

Lateefi

هكذا أحبَّ اللهَ العالمَ حتى وهبَ ابنَهُ الأوحدَ،  
فلا يهلكَ كُلُّ مَنْ يُؤمِنُ به، بل تكونُ له الحياةُ الأبديةُ.

Kitabi

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Nargisi

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Sarmast

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Persian Samples:

Lateefi

خدا محبت است

Kitabi

خدا محبت است

Nargisi

خدا محبت است

Sarmast

خدا محبت است

It has been commonly reported that Francis A. Schaeffer, noted lecturer and author from *L'Abri* Fellowship in Switzerland, once said if he had only one hour to share the gospel with a person, he would spend the first forty-five minutes finding out what the person believed about God and the last fifteen minutes presenting Christ from that basis. For some, the idea of "starting where they are at" would seem a worthless exercise, because the people they are working with come from the same background as they do, so they are "starting where they are at." But the need for this type of method comes in when the respondent (1) is from a different background from the speaker. This process has been called contextualization or cross-cultural adaptation. Although there has been much work on the subject of contextualization and the gospel, most of it seems to fall into two different categories.

**EUANGELION (CONTEXTUALIZATION)**

## Contextualization of the Gospel, What Are The Implications For Our Work?

By: Richard Lauerstorf

[World Mission Conference East Fork, Arizona August 6-10, 1984]

One day some years ago a Christian tourist entered a woodcarver's shop in Tokyo. To his surprise he spotted, mounted to the wall, a carving of Jesus on the cross. "May I ask how you got that crucifix?" he said. "I copied it from one that came from Italy," answered the woodcarver. "Where did you get the original carving?" continued the tourist. "From an American missionary," the shopkeeper replied. Stepping forward to look more closely, the traveler noticed that the face of Jesus was like that of a Japanese. "Was this the way Jesus looked on the crucifix from Italy?" he asked. "No," said the woodcarver, "but that's the way I think of Him."

"That's the way I think of Him." The work of missions is not to bring a foreign Christ or a Westernized Word to people, but the one Word and the one Savior, common to all. That Savior and His life-giving Word cut across time and culture, national boundaries and ethnic barriers, offering to and asking of people the same things everywhere. Yet we who seek to bring this Savior and His Word to the peoples of the world need to be aware that culture and customs do exist. We dare not be ignorant of the different ways and workings of people. So we have before us on the agenda the topic on Contextualization of the Gospel and Its Implications for Our Work.

### Be Concerned About The Content

What is this thing called "contextualization"? The more knowledgeable will quickly state that it is a never term replacing "indigenization," now out of favor because of the parent-child relationship it seemed to project. Others who do their reading will add that it seems to be synonymous with terms like "inculturation," "transculturation," "cultural adaptation," and the like, while other experts will even try to give you different shadings of meanings for each of these. But what does it mean, this term "contextualization," first introduced in the early 1970's?

Byang Kato, at the International Congress of World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974, explained it this way, "We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideas relevant in a given situation... Since the Gospel message is inspired, but the mode of expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right, but necessary."<sup>1</sup> Another author, Bruce Nicholls, offered this comprehensive definition, "Communication includes research into the problem of language and translation, analyzing the changing patterns of culture and religion, and entering into the pain of human suffering caused by political, social, and economic oppression. Communication means personal involvement, discerning areas of spiritual needs as points of contact, areas of agreement as bridges of communication and clarifying biblical thought forms to insure transference of meaning. It recognizes that the Holy Spirit is the real agent of communication."<sup>2</sup> Still another definition, this time from a summary statement produced by the Trinity Consultation of Theology and Mission, held at Deerfield, Illinois in 1976, reads, "Within an evangelical framework, cultural contextualization of Christian truth involves a dynamic process of sympathetic understanding leading to empathetic identification with the culture so that Christianity may be inculturated within the indigenous forms of the recipient peoples. Nothing of the supracultural is to be lost or distorted."<sup>3</sup> Closer to home, in terms that we can understand and with which we can agree is Prof. E. H. Wendland's definition, "Contextualization is the process whereby the message of the Word of God is related to the cultural context of the society to which it is proclaimed."<sup>4</sup> Briefly put, God's Word is to be brought to people where they live, in the cultural soil in which they are rooted, so that they can identify with it, feel at home in it, and express themselves with it in their own cultural forms. "That's the way I think of Him," Apache, Asian, African, South American Christian should be able to say.

Would we disagree? Of course, not. But let the caution flag be run up, right to the top of the staff. Could it happen that in the concern to reach people where they're at we become less concerned about that with which we are to reach them? Could it happen that, more and more, culture dictates instead of Scripture and that culture becomes the criterion according to which doctrine and practice are judged? These are very real concerns for us who view mission work perhaps differently than almost any other church body.

Remember what that view is? In the *Primary Objectives*, adopted by the WELS, for our mission work we find listed as number 1, "Foremost among the objectives of the Board for World Missions, indeed, the one which shapes all other objectives and to which it is pledged by the Lord and His Church is the pursuit of the God-given purpose to preach and to teach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, that is, 'all the counsel of God' (Acts 20:27) or as Jesus Himself stated it, 'whatsoever I have commanded you' (Matt. 28:20), that is, the whole Bible in all its truth and purity in all the world. It is the constant purpose of the Church to 'extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice' (Const. IV) with zeal and dispatch, as the Lord exemplified it in His earthly ministry and as He enjoined His Church to do in imitation of His example (Matt. 20:20; John 017; Luke 2:49; Luke 4:43; Luke 12:50; John 9:4; Matt. 16:21; Matt. 13:38; Matt. 24:13, 31; Mark 16:15; Mark 13:2-23; Acts 1:8; Is. 54:20."<sup>5</sup>

What a treasure we in the WELS have to hand on to the world! By grace we hold in our hands a Bible which we trust as the inspired, inerrant Word of God, and as the one infallible guide for all we believe or do. By grace we know the true God is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and that all others are idols regardless how men label or picture them. By grace, we know that all people are born in sin, separated from God and having no hope for heaven, living lives contrary to Him and digging themselves only deeper into hell's quicksands regardless how they struggle. By grace we know that God's love has paid for all sins of all people, that in Christ's death and resurrection God has reconciled the world unto Himself. By grace we know how the Spirit through His power tools, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, works in the hearts of unbelievers, cracking those hearts open, creating and continuing faith in them. By grace we know what life is for, to live under Him in His kingdom and to serve Him till we live totally with Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. All this and more we have by the grace of God. All this and more propels us into mission work. We have the responsibility and the privilege of bringing the truth in its fullness to others. As we carry this blessed treasure to them, we don't want to lose even one small shred of it.

Do we have to retailer or reshape such blessed truths to fit people of different cultures? Not unless their needs are different! When God speaks to human beings, He does so not on the basis of the shape of their face or the sound of their language, but on the basis of their needs. We have this thought somewhat illustrated in Acts, chapter 10. There we hear Peter, after the vision which directed him to the Gentiles, telling Cornelius, the centurion at Caesarea. "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons (..... from ..... for "face" and ..... for "to take"). God is no judge who looks at your face and then reacts according to whether he likes or dislikes what He sees there. On the contrary "in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him" (v. 35). It makes no difference of what background or nation men are; what matters is fearing Him and working righteousness (..... present participles for durative action). When a sinner, any sinner, repents, trusts God's pardon, follows Christ's will and way, that pleases God. And this is for everyone for verse 43 says, "whosoever believeth in Him shall receive forgiveness of sins." Look at Cornelius! If pagan beliefs had been enough, why did he seek the synagogue? If the synagogue had been enough, why was Peter there? God's truths are supracultural and address people of common needs.

The Standard Epistle Lesson for Mission Festival contains a similar thought. "The Scripture saith, Whosoever believeth in Him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him for whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom. 10:11-13). Everyone who has been brought to trust in Christ can face God and judgment without shame or confusion. ... means just that, 'everyone' without exception. Regardless what the Jew thought about distinctions in his favor, there were none. The Jew and his needs were no better or worse than the Gentile. As in Romans 1:16, Paul mentioned only the Jew and the Gentile, but what he says of them is true of

all classes. How can it be otherwise when there is "one Lord of all"? Then Paul quoted from Joel 2:32 to cement it, "Everyone . . .," he said, even adding . . . . "whoever," making it as general as possible. The same gracious Lord of all is there with the same blessed truths for all. We can't leave Romans 10, though, without quoting the next verse. It rings in our ears and hearts, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?"

In a recent letter Missionary Eric H. Hartzell put it this way, "The message we have talked to all people as equals. I don't think we have to go to all sorts of efforts to make it fit the people. It fits already." A few lines later he wrote, "I tell the Apaches when I get on uncertain ground so far as my being white and their being Apache. 'Look, this message is as foreign to me and my ancestors as it is to you and your ancestors. I'm not a Jew either. Christianity is not a white man's religion. At best a person who wanted to talk that way should call it a 'Jewish' religion. It's not a religion which comes from America. It is God's religion for people - all people." Let's picture it this way. The Word is the genuine article, the content, while contextualization is the packaging, the wrappings. We must know the content thoroughly so that we lose none of it in the wrapping.

