. But any statement from an opponent can provide us an occasion to ask about his presuppositions and to attack them. For example, a person who claims that miracles are impossible must have an intellectual principle or standard by which he decides what is possible and what is impossible. What is this principle? We challenge him to reveal and defend it. If he cannot reveal or defend it, then it is clear that he himself does not know what he is asking, and his objection becomes impotent and meaningless. What if he must borrow biblical presuppositions in order for his statement to be intelligible? What if he must assume principles that can only be found in or justified by biblical revelation? All non-Christians do this without admitting it. But then, is it still an objection, or is it an indirect endorsement of the Christian faith? Of course, his confusion is consistent with what the Bible teaches about the non-Christian's intellectual condition.

v. 27b-29

In the NIV, verses 27-29 read as follows:

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring." Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill.

However, I will paraphrase and divide the passage thus:

God is not far from each one of us, for it is by him – his will and his power – that we live and move and exist. (v. 27b-28a)

Some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring." But if we are his "offspring," then it is self-contradictory for you to represent God with man-made images of gold or silver or stone. (v. 28b-29)

This paraphrase and arrangement is based on the understanding that "for in him we live and move and have our being" (v. 28a) is topically connected with "he is not far from

each one of us" (v. 27b), and that "since we are God's offspring..." (v. 29) is topically connected with "some of your own poets have said..." (v. 28b).

This understanding, and thus this arrangement, is not unique. For example, the GNT says, "Yet God is actually not far from any one of us; as someone has said, 'In him we live and move and exist.' (v. 27b-28a) It is as some of your poets have said, 'We too are his children.' Since we are God's children...(v. 28b-29)" And the CEV says, "...though he is not far from any of us: 'We live in him. We walk in him. We are in him.' (v. 27b-28) Some of your own poets have said: 'For we are his children.' Since we are God's children...(v. 28b-29)"⁵⁹

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) had ascribed Paul's quotation of a Cretan writer to the second line of a quatrain by Epimenides of Crete (Titus 1:12). The fourth line reads, "For in thee we live and move and have our being." However, it is unclear that Paul is quoting the poem in verse 28, because the wording does not reflect the expected poetic meter or diction, and he does not introduce the expression as a quotation as he does the other statement, "We are his offspring." Thus the NASB does not include quotations around the first expression, and it reads, "...though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist..."

This first expression in verse 28, then, illustrates the last portion of verse 27, and thus my paraphrase: "God is not far from each one of us, for it is by him – his will and his power – that we live and move and exist." God is not far from us in the sense that we are constantly depending on him, for our life, our activities, and our very existence. Relating this to the point made earlier, this is why it is inexcusable when non-Christians deny the reality and supremacy of God. They grope in the dark as if God is difficult to find, but the very act of groping in the dark depends on his divine sustenance.

To argue about the existence of God is like arguing about the existence of air – you need to be breathing air while you argue about it, and if it does not exist, you would not be alive to argue about it in the first place. This coincides with what we said about debating non-Christians, that God is both the epistemological and metaphysical precondition of all arguments, so that unless a non-Christian can supply and defend non-biblical presuppositions with which he makes his statements intelligible, the very fact that he argues against Christianity presupposes the truth of Christianity. The inescapable knowledge of God within him is inconsistent with his explicit denial of God.

Those who wish to show that Paul is seeking common ground with the non-Christians say that the apostle cites pagan literature to support biblical claims in verse 28. But if we keep in mind all that we have established when discussing verses 16-27, interpreting verse 28 from the "common ground" perspective should be ruled out from the start. Nevertheless, we will make some additional observations about the verse and its apparent references to pagan literature.

⁵⁹ In a moment, we will cast doubt on whether we should put quotations around "for in him we live and move and have our being."

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that the first part of verse 28 is at least an allusion of the quatrain by Epimenides, if not a direct quotation. What does the expression mean in its original context? "For in thee we live and move and have our being" is a statement about Zeus made from within a polytheistic or pantheistic intellectual framework, and really has no contact with Christianity. The words may sound like something that a Christian would say, but the meaning is completely different. If the two sides were to state their beliefs in a precise manner, all the superficial resemblances would disappear.

If Paul is here using the line from Epimenides "as is" – without modification or qualification – then how can he say that the non-Christians are blind and ignorant (v. 23, 27, 30), since it would show that they have true knowledge? In Romans 1, he says that the unbelievers suppress the truth about God, and in 1 Corinthians 1, he says that God has ordained it so that men would fail to know God through human wisdom. But if the non-Christians are able to acknowledge that we live and move and exist in God *in the Christian sense*, then they would not be so blind and ignorant, nor would it appear that they are suppressing the truth about God, nor would it appear that human wisdom cannot attain the knowledge of the true God.

However, since Paul does consider non-Christians blind and ignorant, since he does believe that they suppress the truth about God, and since he does assert that human wisdom cannot attain knowledge of the true God, this means he cannot be using the line from Epimenides without modification or qualification. Rather, if Paul is really using the expression (v. 28a) to illustrate the biblical claim that "[God] is not far from each one of us" (v. 27b), then it would appear that he is in fact using the same words in an explicitly Christian sense, having emptied the expression of all its original meaning.

That said, it is unclear that Paul is quoting Epimenides in the first place. As Lenski writes, "Paul's statement is not metrical in form, nor does he indicate that he is quoting. All that one may say is that Paul may have read Epimenides and have used his statement in a formulation of his own."⁶⁰ In other words, although the statement may sound similar, Paul is probably not using it as a quotation from Epimenides, and the two of them intend very different meanings.

The other expression in verse 28, "We are his offspring," as Paul himself indicates, is indeed a quotation from pagan literature, and therefore we must deal with it as such. However, just because Paul quotes something does not mean that he agrees with the statement or its author. It depends on how he uses the quotation. Earlier I pointed out that although I was quoting Sanders, I did not use the quotation for support, but as an example to refute. Likewise, we will see that Paul's usage of the statement, "We are his offspring," lends no support to the "common ground" perspective of religion or apologetics, but instead it proves to be another assault against pagan beliefs.

⁶⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*; Hendrickson Publishers, 2001 (original: 1934); p. 732.

The quotation comes from Aratus (315-240 B.C.), in a line from his work *Phaenomena*. Among other things, he was a medic, astronomer, mathematician, and poet. For a number of years, he lived in Athens and was a student of Zeno. While in Athens, he wrote *Phaenomena*, which became popular for a number of centuries in the Greek-speaking world. Paul uses the plural in "as some of your own *poets* have said," because the same thought appeared at least in one other author in a different form, namely, in the "Hymn to Zeus" by the Athenian Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (300-220 B.C.). In a relevant context, Chrysostom named another poet, Timagenes. Nevertheless, we assume that Paul is quoting from Aratus because the statement quoted is as Aratus wrote it.

As an aside – an important aside – although having a knowledge of Homer and Plato would hardly make one especially well-educated in that day (or even today), Paul's knowledge of the relatively minor writers, his close academic relationship with Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), and the fine expositions contained in his writings, certainly warrant the assessment that, "Paul was a scholar."⁶¹ He was an extraordinary intellectual, and if we are to imitate other aspects of the apostle's life and thought, such as his integrity and his zeal, let us also imitate this aspect of his life, even if this means that we must go against the anti-intellectual tendencies of the church and the world. May God grant the church many believers who are "well informed, quick to understand," having "knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature," and "showing aptitude for every kind of learning" (Daniel 1:4, 17). An army of believers having these qualities will spell the doom of non-Christian dominance in the academic world.

