



Introducing the Athenians to God: Paul's Failed Apologetic in Acts 17?

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When an early twentieth-century Archbishop of Canterbury heard that Anglicans and Methodists had joined together in a service of Holy Communion in East Africa, he declared, 'It was highly pleasing to Almighty God, but never to be done again.' Luke's succinct summary of Paul's Areopagus address has sometimes been similarly judged. As such, it is seen as a one-off, valiant

attempt at philosophical discussion concerned with *Providentia* (*de Providentia*) and *The Nature of the Gods* (*de natura Deorum*) in the sophisticated field of apologetics in the late Roman Republican and early Empire.

It is acknowledged that Paul's speech was sufficient for some of those who heard to believe and to identify with him and his gospel message. Among them was a distinguished Athenian, Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus Council, and a woman, Damaris. The former would have been a leading citizen of Athens because of his membership of its very ancient and distinguished ruling body. The woman had rank and status, and presumably was a patroness because the description of 'others who were with them both'. In view of his rank as an Areopagite, Dionysius would also have had clients accompanying him.

However, the Areopagus address is regarded in some Christian circles as a well-meaning, innovative experiment, 'highly pleasing to Almighty God'—after all it resulted in the conversion of the two distinguished Athenians and their entourage—but it was 'never to be done again'. Therefore, it has to be concluded that today Acts 17 provides no paradigm for Christian apologetics which are an essential prerequisite to evangelism.

Those who believe that this address was, in effect, a failure, support their contention by arguing that Paul himself subsequently resolved never again to attempt this approach in his ministry. They argue that, of his evangelistic endeavours at his next port of call, Paul 'determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2) in that culturally sophisticated city of Corinth.

It is concluded that even though there were converts on the day, Paul himself put the Areopagus style of evangelism behind him. He expected that others would never attempt to imitate his Athenian foray into the field of apologetics. This view of Acts 17 provides no paradigm for contemporary presentations of the Christian gospel. If that is the case it also has to be concluded that the address was recorded in Scripture simply as an interesting museum piece in the intellectual heartland of Athens and Greek culture.

Dr. Choong Chee Pang, my long-standing academic colleague and loyal friend of some thirty-five years successfully defended his doctoral dissertation in Aberdeen University in 1977. It was called 'Doctrinal and exegetical issues in the Hindu-Christian debate during the nineteenth Bengal renaissance, with special reference to Paul's teaching on the religions of the nations'.

It indicates not only the early scope of his widely creative reflections but it epitomized his great concern to engage Asian cultures, including his own, with a credible presentation of the gospel. His was an innovative approach that sought to find a biblical bridge for Christian apologetics by using the Aeropagus address as a touchstone for his dissertation. It was to influence the shape of his distinguished ministry. Can what has been concluded by some of Acts 17 also be said of his work? Should his dissertation also be regarded simply as an interesting academic museum piece because it was based on a 'never to be repeated' foray of Paul into the world of ancient philosophical apologetics? Is his apologetic approach flawed?

The purpose of this honorific essay is to refute any such suggestion of failure on Paul's part in Athens, or that Acts 17 provides no biblical pattern for our contemporary interactions with the philosophical or religious views of others for gospel presentations. A biblical approach to Christian engagement with the non-Christian world requires a number of clear elements.

It is proposed to explore (I) Paul's important point of contact with the Athenian audience; (II) his correction of their misconception about introducing his God to Athens; (III) his conversing with the religious views of his hearers; (IV) his critique of their compromise with worship in temples, and (V) his call for them to repent. It will be argued that Paul's approach, in principal, presents a paradigm for evangelists, preachers and teachers alike in their task to herald the kingdom and the call to repentance for this generation as the alternative to facing Jesus' judgement for unrighteous conduct.

I. Connecting with the Athenians situation, Acts 17:19-20

First, what did the Athenians perceive Paul to be doing as he 'dialogued' with Jews, god-fearers and 'those who chanced to be there' in the Greek civic centre or Agora (17:17)? Luke indicates that some hearers felt he was 'a charlatan'.^[1] Others said, 'He appears to be a herald of foreign deities'. Luke explains their justification for the latter perception in the following statement—'because he was proclaiming Jesus and 'the resurrection'(*ten anastasin*) (17:18).^[2]

In the time of Augustus the term 'herald' (*katangeleus*) was used of a priest of the imperial cult and also of the herald of the Areopagus who appeared on the archon-list and held the official seal of the city Athens.^[3] In addition, it had long been used to describe the person who announced to the Athenians the existence of a new divinity.

The task of the heralds of new divinities

R. Garland in his book *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* indicates what the divinity's herald needed to secure his god's recognition.

A convenient forum in which to advertise the benefits of a new god and hence to drum up popular support would have been a public meeting place such as the Agora, the civic, administrative and commercial heart of the city and a popular venue for all those who wished to exchange ideas...^[4]

Following this comment Garland refers to Acts 17:17 and notes in passing that 'Paul argued...in the Agora every day....Subsequently the apostle was invited to present his case more formally on the hill known as the Areopagus—or alternatively before the administrative body of that name.'^[5] Because the period covered by Garland ends with evidence up to 399 B.C. with the trial of Socrates who was accused of introducing new

deities to that city, he does not pursue the implications of Paul heralding 'Jesus and "Resurrection"' as 'foreign gods' in Athens. However, he does link it with the long-established convention.