It can happen that the wrapping interferes with the content. The Roman Catholic Church has often confused content and packaging. Their missiologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries advocated the Adoption Theory which acknowledged that since Western Catholicism was an adaptation to both Greek and German pagan thought, why not extend this same line of accommodation to Asiatic and African cultures. They urged "a willingness to acknowledge the natural in man and the valuable in heathen religions."<sup>6</sup> Forgotten, of course, was what Scripture had to say about man's total depravity and the uselessness of heathen religions.

At home we have contextualization in the form of theology like that of Norman Vincent Peale and the more recently in vogue teachings of Robert Schuler. Dr. Peale attempts to sell the "Gospel" to American business men in contemporary psychological terms while Dr. Schuler hawks it smothered in the sweet scent of success for here and now, success for job and business, over problem or pains, in home or marriage. Both have put their finger on quirks in the American culture, and done their wrapping accordingly, but how much content is really left?

And what do we see but contextualization carried to the 'nth degree in what passes for mission effort and talk in so many circles? We quote Prof. Wendland, "The most recent meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches at Melbourne in 1980 resulted in a mockery of everything that true Biblical Christianity stands for. The theme at Melbourne was the petition of the Lord's Prayer, 'Your Kingdom Come.' The 'kingdom' which occupied Melbourne's discussions was primarily an earthly kingdom. 'Sin' was defined as 'oppression of the poor.' To 'evangelize' meant to make people aware that exploitation of the poor was sinful. The 'coming of the kingdom' was thought to be accomplished when the values of justice, peace, and love would become more realized in this life and when one could hope for the 'ultimate humanization of life.' In a lead article in Christianity Today Arthur Glasser summarized Melbourne's results with the statement, 'Liberation (theology) is in, the unreachables are out.'<sup>7</sup> The packaging has become slick and up to date, but where's that precious content?

Are we against honest efforts to contextualize? How can we be? We surely want those to whom we bring the Word to think of Christ as their own and not some foreign Savior. We surely want them to rejoice in the Lord and worship Him in patterns they can understand. We surely want them to use His Word in honest application to their daily lives, not just as some Sunday morning interlude. But we want them to have this Word in all its fullness: So we start, not with culture, but with Scripture. We look not for an Asian or African theology, but for Biblical theology in an Asian or African setting. We expect the Gospel not just to root itself in their culture, but also to judge that culture. To do less would be to fail to declare all the counsel of God and to shortchange the receptor. To do less would be to forget that every culture has felt the effects of Adam's fall and needs to be brought under Scripture's close scrutiny. To do less would be to overlook the fact that the Christian is a foreigner in every society, including his own, if he really tries to be in the world but not of the world.

From Ralph Martens in Puerto Rico comes this example, "A man who was confirmed on Palm Sunday told me Sunday how he prays daily for a little bit more faith to withstand the many temptations which before

went undetected, but which must now be overcome. He is still living and working with the same business associates who can't understand what has taken place in this convert's heart and life; in short, the fight is on!" From Taiwan and Robert Meister comes the following, "We always have to watch out in Taiwan (as do our men in Hong Kong and Japan) when the customs conflict with Scripture. This most often can happen in the area of funerals, worship of ancestors, etc. Our encouragement of a healthy respect for the aged and the deceased can be a good way to draw people to our church, however, if we give the impression that worship of these same people is encouraged by our church, we're in trouble. If native custom dictates that people must worship ancestors and/or ancestor tablets (which contain the essence of the spirit of the deceased), then we must patiently but firmly point out to them what Scripture says and not contextualize the Gospel in the sense of allowing for worship of the true God alongside a lesser worship of ancestors."

The Word in its fullness must be our message. That's God's charge to us. Those who would change that Word to make it more palatable to the receptor are practicing a form of contextualization we do not wish to imitate. Rather do we pray that God keep us faithful to His Word as given and reliant upon the Spirit to use that Word to break through into the hearts and lives of people everywhere. The *Primary Objectives* of our Board for World Missions says it rather well, "Instead of broadcasting only a vague and elementary Gospel, it is the duty of Christian missionaries to follow the counsel of the Holy Spirit in furthering and deepening the faith and knowledge in Christ of those whom the Lord has brought to faith through their faithful witness of the 'full counsel of G. God.' . . . in world mission fields, as in the church at home, we must be ever aware of those things, lest we develop a weak church, unable to discern or to take a stand against false teaching which will result in the failure of our missions, despite the illusion of success which might be given through impressive numbers and capable organization. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ (Col. 2:8). To achieve this, the principle followed by St. Paul, the greatest missionary of them all, must ever govern and guide us: "For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27)."<sup>8</sup> What's that saying but be concerned about the content!

#### Be Careful About the Packaging

Our concern about the content dare not, however, eliminate concern about the packaging. True, the Word of God has all power in itself with nothing whatsoever to be added by us. But we can detract from its power by our handling of that Word. So concern is in place, careful and constant concern, about handling that powerful Word as effectively as possible. As we bring that Word which crosses all cultural boundaries, we need to realize that we don't. We who bring the Word are immersed in one culture while the people to whom we bring it are immersed in another. The problem will be there that we wrap the Word too much in our own culture because of life long conditioning and also because of a lack of in-depth knowledge of the receptor's culture. And with such wrappings we might present a foreign Christ and a westernized Word to them.

Paul, the Master Missionary, has some words for us. In 1 Cor. 9:19-23 he wrote, "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law of Christ), that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak that I might gain the weak; I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some." What an approach! For the sake of the spread of the Word Paul adapted himself to the ways of thinking and the modes of living of those to whom he preached. Make no mistake about it, this was not to ingratiate himself with people or close his eyes to their false teaching or sinful practice, but to save them. In his love for their souls, Paul practiced contextualization in the proper sense of the word.

So did our forefathers when they wrote Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. We all know their background and why they wrote, but aren't their words quite applicable to our world mission situation? In Article VII they stated, "To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says, "One faith, one Baptism, one God and

Father of all, etc. Eph. 4:15-6-<sup>19</sup> Prof. John Meyer elaborates on that thought, "Anything that will help to emphasize the grace of our God for our faith is proper, but anything that might in the least detract from the glory of God, or on the other hand concede any honor to man is improper. As long as the purpose of our public church gatherings is served, the rites and ceremonies, by which they are conducted, make very little difference."<sup>10</sup>

The proper wrappings have concerned us, too, in our Board for World Missions. Back in 1965 the board said in its "Statement of Principles and Objectives," "To implement the program (i.e. the Christian Missioner Program) in a selected area, two mature pastors with small family responsibilities, if possible, will be called and thoroughly trained in the language and culture of the people whom they are to serve."<sup>11</sup> Again it stated, "Missionaries are required to learn the language of the area to which they are sent, as soon as possible."<sup>12</sup> Again, "To carry out these principles the Board for World Missions insists on a training period not less than one year for all missionaries to acquire a working knowledge of the language and to learn the customs and mores of the people in their area."<sup>13</sup> Concerning the training of national workers the board had this to say, "The curriculum should avoid subjects which serve merely to import or to impose traditional patterns of religious expression or order, such as conventional church buildings, liturgical services, statuary, robing, hymn tunes, and others. It should be kept in mind that the transmission of the true Gospel is the matter of importance, and that the forms, generally speaking, are not essential to proper worship. The Gospel creates many variegated forms for itself (Col. 2:00, 21; Gal. 5:0; Rom. 14:17)."<sup>14</sup> Prof. E. H. Wendland summed it up, "We will want to let other nations express their faith and joy in the Lord in ways which express their own identity. We will want to guard against giving the impression that our Western culture is of itself superior. We will avoid showing a domineering spirit when working in cross-cultural relationships."<sup>15</sup>

Easter said then done, isn't it? World Seminary and Mission Conferences in the past have addressed this concern in one form or another and yet here it is before us again. What's the answer? You men in the field are better qualified to answer than I. Would you speak about the importance of learning the language and culture of those whom you serve? Would you agree with Eugene Nida that "language is not only a part of human activity, it is the most characteristic feature of human behavior, and the possession of distinct languages is certainly one of the most obvious features which distinguish human cultures... Language can and must be learned if the Word of God is to be communicated in the words of men, but this cannot be done outside of the total framework of the culture, of which the language in question is an integral part...Linguistic training is of great help, but it is no substitute for cultural submersion."<sup>16</sup> Learning the language and culture of those you serve is an ongoing task. One where you will often stub your toe, but it's a necessary one. I can still see gray-haired veteran Venus Winter getting a shoeshine ahead of the hotel in Mexico City conversing with the man doing the shining and then jolting down some new Spanish phrase or vocable into his little black book. Does it ever end?

Would you also speak to us about the need for constant review of methods and forms? Are the twenty minute sermons, tailored after Reu and Caemmerer, in which we were schooled and to which our people are accustomed, the ideal for people of all cultures? Pastor Eric Hartzell writes, "I don't believe we can contextualize the message. That has to remain constant. By message I mean the Gospel. The problem is in speaking the words of the Gospel clearly. This may well best be accomplished in something less than a 20 minute sermon with one theme and two parts. I believe the trick is in learning the figures of speech that the people use, learning how they use their language to express what they want to express, learning the nuances and fine points of the language, observing their life and surroundings to see what could be used as examples...I think if we master these things, then we can... contextualize the Gospel."