Returning to the quotation, let us remind ourselves of the biblical teaching regarding the expression, "the children of God." Scripture denies that all human beings are the children of God; rather, it teaches that all non-Christians are the children of the devil, of wrath, and of darkness (John 8:44, Ephesians 2:3, 5:8). The apostle John even tells us how to distinguish between the children of God and the children of the devil (1 John 3:10). Thus not all are the children of God in the spiritual sense; however, all human beings are the creatures of God, since God made all of them. Therefore, all human beings – Christians and non-Christians – are the *creatures* of God, but only Christians are the *children* of God. It is amazing how even some professing Christians can say that, "We are all God's children," and include non-Christians in such a statement. No, if you are a non-Christian, you are a child of the devil.

There is no way that Paul can agree with the statement by Aratus. Whether Aratus is referring to creation or relationship, he is speaking of Zeus, and Zeus is nothing like the God of the Bible. It is most foolish to admit that Aratus is speaking of Zeus, and then assert that Paul's usage of the quotation implies an agreement with Christianity. We cannot simply apply a statement meant for Zeus to the Christian God, because the "his" in "We are his offspring" has a definite meaning, so that the statement means, "We are [Zeus] offspring." Can we apply this to the Christian God? Of course not, but this is what Aratus means by, "We are his offspring," so that in his mind, "We are his offspring" equals "We are [Zeus] offspring."

⁶¹ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Treasures from the New Testament*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941; p. 54.

A word like "his" always has a definite referent when it appears within a given context, and we cannot treat it as without meaning or as completely flexible. It is not up to us to take the "his" from another person's statement, and substitute it with whatever referent we wish. To do so would change it into a different statement altogether. If by, "We are *his* offspring," Aratus means, "We are *Zeus'* offspring," then when we say, "We are *his* offspring," but mean, "We are *Jehovah's* (the Christian God's) offspring," we are saying something completely different, since "We are *Zeus'* offspring" is obviously different from "We are *Jehovah's* offspring." Paul would assert that all human beings are the Christian God's offspring in the sense that all are his creatures, but then Aratus would not have agreed. This should be easy to understand, if not for so many people's eagerness to show that Paul cites pagan authorities with approval, when he cites them with a different purpose in mind.

To understand Paul's intention, we need to see how he uses the quotation from Aratus. Thus we proceed to verse 29: "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill." If we are God's offspring (whether Zeus or another), then how can God be something lower than ourselves or even be represented by something lower than ourselves? If God is something lower than ourselves or is represented by something lower than ourselves, then how can we be his offspring, or how can God himself be something higher than ourselves? Which one is it? They could not affirm both.

Paul cites one idea that many of them affirm in order to contradict another idea that many of them also affirm. Therefore, the best explanation of the quotation is that Paul is not using Aratus *to support the Christian view* of the nature of God, but he is using Aratus *to refute the Athenian view* of the nature of God. Thus Paul defeats the popular Greek religion on this point by an *argumentum ad hominem*, which in this context means "an argument proving a conclusion from the principles or practices of an opponent himself, often by showing them to be contrary to his argument."⁶²

Eugene Peterson's loose paraphrase of verses 28 and 29 is helpful in making apparent the *ad hominem* argument: "One of your poets said it well: 'We're the God-created.' Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn't make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for us, does it?" (Peterson, *The Message*). Remember that the first instance of "God-created" in this paraphrase means "Zeus-created," and therefore has no agreement with Christianity. However, the second instance may refer to a general concept of deity, since this is what Paul is arguing about – the nature of God. It would be less misleading if the paraphrase reads:

One of your poets said, "We are the Zeus-created." But if we are the "God"-created, then it is self-contradictory to think of the divine being or the divine nature as consisting of or represented by an image of gold, silver, or stone.

⁶² Also, "An appeal to the known prepossessions or admissions of the person addressed." See Lenski, *Acts*; p. 741.

That is, "While claiming to be creatures of 'God,' at the same time you think that the divine being can be represented by an image made of gold or stone, and thus you contradict yourself, and your religion self-destructs."

Biblical argumentation exposes the internal contradictions of non-Christian religions and philosophies. Human intellect is finite in the first place, and it is impossible for human wisdom alone to construct a true, comprehensive, and coherent worldview. Human sinfulness has severely damaged the mind, and adds burden to his intellectual finitude, so that it is impossible for man to know the truth about God and his creation without special revelation, or the words of the Bible. However, non-Christian religions and philosophies are attempts to grasp the nature of reality and its implications without divine revelation from the only true God. Therefore, all non-Christian religions and philosophies are bound to fail.

The knowledge of God is inescapable because it is innate in the mind and evident in creation, so that non-Christian religions and philosophies invariably pilfer Christian presuppositions that make perfect sense within the biblical framework, but that generate contradictions when forced into non-biblical systems. Non-Christians need these biblical principles to anchor some of their most cherished beliefs, and so they twist and distort them in order to make them fit into their systems. But it remains that these biblical principles are incompatible with the non-biblical ideas, and thus contradictions will always remain in non-Christian worldviews.

v. 30a

Then, verse 30 says, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." This verse carries important implications for the history and philosophy of religion, the intellectual status of non-Christian systems, the basis of ethics, and the universal and exclusive moral domination of Christianity. We cannot discuss these things in detail, and in fact, before we begin talking about any of them, we must explain the first part of the verse to prevent some gross misunderstandings.

Commentators do not hesitate to point out that it is very misleading to translate as "winked at" (KJV) what is translated as "overlooked" in the NIV, since "winked at" can imply approval, or at least indifference. Although "overlooked" is a better translation, it is still subject to misinterpretation, and it seems that very few commentators can state with precision the sense in which God had "overlooked" the ignorance of the Gentiles. However, we need not be agnostic about the meaning of this verse, because there are relevant and parallel passages in the writings and sermons of Paul that clarify what he means here in verse 30. They include Romans 1:21-32 and Acts 14:15-17.

First, we should read Romans 1:21-32 to establish several things that will help us understand the meaning of Acts 14:15-17 and Acts 17:30:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their

foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, *he gave them over* to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

We have mentioned the relevance of Romans 1 to Acts 17 – both passages deal with pagan beliefs, and in both passages Paul is consistent in his theology and approach toward these pagan beliefs. Here in Romans 1, Paul says that because the people failed to acknowledge the true God but rather worshiped false gods, God "gave them over" to all kinds of destructive beliefs, unholy attitudes, and vile practices. Thus we know that when Paul says, "In the past God *overlooked* such ignorance" (Acts 17:30), he cannot mean that God approved of, or was indifferent toward, the pagan religions. Rather, it appears that, in a sense, God had been judging and punishing the non-Christians all along.

God extends his grace toward a nation when he calls it to repent by means of verbal proclamation and temporal judgments. Although biblical history records numerous occasions when God dealt strongly with the nation of Israel, in general he did not deal with the Gentile nations in the same explicit terms. Make no mistake about it – God dealt with pagan nations about their idol worship and sinful practices; he even converted some Gentiles, and required them to abandon their idols and make a profession of faith. But he never dealt with them the same way he did with Israel, sending prophets and miracles,

many punishments and several exiles to restrain their evil hearts and bring them back to proper religion.