One of the long-established tasks of the Council of the Areopagites was to examine the proofs that a herald might offer in support of his claim that a new deity existed. That role continued into the Roman period. If the Council were so persuaded, then the god or goddess would be admitted to the Parthenon. A dedicated temple would be built to the divinity, an annual feast day endowed and included in the Athenians' religious calendar. Furthermore, in this 'land most dear to the gods'[6] the approval or disapproval of a new god in Athens set the precedent for other Greek cities well beyond Athens' imperial period and into Roman times.[7]

There is evidence of a number of 'foreign' divinities who made it up to the Parthenon in the period covered by Garland's book.[8] In the first century B.C. significant politico-religious changes occurred in Athens with its conquest by the Romans. 'The Panathenaia was renamed Antonaia and dedicated to him [Mark Anthony] as qeo;" nevo" Diovnuso".[9] After Julius Caesar's assassination the imperial cult in the East grew rapidly from the time of Augustus onwards. Not only were deceased emperors deified but reigning ones as well. Sometimes their wives and members of their families were also deified. In Athens itself during Tiberius' reign c. A.D. 18-37, Antonia Augusta, the living grandmother of the future emperor, Claudius, was declared the 'goddess, Antonia'.[10]

While still alive, Nero and Messallina his wife were added to the 'traditional gods' in cities in the East.[11] An inscription records Nero's speech delivered at Corinth on 29th November, A.D. 67. As a result of its privileges conferred on Greece, the decree was made by 'the magistrates and councillors and the people...to erect statues of Nero Zeus the Liberator and the goddess Augusta Messallina...to share with our ancestral gods' in the city of Acraephia.[12] The formal resolution had been put forward by Epaminondas, a priest of Augustus, to 'the Council' for this new god and goddess to share the temple of Ptoian Apollo which housed that city's traditional divinities.

Introducing Imperial Gods and Goddesses and the Areopagus

An Athenian inscription in the same period reads, 'Tiberius Claudius Herodes of Marathon, priest and high-priest of Nero Caesar Augustus for life, made this dedication to Dionysius [Zeus] the Liberator and Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus and the Council of the Areopagus and the Council of the 600 and the people of Athenians from his own resources when Tiberius Claudius Novius was general of the hoplites for the seventh time.'[13]

This dedication to Nero by the high-priest of the imperial cult was linked to the divine Dionysius, the Liberator.[14] It was also dedicated to the Council of the Areopagus. Another Athenian inscription links the imperial goddess with the traditional instruments of government in Athens, 'Julia divine Augusta Providence; the Council of the Areopagus and the Council of the 600 and the People dedicated [it]'.[15]

It is the same in the case of 'Julia Augusta Bouleae mother of Tiberius Augustus, the council of the Areopagus [dedicated it]'. [16] This statue, located near the Council chamber, was of the deceased Livia, his mother in her guise as Julia Augusta. Erected after A.D. 40 it shows that yet another goddess has been 'added' to those in Athens. [17] For S. Alcock this is another example of assimilation. [18] T. D. Barnes concludes that, 'The Areopagus seems to be the effective government of Roman Athens and its chief court. As such, like the imperial Senate in Rome, it could interfere in any aspect of corporate life—education, philosophical lectures, public morality, *foreign cults* [including the imperial cult]. [19]

He then surprisingly comments, 'Hence there is no need to suppose that the Areopagus had special "surveillance over the introduction of foreign divinities" in order to interest itself in Paul.' He adds in a footnote 'As appears to be implied by Geagan'. His citing of Geagan is somewhat misleading, for he himself stated categorically, 'The account of Paul's speech before the Areopagus illustrates its surveillance over the introduction of foreign divinities.' [20]

Athens had its own particular instruments of government—first-century official inscriptions refer to 'The Council of the Areopagus and the Council of the 600 and the People'. [21] The 'chief magistrate' [22] together with the Council, would have been responsible for bringing forward the name of the member of the imperial family whose divinity was to be recognized on the agenda of the assembly for approval by the People.

The Areopagus and the introduction of Paul's God

The Areopagus was the initial legal instrument in the process of the admission of new imperial gods and goddesses. The imperial high-priest may have been the person who moved the motion, as the case in the city of Acraephia. However, the Council of the Areopagus was the body responsible for initiating action for the assimilation of yet another new god into the Pantheon. The view that the Areopagus had no interest in Paul's role as a herald of new gods is in conflict with evidence from the official inscriptions of Athens. The statement in 17:19 that 'they brought him to the Areopagus' relates to this legal instrument and not an Athenian location. While it has become customary among New Testament scholars to see this body having very little power, evidence from official Athenian inscriptions testifies to the fact that, in the first century, it had a very substantial role in the civic and religious affairs of Athens. [23]

What action did these Athenians take on the basis of their perception of Paul as a divine herald? Acts 17:19a records that 'they [some of the Stoics and Epicureans] took him to [the Council of] the Areopagus' (17:19a). The next sentence is usually translated 'they [the members of the Areopagus] said, "May we know what this new doctrine is that you are propounding?"' (*dunametha gnwvai tis h kainh hauth h hupo sou kakoumenh*

didachh). However another rendering of the Greek is more accurate when key words in this sentence are translated in the semantic domain of legal language. Paul was not simply being asked to provide an explanation, but rather the Council was informing him of its long-standing responsibility 'we possess a legal right to judge what this new teaching is that is being spoken by you'.[24]

In the next verse the members of the Areopagus Council explain their reason for making their assessment of the message he has been proclaiming in the Greek agora. The normal translation is 'for you are bringing certain strange things to our ears: we would therefore know what these things mean'. The reference to 'certain strange things' is to 'foreign deities'. On the basis of the meaning of *gnwnai* in legal language in v. 19, the sentence can read, 'We therefore wish to make a judgement (*gnwnai*) on what you claim these things are'.