Would you mention also looking for the right wrappings when it comes to worship? Do we just superimpose Page 5 and Page 15, laced with responses, heavy with intonations and graduals, on the people regardless of their culture? Do we insist upon distinctive Lutheran hymns regardless, meanwhile forgetting how Luther borrowed from the culture of his day? Must it be pulpit, altar, lectern, and baptismal font complete and in the places and styles we are used to? Again we quote the missionaries, "Many of the hymns incorporated into the hymnbook in common use in Lutheran churches in Taiwan are of a distinctively Chinese flavor in melody; these Oriental tunes coupled with sound Lutheran teachings in the hymns make for very edifying hymn singing

...We generally use a liturgy which excludes a lot of singing of page 5 type of liturgy, but which uses a healthy smattering of Scripture passages for confession of sins, absolution, responses, etc., but singing is still very much a part of the service." "In Barrancas and Humacao and San Juan we are still following what Roger used: the page 5 liturgy up to the absolution, no Gloria Pater or Kyrie or Gloria in Excelsis, and continue with the Salutation and collect, the readings without the Gradual... In short we cut the Liturgy considerably... Could I write hymns more Puerto Rican? Hardly. Could any of our members? We encourage it, but until one has a more mature faith, even that, not to mention the musical training and ability, is somewhat remote. Are we stuck then with a 'foreign music'? I guess our answer has been yes... I look forward to the day when we can talk with our veteran members here and the new about such matters."

This proper contextualization of the Gospel is an ongoing process, one which can be quite difficult for us from the West because our distance from most other cultures is so great and our preoccupation with our own way of life so intense. Ironically, we who are financially best suited to bring God's Word to the world might be culturally the least suited. But we try! We give careful effort to contextualize the Gospel we bring. As soon as we can, we must involve the people themselves with their vast knowledge of their own culture. And the best way in the long run to involve them is to ground them and their future pastors as thoroughly as we know how in God's Word so that they can contextualize that Word correctly for themselves.

What about confessional statements which we have so richly in our Lutheran Church but at which contextualization enthusiasts often look with jaundiced eye? True, those statements have come out of particular historical situations and foreign culture, but is that reason enough to ignore them? The errors they addressed have a way of reappearing every so often in more modern garb. The doctrine they present is neither American, African, or Asian, but Biblical, though the thought patterns and wording may be somewhat strange for others. Many of these confessional statements are already known in different parts of the world. All of them can serve as summaries of Biblical truths and as case studies to show how God's people reacted to particular situations in history. The time may come when Christians of different cultures will feel the need to prepare their own confessional statements, but meanwhile to ignore what has been written is to deprive people of benefit and perhaps even to label such people as intellectually inferior and culturally insensitive. One cannot shake off the sneaking suspicion that those who speak so vehemently against creedal statements when it comes to contextualization might be speaking more about their attitudes toward creeds than toward contextualization.

That brings us back to where we started. As we carefully examine the packaging, it's always with utmost concern for the content. Certainly we need to be concerned about methods. Yes, we need constant warnings about being cultural insensitive and paternalistic. But it's the message that counts! Nothing dare sap that message or stand in its way. Cultures can and do come and go; "the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God shall stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

<sup>1</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Theology and Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>4</sup> E.H. Wendland, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 76, 1979, p. 306.

<sup>5</sup> *Proceedings, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 38<sup>th</sup> Convention*, 1965, p. 242.

<sup>6</sup> Johannes Verhey, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978) p. 344.

<sup>7</sup> E.H. Wendland, *An Evaluation of Current Missiology*, (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company, 1981), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Proceedings, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 38<sup>th</sup> Convention*, 1965, p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*, (Minneapolis: Mott Press, 1955) p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> John Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*, (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company, 1965), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> E.H. Wendland, *An Evaluation of Current Missiology*, (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company, 1981), p. 15.



Academics  
Humanities  
Social Sciences  
Sciences  
Theology  
Academic Integration  
Faculty Offices  
Classes

Departments  
Current Issues  
Publications  
Conferences/Events  
Apologetics  
Ministry Tools  
Bible Studies  
What's New

Special  
Past Features  
Other Sites  
Help LU  
About LU  
Link to LU  
Feedback

Navigation  
Site Map  
Site Index  
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## Probe Ministries

# Building Bridges for the Gospel

John Studebaker

As Christians, we are called by God to be Christ's ambassadors. Now that's quite a job description! In order to fulfill our glorious task, though, we are going to have to step outside of our insulated Christian circles and learn how to bridge the gap between Christ's church and today's world.

### What is a Bridge-Builder?

In college I received a minor in civil engineering. In class we learned how to design one of our world's most important structures- bridges. Bridges are fascinating, I think, because they are designed to bring things together--land masses, roads, and people. I've found my life as a Christian to be exciting for the very same reason--because now I get to be a bridge-builder for Christ. Of course, Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5); but, acting under His authority, Christians have the privilege of building bridges also. What kind of bridges are still left to be built? Non-Christians often have barriers that keep them from considering Christ: intellectual, cultural, and moral barriers. We can be their bridges to the gospel. Just as Jesus left heaven to come and mingle with the sinful world, He's left us with the glorious task of creatively penetrating our world with the good news. In a sense, then, there may never be a time when we are more like Jesus than when we are bridging this cultural gap with the gospel.

How does one become a bridge-builder for Christ? While it's true we need

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9/18/2002

Register

to understand theology and the gospel message, we must also understand what non-Christians believe, how they think, and how they've been impacted by today's culture. And then, as ambassadors for Christ, we become the bridge between the church and the world by communicating the gospel into the context of the non-Christian mindset.

I think most people today view cross-cultural ministry as something performed in a foreign nation. But America today has become very secular, developing a culture of its own in an ideological sense--one very different from the culture of the church. So today, we need to view our American culture as a place of opportunity for cross-cultural ministry! We do this by investigating the world views of our culture. According to David Hesselgrave in his book *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, "understanding another person's world view (or belief system) is the starting point for communicating the gospel." (1) By showing an understanding of and interest in another person's beliefs, we gain credibility and integrity before that person--and probably even a hearing for the Christian message.

One time, for example, I was sharing Christ with a Chinese student. After listening intently for forty-five minutes to his belief in Taoism, and asking several questions, he finally asked me, "What do you believe?" What an opening to share the gospel! As we learn to investigate the world views of our culture, we'll even begin to enjoy talking to non-Christians.

A bridge-builder is one who has made a commitment to understand people with different backgrounds and beliefs in order to make Christianity relevant to these people. In order to become a bridge-builder, though, we have to go through a process--one we'll look at in this pamphlet. First, we need to examine the isolation problem found in many of today's churches. Then we'll look at Christ's model for ministry which overcomes our isolation. Next, we'll find out how our lives can build bridges to the world. Finally, we look at the need for education in order to construct better bridges.

### The Problem of Isolation

<http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/bridgbld.html>

9/18/2002

(2)

Imagine receiving a phone call informing you that you'd been chosen to become the American Ambassador to China. You'd consider that quite an honor! How would you prepare for your task? You'd want to do a thorough study of Chinese culture and customs. If you simply said, "No problem, I'm an *American!*" and neglected this study, you'd find yourself very ineffective as an ambassador.

Now imagine if Christ were to call you, as an American, to be His ambassador to America. How would you prepare for that? Well, in fact this is what Christ has called us to (2 Cor. 5:20). But what if we were to say, "No problem, I'm a Christian!" but neglected any attempt to understand our own culture?

Surprisingly this is what many people in the church today have done. Some believers have actually avoided any connection with the world. Jan Johnson in her *Moody Monthly* article "Escaping the Christian Ghetto" has called these people "Rabbit-Hole Christians." According to Johnson, "In the morning they pop out of their safe Christian homes, hold their breath at work, scurry home to their families and then off to their Bible Studies, and finally end the day praying for the unbelievers they safely avoided all day." (2)

In early America, Christians enjoyed discussing philosophy and theology with believers and nonbelievers alike. New England was a community that fostered intellectual pursuit. Their young men, for example, studied the classics and the Hebrew Bible in depth.

Today's Christians, however, are often viewed by the world as anti-intellectuals, as people who have neglected their minds in order to become "spiritual." But with this mentality, we are unable to address the critical issues of our day, and so our culture begins to look elsewhere for answers: to the secular humanists, for example.

What is the root of this separation mindset? Well, many believers today hold to a pietistic view of the Christian life. Pietism began in the 1800s, but it had a certain deficiency. According to Francis Schaeffer, "it was 'platonic' in that it made a sharp division between the 'spiritual' world and

<http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/bridgbld.html>

9/18/2002

the 'material' world. The totality of human experience was not afforded a proper place." (3)

This pietistic view of Christian living, I think, has sapped the real life out of the Christian experience for many people. That's because one's spirituality never quite comes "down" far enough to integrate with the real world. We still end up trying to be nice Christians, but too many areas of our humanity get left out. It no longer looks very attractive to those first investigating the faith, either. In fact, some nonbelievers get scared off!