For example, here are several passages from Jeremiah, illustrating God's policy toward Israel:

"From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets...." (7:25)

"For they have not listened to my words," declares the LORD, "words that I sent to them again and again by my servants the prophets. And you exiles have not listened either," declares the LORD.... (29:19)

"They turned their backs to me and not their faces; though I taught them again and again, they would not listen or respond to discipline...." (32:33)

"Again and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you." They said, "Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them. Then you will live in the land I have given to you and your fathers." But you have not paid attention or listened to me. (35:15)

Jesus himself focused on the Jews when he was on the earth, and he told his disciples to do the same: "He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel'" (Matthew 15:24); "These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel'" (Matthew 10:5-6).

God had decided to deal with the world this way until the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Before Christ ascended to heaven, he left instructions to the effect that Christianity is to be a global faith, and as such his disciples must exert themselves in world evangelism or missions: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, also Matthew 28:18-20).

With this in mind, we hardly need Acts 14:15-17 to understand Acts 17:30, but it is still helpful, since we will see that the passage corresponds to the above explanation:

Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their

seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

Compared to how he dealt with the Jews, God had in a sense "let all nations go their own way" until Pentecost. But the next verse says that God did not leave himself "without testimony," so it is not that God had ignored the Gentiles, but only that he had a different policy toward them until that time. This difference in policy involves the relative scarcity of verbal revelation among the Gentiles and less spectacular acts of divine providence among them. Again, he did not leave himself "without testimony," so that he indeed gave the Gentiles some verbal revelation about himself through his prophets, and showed them some acts of special providence, although he mainly testified about himself through the general providence, so that even joy, perhaps the joy of harvest, was a testimony to the Christian God.

As Romans 1 and other passages show, although human wisdom cannot arrive at a knowledge of God and a knowledge of salvation from general providence, general providence itself is sufficient to make men culpable for their ignorance about God and their rebellion against him. Therefore, no one should misunderstand that God "overlooked" the sinful rebellion of the Gentiles in the sense that none of the Gentiles went to hell until Pentecost!

Scripture is clear that all non-Christians are condemned to hell. Even the Jews under the Old Covenant must explicitly profess Christ to be saved, although they lacked many of the details surrounding his life and ministry. Jesus did not introduce the "gospel," as if no one knew about it before his ministry. Galatians 3:8 says that God himself "announced the gospel in advance to Abraham," telling him outright that "God would justify the Gentiles by faith." Moses said to his people, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (Deuteronomy 18:15). Hebrews 11:26 says that Moses suffered disgrace "for the sake of Christ," and not some indefinite character or principle. Way before Moses, even immediately after Adam and Eve had sinned, God announced that salvation would come through Christ: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). We grant that the gospel was not fully revealed until the time of Christ and the apostles, but it remains that the people of God had considerable knowledge about it all along.

In fact, 1 Peter 1:10-11 at first implies that the main area of ignorance was limited to "the time and circumstances" of what the prophets had predicted. Verse 11 says that at the least they knew about "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." And verse 12 says that even the initial ignorance about "the time and circumstances" was removed when the prophets inquired about them (v. 10). Therefore, they certainly had more than enough knowledge to be saved through Christ, and from this perspective, there is no reason why we cannot call them "Christians." Since faith in Christ has always been the only way to salvation, and since even Old Testament believers were saved only by faith in Christ, we may without reservation say that in all of history, only "Christians" were saved, and all deceased non-Christians are now in hell. With even greater force and

clarity, Scripture now declares that only Christians will be saved, and all non-Christians will suffer endless torment in hell. There is no hope for anyone apart from an explicit profession of faith in Christ; he is the only escape from endless extreme torture in the afterlife.

This leads us to the second portion of Acts 17:30. The verse says, "*In the past* God overlooked such ignorance, *but now* he commands all people everywhere to repent." In the past, God's saving acts were mainly directed at the Jews,⁶³ and in this sense "overlooked" the ignorance of the Gentiles, but now he commands *all people everywhere* to repent, signifying that the authority and the blessing of the gospel transcend all ethnic, cultural, and geographical borders. Positively, this means that God is placing his elect among all kinds of people groups and the saving power of the gospel is extending to the whole earth. Negatively, since the verbal revelation of God is now extending to the whole earth, the wrath of God is multiplied and poured out upon all kinds of people who scorn the gospel.

v. 30b

Paul begins his speech by underscoring the Athenians' ignorance and his own knowledge and authority (v. 23); now he stresses their ignorance again as he nears the end of his speech, and from a position of knowledge and authority, he proclaims God's command for all to repent and believe in Christ (v. 30). As mentioned, many commentators wish to make Paul compliment the Athenians for the knowledge that they have already attained, if they will only allow him to supply the little that they still lack. But when Paul summarizes his speech by saying that their religions and philosophies are examples of ignorance (v. 30), it becomes even more obvious that the intent of his speech (v. 22-29) is to contrast their ignorance to his knowledge, and the futility of pagan philosophy to the grandeur of biblical philosophy. He does not say that he admires their philosophical competence, and that he only wishes them to go a little further and affirm the biblical worldview. Instead, Paul says that they are ignorant people, that they do not know what they are talking about, that he is the one with the answer, and that they must now turn from their idols and worship his God instead.

Notice the urgency, authority, and universality of Paul's statement – "now he commands all people everywhere to repent" – *now...commands...all...everywhere...repent!* No one is excluded from this moral obligation; no one is acceptable to God apart from repentance and faith in Christ. Non-Christians want you to think that this is too narrow-minded, arrogant, and insensitive. How dare you say that only you are right and everyone else is wrong? But when they say this, they are asserting an exclusive view just as much as we are. They are saying that everyone who does not think like them is wrong, just as we are saying that everyone who does not think like us is wrong. The difference is that we admit it, but they do the same thing and lie to us about it. Every proposition necessarily excludes its contradictories; therefore, anyone who says anything is in a sense asserting

⁶³ It follows that if relatively few Gentiles were converted in the past, then God had placed relatively few elect individuals in Gentile nations and cultures until the time of Christ.

an exclusive proposition. The question is which exclusive claim is correct, and not whether we should make exclusive claims.

Calling us wrong or arrogant in asserting that only the biblical worldview is true begs the question, since if what we are saying is indeed true, then we are not wrong or arrogant. But do we have to be so confrontational when discussing these things? Can we not give the non-Christian some place to stand on? Do we have to embarrass him, and contradict him on every point? These questions again beg the question again. If the biblical worldview is exclusively true, and if what we are using is the biblical approach, then this approach is correct. The non-Christian should stop hiding behind superficial issues like hurt feelings and social propriety, and answer the ultimate questions. From the biblical perspective, the Christian is not confronting the non-Christian on the basis of his own human credentials, but on the basis of divine revelation. He is the means by which God says to the non-Christian, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (Job 38:3).

If you are a non-Christian, then all of your beliefs are wrong – all of them. You are wrong, and I am right. But I am right only because I believe what Scripture teaches me, and I am right only to the extent that I affirm what Scripture teaches. The words of Scripture are the very words of God, and since I speak to you on the basis of Scripture, I am therefore speaking to you by the authority of God. This God is the only God – there is no other God. Christianity is his only revelation – there is no other revelation. And now this only God who has revealed himself only through the Christian faith commands you to repent and believe the gospel. Since he has made such a command, he has therefore imposed a moral obligation upon you to repent and believe. Since he has imposed a moral obligation on you to repent and believe, if you do not, you become guilty of blatant defiance against such a command, in addition to the many other sins for which you are guilty before God.