The tone of the sentences is polite, for this was no prosecution but a preliminary meeting of Council members with Paul after it was reported that he appeared to be heralding new divinities in the Agora. They knew that, if he gained popular support in Athens, they could be persuaded to give a rightful place to his deities in the Athenian Pantheon.

Their courteous approach was in keeping with the fact that the herald would normally be a person of status. He would also need to be a man of considerable financial means to buy a site, construct a temple with an altar for sacrifices and also provide a substantial benefaction for a least an annual dinner to honour the deity. It might involve provision for support for any cultic officials.

The initial hearing in Acts 17 as a whole reflects sensitivity to an issue that is not merely of religious but also of political import, indeed such a distinction could never be validly made in Athens.[25] This was no court case. It was one that sought to ascertain whether there really had been an epiphany of the divinity or divinities; if so, what official recognition should be given, what divine honours and statues would be appropriate and when would be the annual official feast day be. Paul's God had to be 'properly' introduced to Athens, if He was going to be properly worshipped.

II. Correcting Athenian misconceptions

First, Paul's 'introduction' (*exordium*) in v. 23a to his formal presentation before a properly convened meeting of the Areopagus Council brought an unexpected element into the hearing. Paul indicates that he was not there to prove the existence of any 'new' divinity in Athens. The fact was that they had recognized the existence of this divinity in Athens, for they had already erected an altar to Him, 'the unknown God' (*agnwstw thew*).[26]

First, the argument among New Testament scholars as to whether there was or was not an actual inscription in the singular term 'God' is misplaced. Those among the hearers who were Stoics and Epicureans would have no difficulty with the use of the singular for 'God' or 'gods'. In a single sentence they could use the singular and plural interchangeably. Diogenes Laertius records that '...worshippers of God...have acquaintance with the rites of the gods...how to serve the gods'.[27] What would take them by surprise would not be the inscription on the altar but rather Paul's affirmation that he was not proclaiming a new divinity for the Athenians.[28] Rather he reminds them that he was going to tell them what this God whom 'you [officially] venerate (*eusebeite*) as unknown' is like.

Second, there would be no need for a parcel of land to be secured by the herald to erect a temple dedicated to this divinity as Athenian custom requires because Paul asserts that this God 'does not dwell in sanctuaries (*vaoi*) made with hands', v. 24b.

Third, there will be no obligatory feast day required for Him in the Athenian's annual religious calendar with the offering up of animal sacrifices. Paul asserts 'He has no need of anything, because it is He who gives life and breath and all things to all of his creation', v. 25. The 'unknown' God does not need anything from the Athenians because He provides everything the Athenians need, including their life and the sustenance, and not only for them but for all of the created order. He is indeed the 'Lord of heaven and earth'.

Fourth, it would have come as a shock to all present to be told that the proud Athenians were not superior to the rest of mankind. As has been noted, they were 'the only Greeks on the European mainland who had a tradition that their ancestors had come from Greece' for they were 'autochthonous'—'sprung from the soil of their native Attica'. [29] This deity however was the creator of all and he ruled in the nations of the earth and blessed them. Athenians had no special prerogatives or were not racially superior. Their seasons and boundaries had been set by God, as had all the nations of the earth—possibly a reminder of their past empire and its present reluctant incorporation into Rome's vast empire by conquest. [30]

Fifth, the formal apologetic provided information about the imminence of this new divinity for whom approval was to be sought for admission to the Athenian pantheon by the People on the recommendation of this Council. 'He is not far from each one of us', a statement that was confirmed by their divinely inspired poets: 'in him we live and move and have our being', wrote Epimenides, the Cretan, v. 27. Furthermore, because the poets were seen to speak definitively, the citation 'For we are also his offspring', [31] rules out any inanimate configuration of this living and life-giving deity replicated in 'gold or silver, graven by art and device of man', vv. 28-9. Idol worship was incompatible with this belief.

Sixth, Paul's God did not now need to be formally introduced and added to the Pantheon of Athens, for His existence was already acknowledged by the Athens. In fact this divinity was not looking for authorization from the assembled gathering. Rather He was seeking the repentance of all, having already fixed the day of the assize, determined the ground rules on which it would be conducted, and He had already appointed the judge for that purpose, vv. 30-1.

Seventh, what further proof was being offered that this would happen? There was not an epiphany of the God that was usually sought. Paul did not provide evidence of his own encounter, i.e., his epiphany on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:5-6, which he repeated in Acts 22:6-16 and 26:9-16. Rather he cites the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the 'proof' (*pistis*) given by this deity to all mankind, v. 31b. That they mocked him at this point is explicable, because the august Council of the Areopagites had been founded on these words: 'When a man dies, the earth drinks up his blood. There is no resurrection (*anastasis*).' [32] Paul here contradicted the very principle on which this ruling body of Athens had been established to judge those guilty of crimes. They believed that offenders could not be left for judgement in the afterlife because there was no resurrection from the dead. So judgement had to be passed before the death of the accused. This had been the traditional remit of the Areopagus until the coming of Rome when matters of a criminal nature were transferred to the jurisdiction of the governor of the province. Little wonder they mocked, v. 32.

The Athenian audience who had cast Paul in the role of a herald seeking to introduce new deities to Athens would have realized at this point in the speech that it was neither he nor his 'God' who were seeking to secure their official *imprimatur*. Rather Paul was announcing that a judicial role that they had traditionally fulfilled was suddenly reversed. God in his mercy was now seeking their repentance so that they could avoid the future, predetermined day of judgement by the resurrected and designated judge, Jesus, before whom personal 'righteousness' would be the standard of judgement. When He died, the earth did not drink up His blood; now they had to decide whether they would one day stand in the dock. Paul and his God were not under scrutiny—but they would be unless they repented.