How can we change this pattern? We must remove this "sharp division" by finding out how our spiritual life works in the physical world, by developing a biblical world view. As we learn to apply the Christian faith to our own life and world we become able to tell nonbelievers how it applies to theirs also, and this opens doors for the gospel. But without a well-thought-out faith we don't feel comfortable taking our message into the middle of the marketplace of modern ideas, and so we stay isolated. What we actually need is a model for building bridges within the complexity of today's culture, one that makes Christianity *relevant* to the lives of real people. Christ Himself has provided this model in an absolutely amazing way. What is this model?

### Christ's Model of Contextualization

The model is based on the character of God. The Bible presents to us a God who continually seeks man by entering into man's cultural context. In the New Testament we first find God seeking man by taking on a "contextualized" form--that of a man. Contextualization means becoming identified with the opposing party and requires breaking through cultural barriers in order to establish communication.

Through the *incarnation* of Christ, God crossed a rather large "cultural gap" to seek man, and identify with man, by actually becoming a man. God took on our context, and in doing so, He broke through two barriers that kept man from having a relationship with Him. What were these two barriers?

First Christ broke through our *humanity* barrier. Christ took on the flesh, cultural patterns, thought patterns, practices, and frailty associated with humanity. He left His world and entered into our world. And then second, Christ broke through the *sin* barrier. He went to the cross and became sin on our behalf so we could be forgiven of our sins and come to know God personally.

Not only did God seek man by becoming a man, His commitment to seek man continued after Christ's death and resurrection, but took on a different form. His communication model, one still involving *contextualization*, continues through His people. In 2 Corinthians 5:20 we see that God has called every believer to be an ambassador for Christ. How do we go about this task? By following Christ's model, and breaking through the same two barriers He did. First, we need to break through the *humanity* barrier. Motivated by His love, we also need to enter into the world of nonbelievers, seeking to understand their context, and finding areas of common ground. This means that, without compromising, we are to get involved with real people and their needs, struggles, and intellectual doubts. Second, we need to help people overcome the *sin* barrier. We do this by sharing the gospel within their context, in a way that "makes sense" within another person's cultural and intellectual makeup.

According to Francis Schaeffer, "[A foreign missionary] must learn the language of the thought-forms of the people to whom one speaks. So it is with the Christian Church. Its responsibility is not only to hold to the basic, scriptural principles of the Christian faith, but to communicate these unchanging truths 'into' the generation in which one is living."<sup>(4)</sup>

Now let's turn our attention to how to use this model of building bridges for the gospel that Christ has given us.

### We Are God's Bridges

When non-Christians encounter us, what impressions do they walk away with? Do they simply see another "religion," or do they encounter a Christianity that is relevant outside the church and makes good rational sense in every area of human life?

<http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/bridgbld.html>

9/18/2002

As Christ took on the context of human flesh, so we must enter into the context of today's world. The basis for our ministry, therefore, is not only found in sharing the truths of the Christian faith, but also in utilizing our own humanity as an actual channel for relating these truths.

The early church repeatedly followed Christ's model by building human bridges in order to communicate the gospel within the context of the audience. In Acts 17, Paul shared the gospel with the polytheistic and philosophically-oriented Greeks differently than he did with the monotheistic, traditionally-oriented Jews. He could do this because he had a deep understanding of each culture. Oftentimes in the New Testament, certain individuals were able to build bridges because of common cultural back-grounds. Their very lives and heritage built a natural bridge. Timothy, for example, could easily minister to Greeks in his hometown because of his Greek heritage. At other times, though, there is no apparent common ground, and we have to learn how nonbelievers are thinking and accommodate accordingly. For example, when Paul needed Timothy to accompany him on a missionary trip, he had Timothy circumcised. Why? Because they were going to come into contact with Jews who saw circumcision as very important.

Christ Himself clearly took a contextual approach to ministry. In John 3, Christ confronts Nicodemus, a teacher of the law, with some deep theological insights. But in John 4, as Jesus casually converses with the woman at the well about her immoral past, He uses the well as a simple illustration of the "living water" He could provide. In each case, Jesus showed genuine respect for that person's background and mindset by tailoring the gospel appropriately. Likewise, an ambassador for Christ must show utmost respect to the people he is trying to reach, and to their mindset. By demonstrating a deep understanding of culture, we gain integrity and credibility with our audience.

The key is that our very lives are the bridges, or channels, for the gospel. When God created man He gave man dominion over the world (Gen. 1:28). God was essentially giving every person the assignment of demonstrating His character on earth. As Christ's ambassadors, He has given each of us specific areas in which we can become channels for His

love and truth as we turn these areas over to Him. These areas include our talents, burdens, educational fields, abilities, and spiritual gifts. Whether a person is a homemaker, a dentist, a Ph.D. candidate, or a farmer, he or she needs to do an extensive study regarding how biblical truth provides a foundation for that "platform" God has given. Often He will show a person a specific subculture that only he or she can reach.

### **The Importance of Education**

In order to become a bridge-builder between the church and the world, we need to be educated about both, and also about how to integrate biblical principles into today's culture. So, becoming an effective ambassador for Christ requires knowledge of the following three areas:

#### **Theology**

As bridge-builders we first need to develop a thorough knowledge of the character of God, the Person of Christ, and the salvation message. As we do, the Holy Spirit incorporates this knowledge into our personal lives and ministries. Many churches today, however, have downplayed the importance of theology as a real solution to the problems of our nation; some have even adopted an anti-theological attitude. According to London and Wiseman in their book *Pastors at Risk*, "Today long-held assumptions about doctrinal devotion no longer apply. Fewer and fewer people choose a church or continue attending because of biblical teaching or particular tradition."<sup>(5)</sup> Instead, we need to develop a hunger for theology, and for becoming theologically educated. You may want to start by reading J. I. Packer's classic book, *Knowing God*,<sup>(6)</sup> or another good theological work.

#### **Anthropology**

We also need to understand the people of our world. This includes the biblical nature of man, the prevailing world views today, and how these world views show their faces in today's media, attitudes, education, government, etc. Also, what are the needs of our world today? There are physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs to consider. But to

<http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/bridgbld.html>

9/18/2002

address these needs we must be educated. One book I would recommend is R. C. Sproul's *Lifeviews*,<sup>(7)</sup> which will not only help you understand the American culture better, but help you bring your faith into that culture.

#### **Contextualization**

As we begin to dialogue with non-believers within our own fields, we'll actually learn how to use those fields as channels for biblical truth. Nonbelievers need to see that a biblical foundation works within their own field of interest before they adopt this foundation for their entire life. So we need to become thoroughly educated regarding the biblical foundation of our own field, whether it be science, marketing, education, medicine, law, childrearing, factory work, whatever. Eventually you'll be able to develop a specific strategy for ministry within your educational or occupational field, turning it into a mission field.

A group of lawyers, for example, could start a legal defense program for Christian education in their area, or could teach a Sunday school class on "A Biblical Basis for Law and Justice." A farmer could train lay people in how to start a garden, and open it to the community, relating biblical principles. A panel of Christian doctors could teach a night sex education course for high school and junior high school students (incorporating the physiological, psychological, and biblical/moral perspectives) at the church--and open it up to the entire community. The sky is literally the limit.

The question we must face, though, is whether or not this sort of education and hard work is really important to us. Why has the church lost its place as a dominant force within our American culture? Simply because Christians have neglected this sort of study--and frequently replaced it with an emotionalized, trivialized Christianity.

Consider making a commitment before God to educate yourself in such a way as to turn your occupational or educational field into a mission field. There is nothing more thrilling than living a life modeled after the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.



Notes

1. David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 121.
2. Jan Johnson, "Escaping the Christian Ghetto," *Moody Monthly* (Nov. 1987), pp. 81-82.
3. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 5 vols. (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1982), vol. 5, p. 424.
4. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 207.
5. H.B. London and Neil Wiseman, *Pastors at Risk* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1993), p. 36
6. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1973).
7. R.C. Sproul, *Lifeviews* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1986)

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9/18/2002

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## **Contextualizing the Gospel for (Neo)Pagans: Learning from Paul's Evangelistic Ministry (Acts 17:16-34)**

The past two and a half decades have witnessed an explosion of interest from around the globe in the theory, process, and problems associated with the contextualization of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Not always recognized, however, is that while the term "contextualization" was coined in the 1970's, the activity that can be thought of as "contextualizing the gospel" has been a dynamic of the Christian mission from the beginning. In fact, we can unearth the roots of contextualization in the New Testament itself as the church wrestled with how the gospel could be freed from an exclusive identification with Jewish culture and incarnated afresh into a predominantly Gentile environment, or with how to work out the ramifications of the Christian message in light of the concrete needs of the various mission communities in the Greco-Roman world. In important ways, these New Testament patterns are analogous to those necessary for the effective contextualization of the gospel in every generation. Such scriptural precedents invite us to discover paradigms that might inform, guide, and suggest parameters for the ongoing task of enabling the gospel to come to life in new settings.