Believing Christ leads to salvation; disbelieving Christ leads to destruction. However, whether you believe is not even up to you, but since faith is a gift from God, it is up to him whether he will give you this gift. Yet there is no other way – atheism will damn you forever, agnosticism is a damnable farce, and Islam and Buddhism cannot save you. Only God can save you by giving you faith in the Christian gospel, and you are completely at his mercy. If you truly realize your wretched state and sincerely call out to God for mercy and salvation through Christ, then you will know that God has already chosen you and regenerated you; otherwise, your present life will be a meaningless existence, and your next life will be endless suffering in hell.

On the other hand, if you are a Christian, then you are right, and the non-Christians are wrong – all of them. The above summarizes the gospel that you must preach. Many believers claim to affirm the exclusivity of Christianity, but when it is stated in such explicit terms, they are reluctant to identify with it. But if you say that you are a Christian, the above gospel message is what you claim to believe, and it is what you must profess and preach before believers and unbelievers. You may have been indoctrinated with non-Christian ideas about how civilized society should operate, that we should

"tolerate" the beliefs of other people, that we should not claim to be right and say that all who disagree are wrong, and that we should not argue against other people's beliefs. But non-Christians spread these principles in order to neutralize the influence of Christianity, and to avoid confrontation with the truth of the Bible. Do not be deceived by them.

If you claim to be a Christian, then you must preach an explicitly exclusive gospel – one that offends the non-elect. But if even you are offended by it, then what gospel do you profess? And what gospel do you preach? Jesus says, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30). There is no neutral position – you are either a friend of Christ or an enemy of Christ. If you claim to be a friend of Christ, then he has commissioned you to "take captive every thought" for him, and "make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). This means that you must not let the non-Christian get away with anything that he has against Christ; it is a declaration of war against every detail of non-Christian thought. Are you for Christ, or are you against him? If you are for Christ, then you are against the world, and you are obligated to take every non-Christian thought and pummel it to a bloody death right in front of everyone.

A point about ethics will give us an appropriate introduction to the next verse. Verse 30 says, "Now he commands all people everywhere to repent." Christian ethics is based on divine commands, so that something is morally good because God commands it, and something is morally evil because God forbids it. For example, it was a moral evil for Adam and Eve to eat from the forbidden tree not because the act of eating the fruit of a tree, or even eating from that tree, was inherently evil, but it was a moral evil because God verbally prohibited them from eating the fruit of that particular tree.

Moral obligation is based on and generated by divine command. Therefore, when Paul says that God commands all people everywhere to repent, it means that God has imposed a moral obligation upon all human beings to repent. It is more than a suggestion or invitation; the failure to obey constitutes sin. Since the command is universal, the moral obligation is also universal. However, the ability to fulfill this moral obligation is not necessarily universal.

The assumption that moral obligation implies moral ability is false. Moral obligation only implies the prior issuance of a divine command and the divine commitment to enforce such a command by reward and punishment. Whether the person upon whom the moral obligation falls has the ability to fulfill this moral obligation is a separate issue. In fact, the Bible teaches that no one can be justified by obeying the law because no one has the ability to obey the law; nevertheless, the moral obligation is there, and unless God chooses to save, all are under condemnation because of the law. The ability to repent and believe comes as a result of God's sovereign grace in regenerating the sinner, giving him the moral ability that he lacked before.

v. 31

Proceeding to verse 31, Paul says that God will indeed enforce his moral commands to all human beings: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." Of course, God's command for men to *repent* assumes their prior

disobedience toward his other moral commands, so that they are already under condemnation, and the only way to escape the wrath of God is to obey this command to repent. Those who do not repent will face divine judgment and eternal condemnation.

Paul proclaims divine judgment to the non-Christians on the basis of the resurrection of Christ: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. *He has given proof of this* to all men by raising him from the dead" (v. 31). The word "this" refers to the judgment, and "he" refers to God. To paraphrase, "God has set a day when he will judge the world by Jesus Christ. And God has given proof that he will judge the world and that he will judge it by Jesus Christ by raising him from the dead." The resurrection of Christ is proof that God will judge the world, and that he will judge it by Jesus Christ.

However, the Athenians denied that resurrection was possible; they did not even believe in immortality, and certainly not the personal immortality of the biblical worldview. Greek mythology has it that when Athena founded the Areopagus, Apollo declared, "Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection." Now, if these Athenians were to become Christians, they must affirm the resurrection of Christ, and this means that they must turn away from their religion and reject Apollo's statement. Conversion, and thus salvation, entails more than an acceptance of Christian propositions, but also a rejection of non-Christian propositions.

Can you see that Paul's conflict with the Athenians was not over some superficial disagreement? Can you see that if Paul was correct, then the Athenians were never "on the right track"? Since contemporary non-Christian religions and philosophies are not any closer in their beliefs to Christianity than the Athenians' beliefs were to Paul's, the disagreements between the Christian worldview and all non-Christian worldviews are at least just as great today.

The Athenians and the philosophers deny the doctrine of divine judgment. How does Paul address it? The "common ground" approach would argue with the non-Christians about something that they disagree with on the basis of something that they do agree with. But Paul rejects this approach. Instead, he argues about something that they disagree with (the judgment) on the basis of something that they *also disagree* with (the resurrection)! As with all the previous stages in his speech, Paul continues to stress their ignorance and proclaims his own philosophy to them from a position of knowledge and authority. He never admits that the Athenians are correct about anything, or that they are "on the right track," as Sanders puts it.

Now, there are in fact some non-Christians who believe that Jesus was raised from the dead based on empirical arguments; they cannot deny the historical reliability of the scriptural testimony even on empirical grounds. However, this does not make them Christians because these people deny the interpretation or the significance that the same scriptural documents attribute to the resurrection of Christ. This is another example of the inherent weakness of empirical proofs. Thus Christians should never speak as if their ultimate authority is their own sensation, when their ultimate authority is Scripture, or

divine revelation. From this revelation we have knowledge of both Christ's resurrection and its significance. Those who disagree must defeat the claim on this presuppositional level.

However, it remains that most non-Christians do not believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, because to them the resurrection of the dead is an impossibility. But as Paul says, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:8). Resurrection poses no problem within the biblical framework. So if you reject the resurrection of Christ, you must be speaking from within another intellectual framework. But if you are not speaking from within the biblical framework, then by what authority or principle do you pronounce resurrection an impossibility?

According to whom is resurrection impossible? According to you? Then are you the ultimate standard of what is possible and impossible? If this is what you claim, why must I accept what you say when my ultimate standard, the Bible, says that you are stupid and insane? Can you refute the Bible? And why should I accept you as the ultimate authority unless you can justify what you say on the basis of your own authority?

Is resurrection impossible according to science? Even if science is reliable, how does it show that resurrection is impossible? You may say that science shows resurrection to be at least improbable, but improbable relative to what? Is it improbable according to God? If God decides that he wants to raise someone from the dead, then that person will indeed rise from the dead; it would be impossible for him not to rise from the dead. But why is science the standard in the first place? Even if science sometimes produces or predicts certain results, to use the practical success of a theory to argue for the view of reality assumed by the theory commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

If you measure truth by some other standard, you must provide justification for it. And if you cannot destroy my right to hold to the biblical framework, then how can you challenge my belief in resurrection? This same intellectual framework that you fail to destroy informs me of the historicity and the significance of Christ's resurrection. If you cannot destroy my framework, you cannot destroy my belief in resurrection. Many people say that they reject the Bible because it contains myths and fables, and by this they often refer to the miracles recorded in it. But this presupposes without argument that the Bible is false. If the Bible is true, then the miracles are not myths and fables (2 Peter 1:16). Unless you can destroy my first principle, it begs the question for you to reject my first principle by denying my subsidiary claims using your own first principle.