III. Conversing with the theological framework of the hearers

In Acts 17 there are five important affirmations about this 'knowable' God. First, on the subject of God and the created order: God 'made the world and everything in it, being Himself Lord of heaven and earth...gives life and breath and all things to all his creation', 17: 24-5.

Second, on God and the nations: God 'determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their [the nations'] habitations and 'the times of ignorance (of all the nations) therefore God overlooked', 17:26, 30.

Third, on God and general revelation: In the Athenian speech there is also the signal from God, (*cf.* Ps. 19) that they should 'seek after God, if haply they might feel after him, and find him', 17:27.

Fourth, on God and religious pluralism: The pluralistic perception of divinity is criticized by means of an argument based on their own poets—"For we are also his offspring". Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the godhead is like gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man', 17:28-29.

Fifth, On God and repentance: the judge, the day and the standard of judgement are all fixed. In his great mercy God calls all people everywhere to repent because that is the only way to avoid that day, and the proof that is coming is the resurrection of Jesus from among the dead, vv. 31-2.

Paul's audience in Athens consisted of representatives of two philosophical schools, the Stoics and the Epicureans, (v. 18). Luke intended to signal to his readers that Paul was engaging the minds of an audience whose religious beliefs were articulated on the basis of their philosophical theism, as the following discussion will show.

In the case of the Stoics, Paul addresses them in their heartland. It was in this very same Agora where he was now speaking that Zeno (335-263 B.C.), its founder, established his school in the south-west stoa. Recent essays have sought to argue that Paul is actually presenting orthodox Stoicism in the Athenian speech.[33] Indeed, it has been suggested that he is arguing for the legitimate tradition of this philosophy, and doing so in the face of contemporary Stoics in the audience whose interest in 'new things' has resulted from a *rapprochement* with popular religion in the development of post-Posidonius Stoicism (c. 135—c. 51-52 B.C.). It included a 'defence of temples and explanation of religious images and temples'—Dio Chrysostom's Olympian oration, 'On Man's First Conception of God' delivered before an ancient statue of Zeus c. A.D. 101 provides such an example.[34]

The Natural Theology of Stoicism

In seeking to understand the nature of Paul's bridge-building with his audience as well as his refutation of their practices as critical points, five points need to be noted about Stoicism.

First, his speech may have consciously followed sections of the standard presentation of the nature of divinity used by the Stoics. Balbus' debate with opposing schools of philosophy c. 77–78 B.C. presents a standard Stoic *apologia* on the immortality of the gods—(*De natura deorum*). He stated that there was an established sequence in the presentation of their case.

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.[35]

The summary in Acts 17 assumes their belief in God's existences and His role as the creator of the world who is Lord of heaven and earth, (v. 24a). It affirms He gives life and all things to all his creation, (v. 25b). His providential care is intrinsically bound up with the needs of all mankind, (v. 26). Paul developed his theme on the nature of the known God thus. Traditional Christian apologetics has long continued this approach as Greek 'natural theology' did then.

Second, the Stoics would not have been concerned that Paul used the term 'God' and not 'gods'. As has been recently remarked, there is 'a curious feature of the language in which Cicero [who records the debate of Balbus] expressed the Stoic position, namely the shifting back and forth from talk about 'God' to 'gods'—a common feature as other sources record. 'God is one but called by many popular names'.[36] Cleanthes, who succeeded Zeno as head of the Stoic school, wrote his hymn to Zeus which likewise expressed this interchangeable use of the terms.

Of gods most glorious, known by many names,

Power supreme, O Lord of Nature's changes,

Law—giving pilot of the universe,

I hail you, Zeus, with whom there is no man

Forbidden converse: we are of your race;

Of all the beasts that live and walk the earth

Only we have a semblance of thy reason.[37]

Balbus also presents the Stoic's view on the existence of the God/gods without any *apologia*—'the main issue is agreed among all men of all nations, inasmuch as all have engraved in the minds an innate belief that the gods exist'. He cites with approval Chrysippus' arguments for God's existence and the latter's conclusion 'therefore God exists', II. 13, 16.

While the Stoics were comfortable with the interchangeable use of the terms 'God' and 'gods', Paul would not have been. An ambiguity had already arisen in the minds of his hearers in the agora in Athens when he was perceived by his audience to be proclaiming 'foreign deities', viz. 'Jesus and Anastasis', (17:18). His communication of his message could only be undertaken by discussing specifically the nature of God.

Third, the Stoic perception concerning the nature of 'God' did not necessarily make him personal but rather pantheistic. Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and Posidonius declared with Zeno 'the substance of God (*ousian theou*) to be the whole world and the heavens.' [38]

Fourth, in the Athenian speech there are important resonances with the Stoic view of providence. This may well have been Paul's most important bridge with that segment of his audience. Balbus sets out what he sees as the Stoic thesis that 'the world is ruled by divine providence...of the gods', 'only familiarity blinds us to nature's marvels', #95. For him providential government of the world can be inferred firstly, from divine wisdom and power, #76–80, secondly, from the nature of the world, #81–97, thirdly from a detailed review of the wonders of nature, #98–153, and fourthly from the care of man, #162.

The providential care of men is based on the thesis that 'all the things in this world...have been created and provided for the sake of men' and 'the things that it contains were provided and contrived for the enjoyment of men', #154. The sun and moon are seen to contribute to the 'maintenance and structure of the world and the seasons and the bounty of the earth have, been given for him', #156. Balbus argues, 'Why should I speak of the teeming swarm of delicious fish...which affords us so much pleasure that our Stoic Providence appears to have been a disciple of Epicurus?'. And then he states that 'an abundance of commodities were created for men's use and which men alone discover', #162.