In this paper, I will focus on one account from the book of Acts which can function as an instructive case study in contextualizing the gospel for a specific audience. Paul's sermon to the cultured and philosophically-oriented Athenians in Acts 17 is perhaps the outstanding example of cross-cultural missionary preaching in the New Testament. In the Areopagus address, Luke gives us a snapshot of Paul at the height of his powers as a missionary communicator, transposing the gospel for the Greeks with both firmness and flexibility. This study will concentrate on the content and method of missionary theologizing which Acts 17:16-34 brings to light, as well as its potential to serve as a model for the interaction between the Christian faith and culture.<sup>2</sup>

### **Audience and Setting**

Although by the first century the university city of Athens had already lost much of its former glory, for Luke it still symbolizes the cultural, intellectual, and religious nerve center of the Greco-Roman world. When the gospel comes to Athens, it penetrates the very heartland of urban pagan culture (Johnson, 1992:319; Dupont, 1979:530). Athens is therefore the ideal setting for Paul's major missionary speech to the Greeks. Luke describes the context for Paul's sermon with meticulous detail. In particular, verse 16 sets the tone for what follows. Instead of being impressed by Athenian architecture and learning, Paul is "deeply distressed" over the pervasive idolatry and religious pluralism he observes there. A city forested with pagan images,<sup>3</sup> temples, sanctuaries, and altars provides the backdrop to the whole narrative (Zweck, 1989:103).<sup>4</sup> Luke almost completely ignores Paul's synagogue ministry to the Jews in Athens, choosing rather to focus on his encounter with the pagan inhabitants of the city. Paul adapts his evangelistic approach to the populace. Like a Greek philosopher, he goes to the marketplace, publicly debating the intellectuals of Athens on equal footing (17:17).<sup>5</sup>

In verse 18, Luke introduces us to two groups of philosophers, the Epicureans and the Stoics, who initially spar with Paul in the agora and later become the primary audience for his address. The Epicureans were committed to a practical ethical system that valued pleasure as the highest good, particularly that which brought freedom from passions, superstitious fears, and

anxiety about death. Consequently, they believed that the soul died with the body, and that the gods, who were material in essence, played no significant role in the lives of people. The more popular Stoics were essentially pantheists, believing that a divine principle of reason was present in all things and governed all things. Their great goal in life was to seek after and to live in harmony with this rational principle, and thus, according to nature. The identification of these two Athenian philosophical schools is critical to the narrative, since Paul interacts with their beliefs--especially those of the Stoics--in his sermon. The reaction of the educated sophisticates to Paul's market preaching is a mixture of outright contempt, gross misunderstanding, and faddish curiosity (17:18, 21). Clearly, this is a difficult crowd (Tannehill, 1990:214). The accusation that Paul was introducing foreign deities into the Greek pantheon is probably based on the false assumption that he was endorsing multiple gods; "Jesus" and his feminine counterpart, "Anastasia" (Resurrection). This confusion simply underscores that the Athenians' polytheistic perspective creates a serious hurdle to their hearing the gospel correctly. Luke's narrative exposes a fundamental clash of worldviews between Paul and his audience.

The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers are not Paul's only hearers. The immediate setting for Paul's sermon is the meeting of the Areopagus, the supreme governing council of Athens, which had responsibility for deciding religious questions.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not Paul faced some kind of official trial or hearing,<sup>7</sup> he was asked to explain his novel teaching to this powerful body of leading citizens (17:19-20). In addition, Luke's description of the response to Paul's address implies that there was a wider listening audience, including a woman named Damaris who became a convert (17:33-34). That Paul addresses not simply the philosophers, but also the council and perhaps other curious citizens (cf. 17:22 "men of Athens"), is important for understanding the critique of popular Athenian religion in his speech, especially since the Areopagus is the very group that is responsible for religious matters (Tannehill, 1990:216-217). Paul transforms the occasion of complete misunderstanding of his preaching and the subsequent demand for an explanation into an opportunity to proclaim the gospel afresh in the very epicenter of Greek thought and culture.

### Persuasive Features

The form and style of the Areopagus speech are ably adapted to persuade a sophisticated Gentile audience. In contrast to the frequent use of language and quotations from the Old Testament that we find in sermons preached to Jews in Acts (e.g., 2:14-36; 13:16-40), this discourse reflects a more Hellenized style that is suited to its occasion and hearers (Witherington III, 1998:44, n.156; Bruce, 1951:383-384). Luke portrays Paul as addressing the council with rhetorical skill and sensitivity. Paul assumes the position of a Greek orator, standing in their midst to deliver his speech (17:22) (Soards, 1994:96). He opens with a conventional form of address for a speech in Athens ("Men, Athenians"), enabling his audience right away to feel at home (Kennedy, 1984:130). The sermon itself fits the conventional pattern of Greco-Roman rhetoric. We can observe the following elements: (1) an opening *exordium* or introduction, designed to gain a hearing from his listeners (17:22-23a); (2) a proposition (*propositio*; 23b) stating the desired goal of the discourse--to make the unknown God known to the Athenians; (3) the main *probatio* or proof (24-29), which argues the case; and (4) a concluding *peroratio* or exhortation (30-31), which attempts to persuade the audience to take the right course of action; namely, to repent (17:30).<sup>8</sup> Because Paul finds himself in a somewhat adversarial setting in which he must explain and defend his teaching about

"foreign divinities," the speech has elements of *judicial* oratory. Yet ultimately it takes the character of *deliberative* rhetoric, which seeks to convince the audience to change their beliefs and their behavior (Soards, 1994:96; Kennedy, 1984:129; Witherington III, 1998:513-514).<sup>9</sup> Paul "proclaims"<sup>10</sup> to the Athenians (17:23) a message they need to hear and embrace. In addition, Ben Witherington III observes that the speech seems to follow the common pattern in ancient rhetoric of first establishing the speaker's *ethos* or character, then offering *logic* in the form of persuasive arguments, and finally using *pathos* in verses 30-31 in order to generate an emotional response from the audience (1998:518). For the sermon to be effective in convincing people to change, it must engage them not only on the level of their intellect, but also their emotions.

Paul's sermon features a variety of rhetorical techniques that would have been familiar to educated Greeks.<sup>11</sup> One such strategy is the use of the delaying tactics of "insinuation" (*insinuatio*). Paul postpones the difficult subject of the resurrection of Jesus to the very end of the oration (17:31), after first establishing rapport and building a foundation for understanding (Witherington III, 1998:518; Tannehill, 1990:217). The speech is also rich with irony. The recurring theme of human ignorance (17:23, 30), for example, would not have been missed in this center of learning and before a body composed of the intelligentsia of Athens (Charles, 1995:53). In addition, Paul's message draws upon the language and ideas of his Greek contemporaries, particularly the Stoic philosophers, in order to establish points of contact with his auditors. He even quotes pagan poets--authorities recognized by his audience--in support of his argument about the relationship of humanity to the living God (17:28).<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that such pagan sources carry the same weight of authority for Paul as do citations from Scripture in sermons to the Jews, as F. F. Bruce rightly points out (1987:74).<sup>13</sup> Paul, however, can recognize the common ground with the writings of the pagans, using them as bridges to his audience, without sanctioning the belief system to which they originally belong. In short, in Acts 17 we see Paul at his rhetorical best, utilizing whatever persuasive weapons are at his disposal in order to effectively engage the Athenian worldview and culture.

### Preaching to the Athenian Intellectuals

#### *Initial Point of Contact*

Like their provincial counterparts in Lystra (Acts 14:8-20), the cultured Athenians have no understanding of Christ, or for that matter, the Scriptures, upon which to build. Consequently, to lead them on a journey through Hebrew history and talk about Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah, as he does with the synagogue adherents in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16ff), would no doubt have made little sense to *this* crowd. Instead, in 17:22b-29 Paul launches into a classic example of what today we might call "pre-evangelism."

Paul begins his sermon with an *exordium* that establishes rapport and credibility with his listeners. It was customary for Greek orators to gain the good will of their audience by introducing their remarks with a *captatio benevolentiae* ("currying of favor"), as Paul does in 17:22b, 23a. Here the opening point of contact is the religiosity of the Athenians themselves: "I see how extremely religious (*deisidaimotesterous*) you are in every way" (17:22b).<sup>14</sup> While the term "religious" can at times mean "very superstitious," it is likely that Paul uses it in a neutral and non-judgmental sense

(Foerster, 1964:20; Dupont, 1979:541).<sup>15</sup> Initially, Paul takes a respectful and somewhat conciliatory approach to his hearers' pagan religious life. He further engages his audience by spotlighting a concrete example of their worship that he has observed, an altar to an unknown god (17:23a).<sup>16</sup> Probably such altars were intended as "safety precautions," motivated by the fear of offending and incurring the wrath of an anonymous deity. According to a local legend, during a plague in which no sacrifices had successfully pleased the gods, Epimenides of Crete counseled the Athenians to release a flock of sheep on top of the Aeropagus. Wherever the sheep stopped, altars were erected to unnamed gods, and the city was spared (Diogenes Laertius 1.110. Cf. Hemer, 1989:245-46). Although we cannot be sure to what extent Paul was aware of this local tradition, it illustrates a common fear of unknown powers among the Greeks. Paul's mention of the altar to the unknown God therefore identifies an underlying religious need of his audience. At the same time, it picks up on the theme of "knowledge," which is highly valued within their culture (Tannehill, 1990:214-215). The Athenians' worship of the *unknown* serves as a springboard for Paul to launch into his evangelistic message about the one true God who is *known* because this God has revealed himself. Additionally, the reference to the altar inscription allows Paul to build credibility with his audience by removing the suspicion that he is trying to introduce foreign deities to Athens (cf. v. 18): the God he proclaims is not *entirely* unknown to them (Zweck, 1989:102-103).