Christians must be alert and cautious, lest they become ensnared by the popular but irrational non-Christian assumptions, thus making their defense of the faith unnecessarily cumbersome and difficult. For example, the notion that empirical and scientific methods are reliable ways of attaining knowledge about reality is a foolish but stubborn assumption among both Christians and non-Christians. Whatever a Christian thinks about empiricism and science, he must not allow them to become his ultimate authority, since by definition a Christian's ultimate authority is biblical revelation. But in fact we should

deny that empiricism and science can attain any knowledge about reality, so that they cannot even become secondary methods in our worldview.

Every Christian who permits any degree of reliance on empiricism and science for knowledge about reality does so for the wrong reasons. To illustrate, the Christian philosopher Ronald Nash writes:

[Some] important content of the Bible depends upon human experience and testimony. If the senses are completely unreliable, then we cannot trust the reports of witnesses who say, for example, that they heard Jesus teach or saw him die or saw him alive three days after his crucifixion. If there is no sensory testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, then the truth of the Christian faith is open to serious challenge.⁶⁴

Nonsense. He says, "[Some] important content of the Bible depends upon human experience and testimony." This is a lie. Not one proposition in the Bible *depends* on human experience and testimony. Rather, all the content of the Bible depends on divine inspiration, and this at times includes a writer's divinely inspired record and interpretation *about* human experience and testimony. Here we have one view that says the biblical writers must depend on human experience and testimony as they write, at least to obtain some of the content; the other says that they depend only on divine inspiration even as they write *about* human experience and testimony. There is a big difference between the two. Non-Christians believe the first, but Christians believe the second.

He continues, "If the senses are completely unreliable, then we cannot trust the reports of witnesses who say, for example, that they heard Jesus teach or saw him die or saw him alive three days after his crucifixion." This is also false.

Unless the senses are completely reliable, there is no way to know by sensation how reliable our senses are. But if the senses are completely unreliable, we cannot even know by sensation that they are completely unreliable, since this would mean that we can indeed verify by sensation that each sensation is false, and thus we would be getting something right by sensation, which contradicts the notion that our senses are completely unreliable. We may say that the senses are at least sometimes unreliable, but then again, there is no way to judge by sensation how unreliable the senses are, or whether the senses are reliable in a particular instance.

The truth is that we cannot know by sensation which sensation is correct and which sensation is incorrect, or the degree of sensation's reliability. Therefore, *any* degree of *dependence* on empiricism on a given issue results in complete agnosticism about that issue. This is different from a mere *involvement* of sensation, as in Scripture's infallible testimony *about* the empirical observations of some people. Scripture's *dependence* is on inspiration, with zero *dependence* on sensation. If God so willed it, any biblical passage

⁶⁴ Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Question: An Introduction to Philosophy*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1999; p. 152.

written *about* a person's empirical observation could have been written with no involvement of anyone's empirical observation at all.

For example, the first chapter of Genesis was written without any dependence on or any involvement of empirical observation by the writer of Genesis, but it is no less true. The same could have been done with all the biblical passages on the resurrection of Christ, if God had so willed it. Therefore, *none* of the biblical passages really *depend* on human experience and testimony, although the content of some biblical passages indeed *involve* human experience and testimony without depending on them.

If the senses are less than infallible, we will need a non-sensory infallible authority or standard to judge all instances of sensation in order to attain any reliable information from them. But when we accept an instance of sensation as accurate *because of* the testimony of this non-sensory infallible authority or standard, then we are in fact accepting the testimony of this non-sensory authority or standard, and not the testimony of sensation. The Bible includes infallible testimonies *about* what some people have perceived by the senses, and we accept that in these instances the people sensed what they thought they sensed because we accept the Bible's testimony about their sensations, and not because we accept the testimony of their sensations. These people could have been wrong in all other instances. Nash completely misses this obvious and necessary distinction.

Finally, he says, "If there is no sensory testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, then the truth of the Christian faith is open to serious challenge." But why must "the truth of the Christian faith" depend on "sensory testimony"? Where does this claim come from, and how is it justified? Of course there are sensory testimonies to the resurrection of Jesus, but we have no immediate contact with them. Even if we do, it would not help much, since we are not apostles, and therefore our opinion about these testimonies are not infallible. However, we have immediate contact with the infallible apostolic testimonies *about* these sensory testimonies, as well as their own infallible testimonies *about* what they saw.

To make sure we understand his point, we combine the second part and the third part of his paragraph: "If the senses are completely unreliable, then we cannot trust the reports of witnesses who say, for example, that they...saw him alive three days after his crucifixion. If there is no sensory testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, then the truth of the Christian faith is open to serious challenge." Again, this shows that he misses some elementary distinctions.

To say that the senses are unreliable does not mean that they are always false. It only means that sensation provides no basis to determine whether a particular instance of sensation is correct, as in whether a person in fact sees what he thinks he sees. Therefore, although the senses are unreliable, the sightings of the resurrected Christ can be true. The problem is not that we never see what we think we see, but how to tell whether we see what we think we see *in any given instance*. The biblical testimony is that in those

instances where the witnesses thought that they saw the resurrected Christ, they were correct – they indeed saw the resurrected Christ.

This does nothing to support the reliability of sensation, but only the reliability of those several instances of sensation on the basis of the infallibility of biblical inspiration. The belief that the witnesses really saw what they thought they saw rests wholly on the biblical testimony *about* their sensations, and not the sensations themselves.

Let us consider several passages as illustrations, beginning with one about a battle between Israel and Moab:

[Elisha] said, "This is what the LORD says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the LORD says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. This is an easy thing in the eyes of the LORD; he will also hand Moab over to you. You will overthrow every fortified city and every major town. You will cut down every good tree, stop up all the springs, and ruin every good field with stones."

The next morning, about the time for offering the sacrifice, there it was – water flowing from the direction of Edom! And the land was filled with water.

Now all the Moabites had heard that the kings had come to fight against them; so every man, young and old, who could bear arms was called up and stationed on the border. *When they got up early in the morning, the sun was shining on the water. To the Moabites across the way, the water looked red – like blood.* "That's blood!" they said. "Those kings must have fought and slaughtered each other. Now to the plunder, Moab!"

But when the Moabites came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose up and fought them until they fled. And the Israelites invaded the land and slaughtered the Moabites. (2 Kings 3:16-24)

What did the Moabites see – blood or water? The Moabites thought they saw blood, but their senses deceived them. We know that they saw water that *looked like* blood because this is what the infallible testimony of Scripture says. Thus the passage points out that the senses are unreliable, and shows that we depend on divine inspiration to tell us about particular instances of sensations.

Another passage is Matthew 14:25-27, where Jesus walked on the water: "During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'" The

apostles thought that they were seeing a ghost, when they were in fact looking at Jesus. Therefore, sometimes even the sensory perceptions of the apostles were wrong. But Matthew 14 itself is not subject to the fallibility of sensory perceptions because it is not based on sensory perceptions; instead, it is an infallible testimony *about* how the sensory perceptions of the apostles deceived them in this particular instance.

John 12:28-29 says, "Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him." So did they hear thunder or a voice? We cannot tell on the basis of sensation – even the people who were present did not agree. However, the infallible testimony of Scripture gives us the interpretation; therefore, if you believe that this voice was more than thunder, your belief has no basis at all on the testimony of sensation, but its only basis is the authority of Scripture, which is the Christian's first principle and ultimate authority.