The Stoic doctrine was not restricted to mankind in general but applied as much to individuals.

Nor is the care and providence of the immortal gods bestowed only upon the human race in its entirety, but is also wont to be extended to individuals. We may narrow down the entirety of the human race and bring it gradually down to smaller and smaller groups, and finally to single individuals, #164.

Seneca the Younger, (c. A.D. 1–65) who was a contemporary of Paul and brother of Gallio, develops this point in an important discussion in *De Providentia* written during Claudius' reign. This work which is Stoic in essence but tempered by his experience of life and mellowed by eclecticism, seeks to answer a question raised by a friend, Lucilius, a procurator of Sicily—'why, if a Providence rules the world, it still happens that many evils befall good men?' Seneca makes it clear that he would prefer to place this question within a more coherent framework i.e., the traditional Stoic treatment of the nature of God proving 'that a Providence does preside over the universe, and that God concerns himself with us'. He continues with an immediate reference to 'gods' and uses the terms interchangeably in this letter in true Stoic tradition, #1.

Not only does he argue that the sufferings of the just are consistent with Providence, but he speaks of God as 'father'—like a teacher who tests just men with hardship. It would be easy to draw the conclusion that Seneca believes in a personal God and therefore represents normative first-century Stoicism. He dealt with subjects such as God, prayer, divine justice and immortality and was able 'to invest with emotions ideas and concepts which are in themselves [for Stoics] impersonal and unexciting'. [39] However it has been shown that his characteristic method was to work from the premise of the recipient of his letter and to develop a more orthodox Stoic view as he proceeded. [40]

After a careful analysis of the basic contrast between Paul and Seneca on this point, it has rightly been concluded that 'Seneca is in the last resort not serious when he speaks of the personal god'. [41] However, there would have been sufficient common ground to provide the necessary bridge in his Athenian topic had Paul met Seneca. [42]

The impact of Stoicism then, is to be found not only in the general structure of Paul's presentation, but also in the discussion on providence. 'God who made the world and things in it'. He has made from one all the nations of earth to dwell on all the face of the earth...He Himself gives life and breath and all things to all...having determined their appointed seasons and the bounds of their habitation, #17:24a, 25-26a.

It must be noted that, when Stoics discussed God's providence it tended to be 'impersonal'. Gerson warns that 'Virtually all of the Stoic theological language must be transposed to take account of their physics. Divine providence is here just the contribution of particular laws and parts of the cosmos to the whole'.^[43] There was a crucial difference between Paul's doctrine of God's providence and that of the Stoics.

Fifth, the theme of judgement found common ground between Paul and his Stoic audience.

It can be concluded, in seeking to understand how the Stoics understand Paul, that he followed the traditional outline of the Stoics when presenting their apologetic on the existence and nature of His God.

Providence provided an important link and it was here that he was able to find significant common ground as he moved to his thesis on the knowable God and Jesus and his resurrection. Paul carefully presents his argument on the issue of idols not overtly from the Old Testament, but by using citations from their own poets against them. The theme of judgement was part of Stoic philosophy. However, they were being called upon to repent because the Stoics had compromised their beliefs by tolerating idolatry.

The Natural Theology of the Epicureans

This speech also addressed the adherents of Epicurean philosophy whose 'code of behaviour' dealing with happiness was spelt out in the forty famous epitomes of its founder.^[44]

First, the cardinal truth Epicurus declared in a letter to Menoeceus was 'First believe that God is living, immortal and blessed'. He proceeded to encourage his reader to believe this and that they were 'not to affirm anything that is foreign to his immortality or that agrees not with blessedness, but believe about him whatever upholds both his blessedness and immortality'.^[45] As Paul uses all these terms elsewhere of God, *viz*, he is a living God (1 Thess. 1:9), he is immortal (Rom. 1:23) and he is 'the blessed God' (1 Tim. 1:11), there would have been an agreement by the Epicureans in the audience with what Paul said.

Second, Epicurus believed that the knowledge of the divinity was clear to all; he said that it was 'according to the notion of God indicated by the common sense of mankind. For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest'.^[46] Although just as with the Stoics there was the interchange of terminology of 'God' and 'gods', there would again have been a starting point with the Epicureans when Paul declared that the character of the unknown God could be known.

Third, there would have been a consensus between Paul and the Epicureans that God does not live in man-made temples. For the latter, the dwelling place of God or the gods was not this earth—divinity was far removed from it and lived in perfection. The Epicureans were notionally opposed to all forms of superstition. They discussed 'the

interior, psychological effects of improper belief and demeaning practice, which characterize what they consider to be superstition'.[47]

Fourth, both they and Paul would have been in full agreement that God has no need of anything, (v. 25a), because the Epicureans also held that 'God had no need of human things'.[48]

There were, however, clearly philosophical and practical departure points for Paul with the Epicureans who denied that 'God's providential relationship with the world entertains a just judgement of mortals, especially a judgement that takes place after death, where rewards and punishments are allotted'.[49] Epicurus in his 'catechism' affirmed that 'Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling and that which has no feelings is nothing to us'. He taught elsewhere, 'Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us.'[50]

While Paul may have had far greater areas of agreement with the Stoics, consensus on four doctrines is sufficient to reject Neyrey's thesis that Luke has Paul siding with the Stoics against his stereotype Epicureans.[51]

IV. Convicting the Stoics and Epicureans of their compromise

Their attitude to popular cults was pragmatic, for it did not follow from their philosophical teaching. It has been argued that early Stoicism was opposed to the worship of idols and the erection of temples, but in the post-Posidonius period, and certainly by the early Roman empire, it assimilated the practices of popular piety.[52] It is questionable whether this is correct. Both pagan and Christian apologists drew attention to Zeno's comments on popular piety.