Paul thus begins where his audience is and builds on as much common territory as is possible. Rather than disparaging their belief system or condemning their religiosity, he recognizes there is something genuine in their religious aspirations and felt needs, and uses them as stepping stones for communicating the gospel (Fernando, 1998:479-481). There are definite boundaries, however, to the plot of common ground. When Paul says he is about to proclaim to them what they were worshiping as unknown, he is not simply identifying for them the God they had been honoring all along without realizing it, as some have claimed.<sup>17</sup> The Athenians are hardly "anonymous Christians." The wording of verse 23 makes it clear that they have been worshipping a "what" (*ho*), not a "whom;" an object, not a personal God (cf. 17:29) (Polhill, 1992:372). Their present condition of idolatrous ignorance must be corrected by a *true* knowledge of God through the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

### *Constructive and Corrective Engagement*

Paul states his basic proposition about the "unknown God" in 17:23b, then develops it through various apologetic arguments in verses 24-29. His exposition is primarily *theo*-centric. It focuses on God's character, revelation in nature, and relationship to humanity. This seems to be Paul's characteristic approach to people without a biblical heritage (cf. 14:15-17). Specifically, he is making the unknown God, the God of the Scriptures, *known* to his audience. It is noteworthy that Paul does not respond immediately to the Athenians' specific inquiries about "Jesus and the resurrection" (17:18). First he must address them at the level of their basic worldview assumptions, creating a necessary context and foundation for proclaiming the risen Christ.

Does Paul accommodate his message to the philosophical ideas of his pagan audience? Martin Dibelius answered that question with a resounding "yes." He argued that this is essentially a Hellenistic speech about the true knowledge of God that everyone possesses by nature, a line of thought that is "foreign to the entire New Testament" (Dibelius, 1956:57-58, here p. 71; cf.

Vielhaur, 1966:34-37). Viewed from this perspective, Acts 17 becomes an example of “over-contextualizing,” where the Lukan Paul has sacrificed the Jewish Christian gospel at the altar of Greek philosophy in order to make points with the Athenians. On the other hand, there are those who think that Paul’s categories come solely out of the Old Testament and Judaism, that he finds no points of agreement whatsoever with his hearers, only contrasts.<sup>19</sup> Neither of these views seems to do justice to Paul’s contextual approach. While it is true that the speech’s theology is firmly rooted in the Old Testament and Judaism, Paul is able to clothe biblical revelation in the language and categories of his Greek listeners--without syncretizing the message (See Charles, 1995:53). He takes advantage of convergences between the Jewish Scriptures and Hellenistic thought in order to construct apologetic bridges to his listeners (Conzelmann, 1966:221; Winter, 1992:135). Paul views Greek philosophy as an appropriate conversation partner in his attempt to contextualize the Jewish Christian gospel for his cultured contemporaries (Johnson, 1992:319).

Paul’s strategy in Acts 17 involves both constructive and corrective engagement of his hearers’ beliefs and worldviews.<sup>20</sup> Colin Hemer is right to read this passage as “a fascinating study in cross-cultural communication, in building bridges where possible without shirking the necessity of dialogue on points of basic disagreement, while seeking to meet those issues where the questioner is, on his own ground and terminology” (1989:247). Paul finds his primary touch points in the Stoic teaching that is familiar to his audience. In fact, Bruce W. Winter argues that Paul may have consciously followed a conventional outline for a Stoic presentation on the nature of divinity (1992:131, 136).<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, Paul paints a picture of the true God in universal strokes as the God of the whole world who has graciously revealed himself to all of humankind through creation. Paul expounds this general revelation in three basic proofs, or arguments, which proclaim (1) God’s creation and maintenance of the cosmos (17:24-25); (2) God’s providential care of all nations (17:26-27a); and (3) God’s immanent relationship to humankind (17:27b-29). While these arguments reflect an Old Testament background (see vv 24-25; Isa 52:5), all three touch upon familiar Stoic notions and terminology, as well. Stoics could agree that God is the source of all life (17:25) and that the world is ruled by divine providence (see Winter, 1989:133-135; Neyrey, 1990:122-124). Further points of contact appear in the Stoic ideas that the human race is one (17:26), that God is near (17:27), and that humankind is in kinship with God (17:28) (Dibelius, 1956:52-54; Barrett, 1974:72-73). Paul buttresses this final point with a direct quotation from the Stoic philosopher/poet Aratus (“one of your poets”), originally written in praise to Zeus. It seems Paul is willing to risk going to considerable lengths in order to identify with his audience and find common ground. In addition, terms like “world” (*kosmos* 17:24), “his offspring” (17:28) and “the divine” (*to theion* 17:29) are characteristic of the Hellenistic philosophers, including the Stoics.<sup>22</sup> Paul’s use of indigenous language and literary traditions would surely resonate with the Mars Hill crowd.

Although Paul’s discourse has less in common with the Epicureans, Winter notes that they too, could find several points of agreement: that God is living and can be known, that God is self-sufficient and needs nothing from human beings, and that God does not live in human-built temples (1992:136-137). Yet despite Paul’s efforts to be sensitive to the contextual needs of his audience, an identificational approach can only go so far. His deeper purpose is to confront and correct their understanding of God at a fundamental level. He accomplishes this not by overtly attacking specific pagan doctrines, but rather by positively confessing the God of the Scriptures. Against the

Epicurean vision of the gods as material in essence and blissfully detached from humanity, Paul proclaims a God who is actively and intimately involved in the world. This God reveals himself as Creator and Lord of the universe (v 24), as providential Ruler (v 26) and Judge (v 31), a God who is near, who desires that all should seek him and enter into a personal relationship of accountability (Larkin, 1995:86). Paul likewise challenges the Stoic vision of God as the all-pervasive and impersonal *logos*, the cosmic principle of reason. In its place, he announces a personal God, the Creator who is transcendent and distinct from his creation, the Lord and Judge who stands over the world instead of being fully expressed within it (See Proctor, 1992:70; Bruce, 1951:385).<sup>23</sup> And in contrast to the Athenians' claim to racial superiority, fostered by the belief that they had sprung from Attic soil, Paul asserts that all human beings descended from the one man, Adam, who was created by God (17:26). Finally, with a series of three negative statements that expose the misconception of confining God to something humans create (whether a temple, an offering, or an image; 17:24, 25, 29), the speech builds a case against Athenian idolatry. Throughout the discourse, Paul uses convergences between Jewish, Christian, and Greek ideas in order to challenge pagan polytheism (Hansen, 1998:316). This indictment is not simply aimed at the general culture of religious pluralism in Athens; it boomerangs on the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers as well, since under pressure from the growing emperor cult they too tended to accommodate their beliefs and practices with popular religion (Winter, 1992:139-140; Marshall, 1983:289).

The genius of Paul's evangelistic contextualization in Acts 17 is that he intentionally uses the philosophical language of his audience, not simply to establish common ground, but in order to transform their worldview. Familiar terminology is taken up and infused with new meaning in light of biblical revelation and the Christ event. For example, Paul reinterprets the words of the pagan poet in verse 28: we are God's "offspring," not in a Stoic pantheistic sense, but rather in a biblical sense of being created in the image of God (Marshall, 1983:289). The quotation then becomes the platform for Paul's critique of pagan idolatry: if the living God has made us in his image, we surely cannot create "gods" out of lifeless objects (17:29). Likewise, in verse 27, "seeking God" is not a philosophical quest through which God could be easily known from examining nature, as the Stoics believed (See Witherington III, 1998:528).<sup>24</sup> Rather, Paul portrays the religious seeking of the Greeks as a groping search, a fumbling in the darkness, which awaits fulfillment in the gospel of the risen One.<sup>25</sup> Paul begins where his listeners are, but he will not allow them to stay there. With laser-like focus, he moves them on to the definitive revelation of God in Christ.