Here is another example: "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:16-17). But some doubted?! They were right there looking at the resurrected Christ – how could they doubt? But they did, and this is no surprise under a biblical epistemology that rejects the reliability of sensation. Empiricism cannot justify any belief and cannot withstand scrutiny. Therefore, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

For this reason, even though he was standing right in front of them, instead of using empirical evidence to convince the disciples of his resurrection, Jesus preferred that they would believe on the basis of infallible Scripture:

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him...He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:15-16, 25-27)

Verse 16 says, "They were kept from recognizing him." The person who depends on his sensations would really be at a disadvantage here, would he not? In fact, verse 24 seems to imply their dependence on sensations: "Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, *but him they did not see*." If these disciples were prevented from recognizing Christ, then without an infallible testimony giving us the truth, would we know what they did or did not see? Christ responds, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (v. 25). We can be fools and believe in our sensation, or we can be wise and believe in biblical revelation.

In another place, Jesus says, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). This verse is sometimes used to counter the teaching that sensations are unreliable or that they cannot offer any knowledge. But this usage is a strange distortion of its intent. The verse says nothing about the reliability of sensations. The immediate contrast is not even between sensation and revelation, but between the presence and absence of a basis of sensation. Jesus says that a belief in him that is without a basis on sensation is blessed. He does not even say more blessed, since no blessing at all is attributed to a belief that has a basis on sensation. This is not to say that a belief that has any basis in sensation is false, but at least in this verse, no blessing is attached to it. How will people believe if they do not have the relevant sensory experiences? Jesus talks about "those who will believe in me through *their message*" (John 17:20); that is, people will come to faith in Christ because of what the apostles speak and write.

1 John 1:1-3 is a favorite passage for empiricists, but does it prove what they want it to prove?

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

For sure, the passage contains several references to sensations, but it gives no assurance that all of *our* sensations, some of *our* sensations, or any of *our* sensations, are reliable. Rather, this is a divinely inspired testimony about the experience that John and the others had with Jesus Christ. From this passage, we cannot say that all of John's sensations were reliable. In fact, we cannot even say that all of John's sensations about Christ were reliable, since he could have been one of those who thought he saw a ghost walking on the water when it was really Jesus. Thus the passage lends no support to the reliability of sensation or an empirical theory of epistemology.

What the passage says is that the apostles had physical contact with Jesus, who had a real human body, and he was the incarnation of God. This is about all that we can deduce about sensation from the passage. Most of the passage is entirely independent from sensation. For example, John calls Jesus "that which was from the beginning," "the Word of life," "the life," "the eternal life," and "[God's] Son." But it is impossible to know or infer from a temporal sensation of Christ's physical appearance that he was "that which was from *the beginning*"? His body was a real *human* body, so no one could have known that he was God by seeing or touching him.

When Peter said to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (v. 17). Peter did not come to know that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God by sight or touch, but by divine illumination granted to his mind by the sovereign grace of God. In 1 John 1:1-3, the apostle is telling the readers *what* he saw and touched; he never says that he discovered the nature and identity of what he saw and touched *by seeing and touching*. He found out the nature and identity of what he saw and touched the same way Peter did – by divine illumination, entirely apart from sensation. And this is how a person can come to know about and agree with the truth concerning Christ today. What a difference! The passage gives zero support to empiricism; rather, it exposes the impotence of sensation.

There are many other examples, but we will stop with this one where Paul writes about the resurrection of Christ:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Like Nash, many Christians maintain that we must grant some essential place to sensation in our epistemology because the Bible grants such a place to sensation, and it even depends on sensation in some passages. They use passages like 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 as examples.

Verses 5-8 contain the portion relevant to empiricism. Again, we receive the passage not as a sensation or observation, but as biblical revelation. It may contain information *about* sensations and observations, but the authority of the testimony resides in the divine inspiration of Scripture, and not in the empirical content that it speaks about. In fact, Paul begins by emphasizing that what Christ did was done "according to the Scriptures" (v. 3-4).

If God endorses Abraham, the authority of his endorsement does not come from Abraham. Rather, Abraham receives credibility because of God's endorsement. If the endorsement is specific to one aspect or event in Abraham's life, then the endorsement cannot be applied to Abraham's entire life. Likewise, when the Bible testifies about something, its authority does not rest on what it testifies about, but on divine inspiration. That is, the Bible is true not because it has been confirmed by sensation or observation, but because it was produced by divine inspiration.

Of course there are "empirical" evidences for Christ's resurrection – the disciples saw him many times after his resurrection. But it is not that we know the Bible is true because of these instances; rather we know about them because of the Bible, and it is also because of the Bible that we know that they indeed saw what they thought they saw. We know that Christ resurrected because the Bible says so, and we know that the disciples saw the resurrected Christ also because the Bible says so. However, it is impossible to then go beyond what the Bible says and derive an empirical theory of epistemology from it.

If you believe in the resurrection of Christ *because* of the sensory perceptions of other people or even your own sensory perceptions, then you have no defense against all alleged visions and apparitions, even those that contradict your own. But contradictory visions and apparitions cannot all be true; therefore, to base religious beliefs on sensory perceptions, whether other people's or your own, can only result in confusion, uncertainty, and skepticism. However, if our ultimate authority is Scripture, then on the basis of this authority, we may declare that those who have anti-biblical visions and experiences are delusional.

Christians believe in the resurrection of Christ because of the apostle's infallible testimony, and sometimes the apostles record what they or other people saw, judging these particular instances to be accurate by divine inspiration. This is what the Bible shows about sensory perceptions – sometimes they are accurate and sometimes they are not, and we know when they are accurate based on the divine inspiration of the prophets and the apostles. It is obviously impossible to take this and infer that Scripture grants sensation any degree of reliability.

It is the infallible testimony of Scripture that gives confirmation to particular instances of empirical observations, and so those who say that we must give some place to sensations in our epistemology because the Bible sometimes depend on them have reversed the order of authority. Unreliable sensations cannot prove or disprove scriptural claims; rather, scriptural claims prove or disprove particular instances of sensations. But since no one today can claim to possess divine inspiration or infallibility, no instance of sensation or observation today can be certified by divine authority.

It is obvious, then, that everything about Christianity rests on biblical revelation. Scripture is our ultimate authority, and nothing else matters in contrast. You may then ask the all-important question, "You bring everything back to the truth of the Bible, but is the Bible indeed true?" Once you ask this question, the focus of the debate moves away from the historicity of Christ's resurrection, and to the Christian first principle of biblical inspiration and infallibility. If the Bible is indeed inspired and infallible, then everything that it says is true, including all that it says about Christ's resurrection and its significance. If pursued long enough, every debate must eventually be settled on the presuppositional level. And once the debate arrives at the presuppositional level, the level of first principles, we have already won.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*.

v. 32-34

There is some debate concerning whether Paul is interrupted at this point. A number of arguments are unsound; for example, some of those who say that he is interrupted believe this because they are dissatisfied with how the speech concludes, and not because there is any strong evidence that such an interruption is occurring. In any case, Paul has presented a reasonably comprehensive summary of the Christian faith given the circumstances and constraints. There are various responses from his audience:

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. (v. 32-34)

In other words, some mock, some wait, and some believe. Or, we may say that the gospel message produces in its hearers provocation, procrastination, and profession.