Plutarch (A.D. c. 50–c. 120) declared that Zeno's teaching was not to construct temples 'because a temple not worth much is also sacred and no work of builders and mechanics is worth much'. Clement of Alexandria, a second century Christian apologist also refers to this, citing Zeno's *Republic* as the source: 'we ought to make neither temples nor images; for that no work is worthy of the gods.'[53]

Diogenes Laertius notes that Zeno in the *Republic* 'at line 200 prohibits the building of temples, law courts and gymnasia in cities'.[54] Attridge, commenting on these texts, suggests that 'there is some evidence that this was done in the early years of the school, although the classical Stoic position was one of accommodation to ordinary cult and beliefs', citing Balbus in *De natura deorum* II in support of the latter.[55]

Balch cites a comment of Posidonius found in Strabo in support of the view that he, like the founder of the Stoic school, also believed that 'the Greeks were wrong in modelling gods in human form'.[56] However, as Balch himself points out, this citation comes from Posidonius' *History* in which he describes Jewish views on idolatry. He therefore rightly comments, 'In this text, Posidonius's opposition to images of the gods may be reflected in his description of Moses.'[57] There do not seem to be grounds from the extant citations of Posidonius to support the view that Paul represented Zeno's 'orthodoxy' on the issue of images. His contemporary, Balbus, who incidentally cites Posidonius, provides an apology for Stoic participation in the popular religion.

...though we repudiate these myths with contempt, we shall nevertheless be able to understand the personality and the nature of the divinities pervading the substance of the several elements, Ceres permeating earth, Neptune the sea and so on; and it is our duty

to revere and worship these gods under the names which custom has bestowed upon them, II. 71.

The Stoic self-contradiction, as Plutarch pointed out, was that they 'attend the mysteries in the temples, go up to the Acropolis, do reverence to statues, and place wreaths upon the shrines, though these were the works of builders and mechanics'.[58]

Epicurus himself had believed that popular piety was not correct—'For the utterances of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions,'#124. In spite of this commonly held conviction among Epicureans, there was no endeavour to dissociate their adherents from the popular cultic activities. While a mid-first century A.D. Epicurean treatise declares that the proof of piety could not be measured by offering up sacrifices, one was free to do so.

It is of course open to you to offer sacrifices to the gods...you conform in some sense to religious traditions. Only be careful that you do not permit any admixture of fear of the gods or of the supposition that in acting as you do you are winning the favour of the gods.[59]

There certainly are no grounds for affirming that Paul appealed to 'Posidinius' tradition' on the matter of images.[60] It would seem that the compromise with the popular cult was established at the time of Posidonius and Balbus who were contemporaries. Paul's argument was not, in fact, based on such an appeal, but rather on the poetic sentiment, 'For we are also his offspring', (v. 28). From this he deduced in the following verse. 'Being therefore the offspring of God we compelled not to think that the Deity is like gold,...', given that his audience conceded that the premise of their poets was correct.

Both philosophical schools had adopted the principle of accommodation of their beliefs with popular religion for their followers to conform in some sense to contemporary religious traditions. The notional caveats they provided for their adherents enabled the latter to participate in cultic activities. They show the uneasy but necessary compromise that they felt they had to reach with it. Stoicism and Epicureanism in the imperial period had to endorse religious pluralism if they were to maintain their following, given participation in the imperial cult as one of the ways of affirming their loyalty to the empire.

Paul's affirmations about the activity of God in creation and his providence in the Athenian speech were clearly taught in the Old Testament. For example, in Isaiah 40:12 this God is 'the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth'. It is He who 'has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance' (*cf.*, vv. 28 and 15, 22, 26). There is a ready resonance if not a direct connection with Jeremiah 5:24 —'Let us now fear the Lord our God, who gives rain for the former and the latter, in its season; who reserves for us the appointed weeks of the harvest.' Psalm 50:9-12 declares that God owns all his creation.[61]

Paul had found important common ground between certain beliefs in Stoicism and the Old Testament in his speech. He was not borrowing his theology from the philosophical schools for pragmatic purposes. His knowledge of their belief systems enabled him to see where there was a confluence with the oracles of God.

IV. Confronting the Athenian audience

To declare, as Paul did, that God had previously 'overlooked' their idolatry 'but now called upon all men everywhere to repent', had political ramifications for this philosophically orientated audience in Athens. Paul explained that the 'now' was because God had appointed a day of judgement, a judge, and the canon of judgement. Escape from it involved repentance, including the renunciation of the worship of idols and the pluralism which that implied.

To have declared this, would signal an inevitable confrontation with Athenian policy on imperial religion. From the death of Julius Caesar onwards the incorporation of living and deceased emperors into the pantheon and their veneration became part of the imperial political strategy.[62] In the city of Aphrodisias, the magnificent Sebasteion of the emperors leading to the temple of Aphrodite, who, as Venus, was said to be the mother of the imperial family, shows how loyalty to the emperors was closely linked with religious pluralism; and Athens was no different.[63]

Did the herald's defence of the existence and nature of this divinity meet the expectations of the Areopagus Council? Those who came as the assessors suddenly found they were being confronted with having to face the fact that there will be a divine assessment of their lives. It was a speech that so engaged the minds of the hearers that 'some mocked', others were not so dismissive and left saying 'We will hear you again about this,' (v. 32b). Others believed, (v. 34).

V. Summary and implications

The strategies Paul adopted in Acts 17 provide the paradigm for contemporary Christian interactions with the minds of non-Christians. Connecting with the hearers, correcting their misconceptions, conversing with the theological or ideological framework, convicting them of their compromises with their consciences in the light of their own intellectual commitment are critical steps. It is also necessary to confront them with their need of repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because of the coming day of judgement. These are all essential features of a dialogue that is distinctly Christian and biblical.