### *Evangelistic Appeal*

The speech reaches its climax in verses 30-31. Rhetorically, Paul's conclusion achieves two things. First, it directs his audience to the theological focal point toward which the entire speech has been building--the announcement that Jesus, whom God has raised from the dead, will be Judge of the world (Hansen, 1998:317). This fulfills the stated goal of the speech (17:23b) by making the unknown God known, now in a more specific way in the person of Jesus. Second, it appeals to his listeners to take the right course of action. They must repent of their idolatry and be rightly related to God through Christ. To this point in the speech, Paul the orator has taken care to identify with his audience, highlighting a number of points of contact and agreement. Only now does he bring the Athenians face to face with the heart of the gospel, God's saving action in the risen Christ, as he takes up familiar themes that appear in other evangelistic sermons in Acts (e.g., 2:38; 3:19-20;

10:42) (See Soards, 1994:99-100; Fernando, 1998:481-482). The need for conversion in both beliefs and attitudes which the first part of the speech anticipates now becomes painfully plain to the Athenians. God's new and decisive work in Jesus means that "all people everywhere" need to repent (17:30). That includes enlightened philosophers as well as pagan idolaters. Paul's speech, Robert Tannehill insists, "is basically a call to repentance, a call for the Greco-Roman world to break decisively with its religious past in response to the one God who now invites all to be part of the renewed world" (1990:218).<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the understanding of salvation at work here is not simply a matter of purifying and redirecting the pagans' natural knowledge of God, as some have supposed (E.g., Vielhaur, 1966:36; cf. Dibelius, 1956:58). According to the sermon, what is needed is not education, but transformation (Gempf, 1993a:54).

The themes given in verse 31 as the reason the Athenians must repent are end time judgment and the resurrection of Christ, both of which pose a blatant challenge to Greek thought. The concept of a coming divine judgment at the culmination of history upends the Stoic conception of time as moving endlessly in cycles. In fact, "The Judeo-Christian understanding of history, which begins and ends with divine fiat, marks a radical discontinuity with the world view of Paul's audience" (Charles, 1995:59). In addition, the notion of judgment in righteousness implies that Paul's hearers are morally accountable before God. Their "ignorance" (17:30) is clearly not bliss. They must respond to the knowledge of the Creator they have received with repentance and conversion (Charles, 1995:59, 61).

The address concludes with the assurance that God will righteously judge the world by "a man" whom he has appointed and raised from the dead (17:31). Paul waits until the very end of the speech--after he has taken great pains to lay the proper groundwork--to return to the controversial and easily misunderstood subject of "Jesus and the resurrection" (cf. 17:18). Even then, he does so with some care, introducing Jesus without mentioning his name, perhaps "to avoid the impression that Jesus was just another god" (Gempf, 1994:1094).<sup>27</sup> The rhetorical "proof" (*pistis*)<sup>28</sup> that God has revealed himself in the One who will judge the world is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That Paul's preaching of the gospel in Acts 17 highlights the resurrection and not the cross is entirely appropriate for the context, since it is the former the Athenians questioned him about specifically (17:18-20).<sup>29</sup> The notion of "resurrection from the dead," which implies a *bodily* resurrection, was alien to all forms of Greek thought. The Greeks generally assumed a dichotomy between spirit and matter (including the body), and for many the body was a prison from which to escape at the time of death. Epicureans, for their part, denied the reality of an afterlife altogether, and Stoics had a vague concept of the future that involved the soul's mystical absorption into the cosmos.<sup>30</sup> It is small wonder that the idea of a bodily resurrection would have sounded like anything but "good news" to most of the Areopagus assembly. Yet Paul does not water down the gospel in order to make it more palatable to the Greeks. Despite his painstaking efforts to contextualize his message for a Greek audience, the gospel's inevitable offense must stand.

### The Response

Following the common pattern in Acts, Paul's sermon gets mixed reviews (17:32-34). Both in the marketplace and before the Areopagus, the dissonance between the worldview of the Athenians and the gospel of Christ is so great that it provokes incomprehension and scorn. Luke



underscores in verse 32 that the central truth of a resurrected Savior was the stone over which these Greek intellectuals stumbled.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Luke is careful to point out that the speech was not devoid of positive results. Some were prepared to hear more,<sup>32</sup> and others willingly embraced the message and became believers.

## Conclusion

While some have thought that Paul's attempt to adapt his message to the philosophically-minded Athenians was a sell out of the straightforward gospel of "Christ crucified"--a mistake which he later corrected in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-2)--there is nothing in the text to support this.<sup>33</sup> All indications are that Luke regards the Mars Hill speech, not as a failure or as some kind of temporary experiment, but rather as a model of missionary preaching to an educated pagan audience (Witherington III, 1998:533; Dupont, 1979:534).<sup>34</sup> Can the approach of the missionary from Tarsus instruct Christians in the twenty-first century, as well? I believe it can. Acts 17 has been rightly characterized as "a classic of intercultural communication applicable to our own increasingly pluralistic world (Hemer, 1989:255)."<sup>35</sup> While we cannot slavishly imitate either the specific content or methodology of the speech, Paul's preaching to the Athenians conveys several profound implications for the mission of the church today.

First, Paul's ministry in Athens is a model of cultural sensitivity and creativity when presenting biblical truth to non-Christians. J. Daryl Charles observes that according to Luke's account, Paul demonstrates an understanding of Athenian culture which earns him the right to be heard (1995:60). He keenly observes their religious beliefs and practices. He shows familiarity with their ancient literary and philosophical traditions. Using this knowledge to engage their worldview; he draws upon indigenous language, images, and ideas to communicate the gospel in culturally relevant ways. His means of persuasion are likewise appropriate to the context.<sup>36</sup> With great care and rhetorical skill, Paul establishes rapport with his audience, and then through a series of contact points he builds conceptual bridges that they can cross. He risks bringing Christian monotheism into dialogue with Greek philosophy. In Athens, the Jewish Christian gospel is transposed into an Achaian key. The church must always understand the culture in which it ministers and draw upon that culture's internal resources if it hopes to herald the gospel in credible and convincing ways. If the gospel is to become a credible option for "neo-pagans" in today's Western cultures whose worldview is no longer Christianized, we cannot continue to communicate the message of Christ with terminology, theological arguments, and worldview assumptions which blissfully refuse to recognize that the context has changed.

At the same time, Paul refuses to syncretize his message or to compromise its theological integrity. He engages Athenian culture with the aim of its transformation. He builds on his understanding of the world of his hearers in order to effectively critique the false values, beliefs, and practices that are embedded within it. There are "non-negotiables" to Paul's message which confront the prevailing assumptions of his audience--the Sovereign lordship of the Creator and Ruler of the nations (which requires that there are no other gods), the universal need for repentance (which presupposes sin and guilt), the reality of a future judgment (which implies moral accountability), and above all the supreme revelation of God in Christ, validated by Jesus' resurrection from the dead (which flies in the face of Greek notions of death and immortality) (See Charles, 1995:60-61;

Williams, 1985:309). Ultimately, both the Athenians and their worldview need to be converted. The church today can learn from Paul's practice that authentic contextualization of the gospel requires us to sensitively and critically engage a pluralistic world, while avoiding the path of easy accommodation to the dominant culture. Only then can people be genuinely transformed.

Finally, Paul's encounter at Athens presents us with a perspective for contextualizing the gospel among people of other religions. Three observations are relevant here. First, Paul's *attitude*. Although distressed about the idolatry he finds in Athens, Paul refuses to flatly condemn the pagans or their religious and philosophical systems. Instead, he recognizes that the Athenians, their past, even their religious aspirations, have been touched by the grace of God. The speech affirms that all human beings are made in the divine image (17:28), that God has created them for the purpose of seeking him (17:27).<sup>37</sup> This groping search may reflect humanity's sincere response to God and desire to know him, prompted by God's seeking grace. Consequently, Paul does not hesitate to look for points of intersection with Christian truth in the Athenians' religion and philosophy. Realizing that God's prevenient grace is at work among people of other faiths, drawing them to himself, will keep us from vilifying them or their religions. It will allow us to recognize "signs of grace" wherever they are found.

Second, Paul's *approach*. In presenting the good news to pagans, Paul is careful to prepare the ground. He begins by affirming that which is universal and is shared human experience--God's creation and general revelation. Only after laying out an entire biblical world view about God the Creator of the whole world, the Ruler of nature and history, and the universal Judge, does he raise the issue of God's particular revelation in Jesus Christ. Likewise today, general revelation and our shared creaturehood as people made in the image of God may be a necessary starting point in approaching people of other religions.

Third, Paul's *answer*. Nothing in the passage gives any assurance that the Athenians' religious searchings will result in their finding the true God by themselves. In fact, their very religiosity has led them to worship out of fear and to create gods of their own. Yet, the Athenians no longer need to grope blindly after God in the dark. At the end of the speech, Paul points them to the definitive answer to their fear, religious ignorance, and absence of future hope--the gospel of the resurrected Christ. Ultimately, the religious longings of human beings can only be fulfilled in the transforming word of the gospel. To be authentic, our evangelistic contextualization must bring people face to face with the reality of the Christ event, even at the risk of rejection.

Paul's ministry in Athens in Acts 17 offers contemporary Christians an example of a magnificent balance between an "identificational" approach that proclaims the gospel in culturally relevant forms on the one hand, and a "transformational" approach that resists compromising the gospel's integrity in a pluralistic culture on the other. Whether called to become "as a Jew to the Jews" within a familiar culture or "as a Greek to the Greeks" among cultures different than our own, it is the church's constant challenge to herald the good news--under the guidance of the Spirit--with that same passion for both contextual relevance and courageous fidelity to the transforming word of salvation.