How does the Bible account for these different reactions? Those who are man-centered in their thinking appeal to human free will to explain people's different reactions to the gospel, but they cannot defend this doctrine by biblical or non-biblical arguments. On the other hand, the Book of Acts provides us with the correct explanation, that people respond differently because God has chosen to save some and not others:

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. *The Lord opened her heart to respond* to Paul's message. (Acts 16:13-14)

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and *all who were appointed for eternal life believed*. (Acts 13:44-48)

Lydia believed the gospel because "The Lord opened her heart," and those Gentiles who believed the gospel did so because they were "appointed for eternal life." Since *all* who

were so appointed also believed (13:48), and not all believed, it follows that not all were appointed to eternal life.

Likewise, in Acts 17, all those who were appointed to eternal life believe, and the rest respond exactly as they should as reprobates:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God....Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-24)

Due to their own stupidity and wickedness, the reprobates regard the gospel message as foolishness, but we can defeat them in argumentation:

For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:19-21)

Some commentators, because of their anti-intellectual and anti-philosophical bias, oppose Paul's approach in Acts 17, and they cite verses 32-34 as evidence for their assertion, that Paul fails to generate a decisively positive outcome. They say that Paul abandons this approach after Athens, and when he arrives at Corinth, he takes a different approach, preaching the "simple" gospel of Christ rather than arguing with non-Christians. They cite 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 as evidence:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

But this is what Paul did at Athens! He did not base his preaching on human wisdom or eloquence, but he depended on the content of biblical revelation, which is just another way of saying, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." I have shown elsewhere that 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 shows that Paul

avoided the use of philosophical sophistry,⁶⁶ or empty arguments that are based on human speculation, but that he definitely used arguments that are derived from the very wisdom of God, and thus the "demonstration" – axiomatic proof – of the Spirit.

In addition, the Book of Acts itself states that after "Paul left Athens and went to Corinth" (18:1), "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (v. 4), just as he did at Thessalonica and Athens (17:1-3, 16-17). There is no evidence that Paul changed his approach after leaving Athens, but there is evidence that he continued to argue against non-Christians. Commentators assert otherwise because of their anti-intellectual prejudice. We should just accept the fact that Paul was an intellectual, that he used an argumentative approach, and that he addressed the major philosophical questions in his preaching.

Paul used the correct approach to apologetics and evangelism in his Areopagus address, and the Holy Spirit intends it to be an example for us. Christians need to abandon their bias against philosophical argumentation, and their tendency to measure evangelistic success by the sheer number of converts. God says that his word will not fail; it will do exactly what he intends. The fallacy is in thinking that God always intends conversion: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life." (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). True gospel preaching does not convert everyone; rather, it awakens the elect to faith, and confirms the non-elect to damnation. Therefore, "success" in apologetics and evangelism should be measured by whether we have presented the Christian message faithfully and defended it cogently, and not by practical results.

That said, Paul does obtain some positive results: "A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others" (17:34). One of the converts, Dionysius, was "a member of the Areopagus" – the prominent council to which Paul was brought to explain his philosophy. Another convert was a woman named Damaris. The very fact that her name is mentioned suggests that she was a woman of some consequence. And then, there are also "a number of others" who believed.

⁶⁶ Vincent Cheung, "Christian Soteriology," in *Ultimate Questions*.

3. CONQUEST

FOUNDATION

Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17 is a wonderful piece of philosophical preaching. While the modern man tends to have an aversion to all things rational and intellectual, the apostle Paul does not share this attitude.

For a biblical verse on this subject, Colossians 2:8 is as clear as any: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." He warns us about "hollow and deceptive" philosophy, but some people misconstrue this as a statement against philosophy itself. However, Paul also warns us about false doctrines, but only the most stupid individuals would take this as a statement against all doctrines, that is, even biblical doctrines. The verse is saying that we should reject man-centered philosophy, and instead adopt a Christ-centered philosophy. Paul implies that he approves a philosophy that depends on Christ as its foundation and tells us to reject any philosophy that is built on another principle; therefore, the Bible approves only an explicitly Christian philosophy. Theism is not enough.

Whereas non-Christian religions and philosophies are built upon nothing more than human speculation, the foundation of Christian philosophy is divine revelation. This is not a form of fideism, but a form of rationalism or foundationalism, or to be exact, it is biblical rationalism or biblical foundationalism. As every system of philosophy has its first principle or starting point, so no one can forbid the Christian from presupposing biblical revelation as the first principle. This is the starting point of our philosophy.

Of course, adherents to non-Christian religions and philosophies attack our faith. We are not afraid of them. Rather, although God has already commissioned us to invade the world with his divine weapons – thus we have divine license to preach – the non-Christians' relentless attacks against the Christian faith grant us even the social license to respond with a comprehensive and terminal assault against all of their non-biblical beliefs.

Paul tells us that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Corinthians 1:18). But this does not mean that they are right; it does not mean that the gospel is indeed foolish. Verse 25 says, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." Non-Christians are not competing against our wisdom, but they are competing against God's wisdom, and even the "foolishness" of God is wiser than anything that unbelievers can conjure up.

We triumph over non-Christian religions and philosophies not by human sophistry or eloquent presentation, but by the sheer superiority of the contents of our philosophy, or the biblical worldview. Paul explains:

For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. (v. 19-21)

God's revelation has reduced the wisdom of this world to utter foolishness. Our task is not to make biblical propositions appear true from non-Christian perspectives, but it is to refute the non-Christian perspectives themselves. Instead of suggesting that they are wrong by only a little, we declare that they are completely wrong, and wrong from start to finish. This is why they must change their very perspectives or frameworks, and not just see things a little more clearly from the same fatally flawed perspectives or frameworks.

This means that not all approaches to apologetics and evangelism are correct. We must rule out all positions and methods that, in the attempt or the pretense to defend Christianity, result in a compromise of the biblical claims. We must never depend on "the basic principles of this world" to defend the faith of Jesus Christ.

CONVICTION

On the final page of his book, *Humble Apologetics*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr. writes, "We Christians do believe that God has given us the privilege of hearing and embracing the good news, of receiving adoption into his family, and of joining the Church. We do believe that we know some things that other people don't, and those things are good for them to hear. Above all, we believe that we have met Jesus Christ."

This is fine, but then he adds, "For all we know, we might be wrong about any or all of this. And we will honestly own up to that possibility. Thus whatever we do or say, we must do or say it humbly."¹ This is unbiblical and outrageous. He has just stated what represent some of the central claims of the biblical message, and that he affirms these claims as true, so when he says that "we might be wrong about any or all of this," he necessarily implies that Scripture itself might be wrong about any or all of this. However, since the Bible itself does not admit that it "might be wrong about any or all of this," when Stackhouse says that he "might be wrong about any or all of this," he is no longer defending the Bible.

¹ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today*; Oxford University Press, 2002; p. 232.

Of course, his emphasis is that he himself might be wrong that the Bible is the revelation of God, but this still returns to the point that if this is what he means, then he is no longer defending the Bible. He is saying that he might be wrong when he says that the Bible is right, which amounts to him saying that the Bible might be wrong. Since he says that he might be wrong when he affirms that the Bible is true, so that the Bible might in fact be false, he is no longer doing biblical apologetics.

The Bible says that when we affirm what it teaches, we can know with certainty that what we believe is true:

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may *know the certainty* of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:3-4)

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They *knew with certainty* that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. (John 17:6-8)

Now faith is being *sure of* what we hope for and *certain of* what we do not see....And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:1, 6)

If the Bible itself claims to be the revelation of God and therefore completely true, then by what standard of humility does Stackhouse call his less than certain approach to apologetics "humble"? Since the Bible is the ultimate standard of ethics, it also defines humility; therefore, when Stackhouse implies that the Bible itself might be wrong, he is not being humble, but arrogant – so arrogant that he says he might be wrong if he affirms what God reveals. According to biblical standard, it is not humble to say that you might be wrong when you affirm what the Bible affirms; instead, you are arrogant if you say that the Bible might be wrong.