However, what is to be said about Paul's determination in 1 Corinthians 2:2 'to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified'? There, he confronts the convention in Roman colonies where the orator who was speaking in that city was required to speak on the topic nominated from the audience. The presentation was to be a model of sophisticated oratory and erudite wisdom and had to contain the three proofs laid down by Aristotle, namely, acting out the part he was playing, playing on the emotions of the audience and providing the rhetorical proofs justifying the claims. Paul of course rejected this as he did not want the hearers' faith to be placed in the wisdom of the speaker but in the power of God; hence his comment in 2:2.[64] There is no conflict between the Areopagus theme of repentance or judgement by Jesus and Paul's Corinthian theme of Jesus and Him crucified.

In past decades some of our Asian brothers and sisters have been tempted to follow 'the latest method' of their evangelical colleagues in the West who promote the latest 'one' way to engage the non-Christian world regardless of the cultural and religious inheritance. For example in 1960's there were 'the crusades'—the very term being highly offensive in some Asian contexts, given the never-to-be-forgotten legacy inflicted by the Crusaders at the beginning of the second millennium. The 'four spiritual laws' in the 1970's were promoted as the way forward but were largely unintelligible to the thought world of the Chinese Diaspora, not least of all to those with a Chinese education, with 'ego on the throne', etc. There are more recent examples of *the* latest method. When judged

alongside the content of the Areopagus address, how foreign to the hearers and how faithful are they to the pattern laid down for us in Acts 17? Embracing the latest 'method' to emerge from the West has never been the approach of our esteemed colleague. His own doctoral dissertation using Acts 17 has been a touchstone that prevented him from uncritically adopting the latest 'wave' to come East.

If the theme of the 'unknown God' was the centre of apologetics in Athens, then the 'forgotten God' could well be an important point of contact in the Chinese context. Up to the very end of the dynasties in China, successive emperors offered up an annual sacrifice in the Forbidden City in the 'hall of prayer for good harvest' (*qí nián diàn*) that was devoid of any image. The god also recorded in ancient Chinese classics as the creator and sustainer of heaven and earth was venerated by the succession of emperors, but forgotten by others in a world of religious pluralism. This points to a not dissimilar situation in Athens with its altar to the 'unknown God'.

In the light of his doctoral thesis and his knowledge of the Chinese classics, one can see our colleague declaring in the Chinese academy and elsewhere, the nature of this God who has been forgotten. The address could readily be based on Paul's discourse concerning the nature of God but replicated in Chinese garb.[65] He can move with ease into the Indian context as well. Like Paul, he resolved in his ministry to 'become all things to all men that by all means he might save some', 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. That is true not only of the rich intellectual tradition of his own culture in which he has immersed himself and which he enhanced with postgraduate studies in the University of Oxford, but also the others in which he has studied.

In an era of not unjustified suspicion about the nature of dialogue endorsed by many from the Western church, our brother's own position has always been crystal clear and always courteously put. No dialogue can be called 'Christian' that does not possess the five elements expressed in Acts 17. So Paul's sermon in Athens was highly pleasing to Almighty God and these essential elements are to be repeated if we are to win the hearts and the minds of our contemporaries who need to believe the gospel.

[1]He was a rag-bag collector of scraps of learning.

[2]F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester and Grand Rapids: IVP and Eerdmans, 1993), p. 377 'they might have thought that Anastasis was a new-fangled goddess'. *Contra* K. L. McKay, 'Foreign Gods identified in Acts 17:18?' *TynB*. 45.2 (1994), p. 411 who argued that 'Paul would not have introduced the idea of resurrection...by means of the abstract noun, anastasis' on the grounds that he does not use it thus elsewhere in his letters and that he was unlikely to have used in an abstract form here'. It is difficult however to escape the implications of the reference to foreign 'gods' followed as it is by 'because' (*hoti*).

[3]On the use of this term, see *OGIS* 456 which is a Mytilenean decree in honour of divine Augustus and discussion in D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987) I.1, p. 172. On the herald of the Areopagus see *IG* ii/iv2 83 and discussion in D. J. Geagan, *The Athenian Constitution after Sulla*, *Hesperia Supplement* xii (Princeton: American School at Athens, 1967), xiif., 24ff.

[4]R. Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1992), pp. 18-19.

[5]Garland, *Introducing New Gods*, p. 19.

[6]Aeschylus, *Eumeniaes* 869.

[7]Garland, *Introducing New Gods*, p. 8.

[8]Garland, *Introducing New Gods*, chs. 1-7.

[9]D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), I. p. 48.

[10]*IG*, II/III2 5095, N. Kokkinos, *Antonia Augusta: Portrait of a Great Roman Lady* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 98.

[11]*SIG*3, 814.

[12]*SIG*3, 814 ll. 29-30, 44-51 (28th Nov., A.D. 67).

[13]*IG*, II/III2 3182. J. H. Oliver, *The Athenian Expounders of the Sacred and Ancestral Law* (1950), pp. 82-3.

[14]In Athens another inscription designates Nero as the 'New Apollo'. 'To Emperor Nero Caesar Augustus, New Apollo', *IG* ii/iii2 3278.

[15]*IG* ii/iii2 3238.

[16]*L'Année épigraphique*,. 1938, 83.

[17]T. D. Barnes, 'An Apostle on Trial' *JTS* XX (1969), p.

[18]S.E. Alcock, *Graecia Capta: The Landscapes of Roman Greece* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1993) 195.

[19]'An Apostle on Trial' *JTS* XX (1969), p. 413.