## Notes

1. See e.g., the bibliographies in Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989) and Gilliland (1989), and the recent collection of essays in Scherer and Bevans (1999).
2. Any study of Paul's missionary preaching in Acts raises the complex question of whether it is really the historical Paul speaking or whether Luke is presenting his own ideas through Paul's mouth. For a valuable summary of the issues, see Green (1997:10-11). Recent examination of the function of speech recording in ancient historiography has shown that serious Greek historians such as Thucydides and Polybius were in fact concerned about *both* historical *and* literary appropriateness; that is, "the historians were interested in including speeches that were appropriate to their book and also appropriate to the alleged speaker and situation." (Gempf, 1993b, here, p. 303). If the historian Luke follows a similar type of approach, as is likely, we should not expect Paul's sermons in Acts to be verbatim transcripts of what was said--this is clear from their brevity alone--but we can expect them to represent faithful edited records of how Paul addressed particular audiences on specific historical occasions. I will therefore refer to "Paul" as the preacher of the gospel, with the understanding that what Paul says in Acts 17 also communicates Luke's own literary and rhetorical concerns. In any case, in the "world" of Luke's narrative, Paul is assumed to be the one communicating on the occasion described.
3. For the translation of *kateidolos* (17:16) as "a forest of idols," see Wycherley (1968:619).
4. On religious cults and edifices in Athens, see Gill (1994:442-445).
5. Apparently Luke wants his audience to draw a parallel between the experience of Paul and that of the great Athenian philosopher Socrates, who also engaged in dialogues in the agora and who was put on trial for the introduction of other new divinities (Plato, *Apologia* 24B, cited in Bruce, 1951:377; cf. Acts 17:18). This association of Paul and Socrates would provide a point of contact for Luke's Hellenistic readers and encourage a favorable disposition toward Paul's Areopagus address (Hansen, 1998:310).
6. There has been extensive discussion over whether the term *Areopagus* refers to the judicial and administrative Council or the hill near the Acropolis from which it derives its name. Although there are good arguments on both sides, in light of the reference to Dionysius the Areopagite in 17:34, the former meaning is more likely.
7. Greg L. Bahnsen is probably correct that "Paul appeared before the Areopagus Council for a reason that probably lies somewhere between that of merely supplying requested information and that of answering to formal charges." (1980:17).
8. This follows the basic outline of Witherington III (1998: 518). With minor differences, Zweck (1989:97); Yeo, (1998:169-170). For an alternative rhetorical analysis, see Dupont (1979:539-540).
9. Cf. Yeo (1998:168-173) and Zweck (1989:95) for the view that the speech is an example of purely deliberative oratory.
10. The verb "proclaim" (*katangello*) is regularly used of apostolic preaching of the gospel in Acts

(e.g., 4:2; 13:5, 38; 15:36).

11. These include assonance (*heuron kai bomon* v 23; *zoen kai proen* v 25); alliteration (*pantos prosopou* v 26; *pistin paraschon pasin* v 31), and paronomasia (*pantas pantachou* v 30). See Yeo (1998:173).

12. The origin of the quotation in 17:28a (“In him we live and move and have our being”) is not certain, but it may be derived from a poem to Zeus attributed to Epimenides the Cretan, a figure who had some importance in Athenian religious tradition. See Hemer (1989:245-246) and the discussion in Bruce (1951:384-385). In any case, Luke assumes that it would have been a recognizable citation to Paul’s audience from their own literary heritage.

13. Contra E. Haenchen (1971:525), “The quotation...stands as proof in the same way as biblical quotations in the other speeches of Acts.”

14. Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

15. Dean Zweck is probably correct to see an ironical twist to the statement for Paul’s readers (1989:102). Paul’s distressed reaction to Athenian idolatry in 17:16 makes it clear that his audience’s religiosity is not entirely favorable.

16. While it is true that no inscription has been discovered to “an unknown god” in the singular, there is ample literary and archaeological evidence for altars for “unknown gods” in Athens. Cf. van der Horst (1994); Witherington III (1998:521-523). Bruce Winter concludes that whether Paul would have seen the title in the singular or the plural is inconsequential, since “the terms “god” and “gods” could be used interchangeably by Stoics and Epicureans in the same sentence (1992:128-129).

17. So, e.g., Panikkar (1981:168); Yeo (1998:177); cf. Sanders (1992:246, 247), who insists that “in some clearly imperfect but nonetheless genuine sense, the Athenians did worship the true God...His preaching was a success in that those who were *believers* became *Christians*” (italics mine).

18. The emphasis in the Greek syntax of 17:23b falls on the Athenians’ ignorance, not on their worship.

19. E.g., Bahnsen (1980:33-34); cf. Gärtner (1955), who stresses similarities between Paul’s Areopagus speech and Hellenistic-Jewish apologetic writings.

20. For the language of “constructive and corrective engagement,” see Larkin, 1995:85.

21. For example, Cicero in his work, *De natura decorum*, II.3, outlines the established sequence as follows: “first they prove that the gods exist; next they explain their nature; then they show that the world is governed by them; and lastly, that they care for the fortunes of mankind.” Cited in Winter (1992:131). Others see parallels to the structure and themes of Paul’s Areopagus speech in the *Olympic Oration* 12 of the Stoic Dio Chrysostom. See Balch (1990); Zweck (1989:99).

22. E.g., Epictetus, 4.7.6 (*kosmos*); Aratus, *Phaenomena* 5; cf. Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus* 4 (*genos* “offspring”); Epictetus 2.20.22 (*to theion*). See Hemer (1989:243-244) for additional references.

23. The speech's thorough critique of Stoic notions means that Jerome Neyrey's argument that Luke takes the side of the Stoics against the Epicureans does not stand (Neyrey, 1990: 127ff.). Paul finds points of contact and disagreement with both philosophical schools of thought.

24. Against Dibelius (1956:32-33), who argues for the Stoic sense of "seeking" here.

25. The construction of verse 27 seems to offer little encouragement that those who "seek" God may "find" him and be saved apart from the gospel. Conrad Gempf points out that the verb "find" is weakened in three ways: (1) by the use of the optative mood, suggesting uncertainty; (2) through its connection with the verb "groping"; i.e., "blind searching"; and (3) by the concessive clause which follows--"although he is not far" (1993a:52).

26. This counters Philipp Vielhauer's conclusion that Paul "lays claim to pagan history, culture, and religion as the prehistory of Christianity" (1966:37). For Paul, the story of the pagans in Acts 17 is not in the same category as the story of Israel in Paul's speech to the synagogue in Acts 13:16ff.

27. Compare Yeo, who thinks that this is a rhetorically subtle approach which "draws the mind of the audience to focus on the mission of Jesus" (1998:185-86).

28. Although unique in the New Testament, Ben Witherington III is correct that "[w]ithin a rhetorical argument such as this one, *pistis* here refers to a proof" (1998: 532, n. 257). Once again - the vocabulary of the speech is tailored to its educated Greek audience.

29. Due to the abbreviated nature of Luke's account of Paul's Areopagus speech, he no doubt concentrates on those elements of Paul's preaching which are distinctive to the setting and audience. See Marshall (1983:290-91); Hemer (1989:257). In view of other examples of early Christian preaching in Acts, it is likely that Paul's preaching of the resurrection in Athens was linked to his announcement of the death of Christ. It is therefore unnecessary to attribute the absence of any reference to the cross in the speech to the fact that Paul was interrupted. Against Legrand (1981:159), who calls the Areopagus speech an "unfinished symphony."

30. On Greek notions of the afterlife, see Yeo (1998:188-89); Marcus (1988:148).

31. Commentators frequently cite the report of Aeschylus that at the founding of the Areopagus, Apollo taught the Athenians that "When the dust has soaked up a person's blood, once he is dead, there is no resurrection" (*outis est' anastasis*) (*Eumenides*, 647-48; see e.g. Bruce, 1951:387).

32. It is preferable to see the statement "We will hear you again about this" (17:32b) as an expression of genuine interest rather than as a form of dismissal. See Fitzmyer (1998:612).

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

34. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke takes pains to demonstrate for his readers how the gospel was proclaimed in various key contexts and to different classes of people (Witherington III,

1998:119, n. 18). In Paul's case, Luke highlights three extended paradigmatic speeches; to Jews in a synagogue setting (Acts 13), to cultured pagans in Athens (Acts 17) and to Christian leaders in Miletus (Acts 21).

35. Others who affirm the paradigmatic character of Paul's ministry in Athens include Charles (1995:60-61); Samuel (1986:18, 29-32); Bahnsen (1980: 5, 8-9, 39-40); Fernando (1998:477-82); Proctor (1992). See especially Yeo Khiok-khng's thoughtful attempt to apply Paul's rhetorical approach in Acts 17 to a contemporary Taoist context in China (1998:190-97).

36. A brief comparison of Paul's methods of persuasion and theological emphases in Acts 17 with his speeches to a predominantly Jewish synagogue crowd in Acts 13:16-41, and even to the crowd of uncultured pagans in 14:15-17, spotlights the extent to which Paul targets his message and means of communication to his audience in Acts.

37. I take the infinitive "to seek" (*zetein*) in verse 27 as parallel to the infinitive "to dwell" in verse 26, with both expressing the purpose of God's creation.

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