For Stackhouse to assume the identity of a Christian and then say that his religion might be wrong is to say that Christianity might be wrong; therefore, instead of doing apologetics – humble or not – he is in fact attacking Christianity. If the Bible is the word of God, then to say that we might be wrong about it being the word of God is not humility, but blasphemy. If Stackhouse admits that he himself *does not* have certainty, then we may perhaps still accept him as a weaker brother, but when he says that we *should not* ever claim certainty, then he has made himself an enemy of Christ.

Rather than saying that we must "own up to that possibility" that we might be wrong, we must insist on the impossibility that we are wrong when we are affirming what the Bible

teaches. When we affirm what the Bible affirms, it is impossible that we are wrong. If Stackhouse is so "humble," he must also confess that he might be wrong when he says that he might be wrong about Christianity, for how can he be so sure there is "that possibility" that Christians can be wrong who affirm the Bible? Is he fallible when he affirms the Bible, but infallible when it comes to "that possibility"?

Stackhouse's position is unbiblical and irrational. We must reject such pretended humility, unfaithful spirituality, and asinine pseudo-scholarship in exchange for an approach to apologetics that is biblical, which is one that says, "We are right, and we are sure that we are right. You are wrong, and we are sure that you are wrong." If this biblical position brings the world's reproach, then so be it; let the non-Christians try to defeat us in argumentation. On the other hand, if you who claim to be a Christian are so drunk with "tolerance" that you prefer to adopt Stackhouse's anti-biblical stance, then why not go all the way and stop calling yourself a Christian?

DOMINATION

The point is that your approach to defending the Bible must be consistent with the Bible itself. If you contradict biblical claims in your very approach to defending biblical claims, then you are really no longer defending biblical claims. When arguing about religion, why must Christians pretend to be non-Christians, and then from there argue to the truth of Christianity, when the atheists, agnostics, the Muslims, and the Buddhists never pretend to be Christians, and from there argue to their own beliefs?

The basic stance of the Christian in apologetics and evangelism, then, is one of extreme opposition to all non-Christian thought. This does not always mean that we must be hostile in our mannerisms; rather, we can be very polite, or act in such a manner as wisdom dictates. However, we must never yield an inch of intellectual ground – not an inch. This is the biblical attitude.

As for the content of preaching, Paul's example in Acts 17 is very informative. In philosophical terms, he addresses the topics of epistemology, metaphysics, religion, biology, history, and ethics. In theological terms, he addresses the topics of revelation, theology proper, creation, providence, anthropology, ethics, christology, soteriology, and eschatology. Depending on the vocabularies we are using to describe it, his speech resembles a basic outline for systematic philosophy or systematic theology.²

Since "Paul's approach was to accentuate the antithesis between himself and the philosophers,"³ and since the content of his speech is rather comprehensive, it follows

² Some of the points are not developed in detail, but this is to be expected under the circumstances and constraints Paul faces.

³ Bahnsen, *Always Ready*; p. 272. As with his master Cornelius Van Til, Bahnsen himself does not practice the approach that he attributes to Paul. He claims that biblical presuppositions "account for" (in an approving sense) numerous non-Christian principles, including the uniformity of nature, the reliability of sensation, induction, and the scientific method. He keeps saying that we should "press the antithesis," but his philosophy represents a synthesis with non-Christian principles rather than an antithesis to them. Since these non-Christian principles are inherently irrational, he has introduced falsehoods and contradictions into

that a biblical approach to apologetics must demonstrate our comprehensive opposition to non-Christian beliefs, and our constructive presentation must likewise be thorough, covering all major topics. One implication is that those who do not have a basic grasp of systematic theology cannot do apologetics or evangelism in a biblical manner.

Jesus tells his disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Teach them everything? Most Christians today hardly know anything about biblical doctrines and how they all fit together. But this comprehensive biblical knowledge is the prerequisite of a comprehensive preaching ministry, which is what Jesus demands. Since biblical apologetics and evangelism require comprehensive understanding of at least the basics of theology, those who are without this knowledge cannot claim to be doing biblical apologetics and evangelism.

As evident in Acts 17, there are often constraints imposed upon us by time and other factors. But as circumstances allow, we must offer a systematic and comprehensive presentation of the biblical worldview, and a systematic and comprehensive refutation of the non-biblical worldviews represented by the hearers. Our aim must be nothing short of a complete vindication of Christian claims, and a thorough annihilation of non-Christian beliefs. This may be done over the course of days or even months. And in some situations, it is done over the course of many years, as should be the case in parenting our children. Sometimes we may have only half an hour, but whatever the case may be, we should seek to cover the major points, or to preach "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27, NKJ). As we do this, we must make clear that we are loyal only to the biblical foundation and heritage, and not a pagan foundation or heritage.

Jude says, "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to *contend for the faith* that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (v. 3). Apologetics is so important that although this apostle wants to write about soteriology, he decides to talk about defending the faith instead. It is time for Christians to truly obey the Great Commission, and to compel the non-Christians to meet the presuppositional challenge of biblical apologetics and evangelism. It is time for you to confront the non-Christians around you, not from a non-biblical intellectual foundation, but from the foundation of biblical revelation, so that from a position of authority and knowledge you may proclaim to them what they do not know. If we are committed to a faithful application of the biblical approach to apologetics and evangelism, then we will always win when debating unbelievers, and Christian scholarship will spell the doom of all non-Christian systems, by which the reprobates attempt to justify their unbelief and disobedience.

Most Christians are not aggressive enough, even if they know something about biblical apologetics and evangelism. We can all take a lesson from the exchange between Elisha and Jehoash:

a supposedly Christian system or approach. This makes him an enemy of Christ, and no better than Stackhouse. Although his philosophy is a disgrace and a complete failure, instead of gloating over its demise, let us be warned by his example so that we do not repeat his error.

Now Elisha was suffering from the illness from which he died. Jehoash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him. "My father! My father!" he cried. "The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Elisha said, "Get a bow and some arrows," and he did so. "Take the bow in your hands," he said to the king of Israel. When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king's hands. "Open the east window," he said, and he opened it. "Shoot!" Elisha said, and he shot. "The LORD's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!" Elisha declared. "You will completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek." Then he said, "Take the arrows," and the king took them. Elisha told him, "Strike the ground." He struck it three times and stopped. The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times." (2 Kings 13:14-19)

God has given us divine weapons with which to destroy all non-Christian religions and philosophies (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). These are spiritual or intellectual weapons, expressed in our preaching and arguments. But what are we doing with them? As Elisha was angry with Jehoash for not being aggressive and thorough enough, so this man of God would be very angry with most of us today. He would have no patience for our tolerance and propriety.

Nevertheless, God is faithful to himself and to his people, and he has preserved some of us who have not bowed the knee to relativism, pluralism, and other non-biblical perspectives. We who know our God will do great things in his name. We will ceaselessly attack non-Christian religions and philosophies with biblical argumentation and persistent prayer. We will strike them again and again. When they run, we will pursue them; when they hide, we will expose them; and when they fall, we will trample them. We will not make Jehoash's mistake, who struck three times and stopped – we will never stop. When we finally learn to fight by the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, we will find that non-Christian thought has no defense against our assaults. We will be an invincible army, and the very gates of hell will not stand against us.