[20]Geagan, *The Athenian Constitution after Sulla*, citation 50. Barnes noted, and indeed used, Geagan's work as an important treatment of the constitution of Athens after Sulla (138-78 B.C.).

[21]E.g. *OGIS*, 428, *SEG* xxi, 742, *IG*, II/III2 3182.

[22]On role of Areopagus and the *archwn* see D.J. Geagan, *The Athenian Constitution after Sulla*, *Hesperia Supplement* xii (Princeton: American School at Athens, 1967), xiif., pp. 24ff.

[23]On its earlier role see R. W. Wallace, *The Areopagus Council to 307 B.C.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) and D. W. J. Gill, 'Achaia' in edd. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Paternoster and Eerdmans, 1994), p. 447.

[24]Cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 14:24 'we shall not be able to judge (*dunhsometha gnwnai*) between the free man and the slave', although in this case it relates more to a matter of outward appearance.

[25]Barnes, 'An Apostle on Trial' pp. 407-19; p. 419 suggested that Paul seems to have been put on trial in Athens, suggesting that this theory 'possesses intrinsic plausibility', but he felt that it was a 'clearly impossible task of providing proof positive'.

[26]For Athenian altar-inscriptions see *IG II, III.* 4960-5020, and literary evidence see Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.1.4, 'altars to gods called "unknown"' (*agnwstwn*), Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, vi.3.5, and Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers*, I.110.

[27]Diogenes Laertius, *Zeno VII*, 119. Paul was not, as Barnes 'An Apostle on Trial' *JTS XX* (1969), p. 418, suggested 'using the sophistical trick of slightly misrepresenting the evidence in his own favour'.

[28]Barnes 'An Apostle on Trial' *JTS XX* (1969), p. 418 'Paul replies that his audience already acknowledges his God'.

[29]F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (London and Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962), p. 357, n. 44.

[30]See edd. M.C. Hoff and S.I. Rotroff, *The Romanization of Athens* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1997).

[31]Cf. Aratus, *Phainomena* 5 and Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus* 4

[32]Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 647-8.

[33]A. J. Malherbe, "'Not in a Corner": Early Christian Apologetic in Acts 26:26' Paul and the Popular Philosophers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 152 and D. L. Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech: An Appeal to the Stoic *Historica Posidonius* against Later Stoics and the Epicureans' D. L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W. Meeks edd. *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), ch. 4.

[34]Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', pp. 71, 79.

[35]Cicero, *De natura deorum* II.3.

[36]L. P. Gerson, *Gods and Greek Philosophy: Studies the Early History of Natural Theology* (London: Routledge, 1990), #2, 154-66 *cit.* p. 155. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, 'Zeno', *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VII, 119 '...worshippers of God; for they have acquaintance with the rites of the gods...how to serve the gods.'

[37] *SVF*, I. 537.

[38]Diogenes Laertius, 'Zeno', *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* VII, 14, Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.39. God is said by some to be 'breath' (*pneuma*), i.e., a mixture of air and fire, and sometimes the whole world is called 'God', F. H. Sandback, *The Stoics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), p. 35.

[39]J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 115.

[40]J. R. G. Wright, 'Form and Content in the Moral Essay' in C. D. N. Costa ed. *Seneca Medea* (Oxford: OUP, 1973), pp. 48-9.

[41]J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), p. 37.

[42]For a discussion of the spurious letter from Seneca to Paul see, Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca*, 11 ff.

[43]Gerson, *Gods and Greek Philosophy*, p. 166.

[44]Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X. 139-54.

[45]Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X. 123.

[46]'The gods exist, the knowledge which we have of them is clear vision', Epicurus, *Epistles* III, 123.

[47]Attridge, 'The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire', p. 64.

[48]Philodemus, *pros eusebias* fr. 38.

[49]Diogenes Laertius, *Epicurus*, X.139, 124.

[50]J. H. Neyrey, 'Acts 17, Epicureans and Theodicy: A Study of Stereotypes', edd. D. L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W. Meeks, *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 129ff.

[51]Neyrey, 'Acts 17, Epicureans and Theodicy: A Study of Stereotypes', 129ff.

[52]D. L. Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech: An Appeal to the Stoic Historica Posidonius against Later Stoics and Epicureans' edd. D. L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W. Meeks, *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 71.

[53]Plutarch, 'Stoic Self-contradictions' *Moralia* 1034B and Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* V.xi.

[54]Diogenes Laertius, VII. 33

[55]Attridge, 'The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire', p. 66 and *De natura deorum*, II.23-8, 59-72.

[56]Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', p. 69 citing Strabo, *Geography*, 16.2.35-9.

[57]Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', pp. 69-70.

[58]Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1034B-C.

[59]*P.Oxy.* 215, and the discussion in Attridge, 'The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire', pp. 45-7, and A. J. Festugière, *Epicurus and His Gods* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), pp. 64-5.

[60]Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', p. 72.

[61]B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: C. W.K. Gleerup, 1955), pp. 86-7.

[62]Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West*, I.1

[63]A. J. S. Spawforth, 'The early reception of the Imperial Cult in Athens: Problems and Ambiguities', edd. M. C. Hoff and S. I. Rotroff, *The Romanization of Athens*, pp. 183-201.

[64]On 'Paul's anti-sophistic coming: 1 Corinthians 2.1-5', see my *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002 2nd ed.), pp. 143-64.

[65]See R. Covell, *W. A. P. Martin: Pioneer of Progress in China* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) for Martin's skilful use of William Paley and other early nineteenth Christian apologists in his evangelistic efforts over his lengthy missionary service in China from the Tai Ping rebellion to his role as the founding Chancellor of Peking University at the end of that century.