

(1) *The Athenians' Curiosity (17:16–21)*

<sup>16</sup>While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup>Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup>You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.” <sup>21</sup>(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

In Paul’s day Athens was but a shadow of its former glory in its “golden age” in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. Corinth was now the leading city of Greece commercially and politically. Even Athens’ native population had dwindled, estimated at some 5,000 voting citizens. But this was considerably augmented by the nonnative population, particularly the artists, the students, and the tourists. And there were the buildings and the works of art, mute testimony to its former grandeur. This is not to say that Athens was no longer an important city. It was still considered the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire, and it is in this perspective that Luke portrayed it.

**17:16** Athens was known the world over for its magnificent art and architecture. The art, however, characteristically portrayed the exploits of the various gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon, and most of the impressive buildings were temples to the pagan gods. For Paul, Jew that he was with his strong monotheism and distaste for graven images, the scene was most unappealing. The NIV is too gentle in saying that he was “greatly distressed” (v. 16). The Greek word Luke used is much stronger (*paroxynō*). We get our word “paroxysm” from it. Paul was “infuriated” at the sight. Ancient descriptions testify that the marketplace was virtually lined with idols, particularly the “herms,” the monuments to Hermes with the head of the god on top.<sup>65</sup> For Paul a thing

<sup>65</sup> For very thorough descriptions of the Athenian idols and temples, see O. Broneer, “Athens ‘City

of beauty was decidedly not a joy forever, particularly when it embodied so distorted a view of divinity.

**17:17** Paul evidently stuck to his usual pattern of missionary preaching. On the Sabbath he reasoned with the Jews, evidently following the same method of scriptural proof that Christ was Messiah as he used at Thessalonica (v. 17). But during the week, on a daily basis, he bore his witness in the agora, the famous marketplace and hub of Athenian life. There he got his most pronounced response, especially from some of the philosophers. The Epicureans and Stoics were among the leading schools of the day,<sup>66</sup> and they serve as representatives of the confusion caused by Paul's preaching.

**17:18** Epicureans were thoroughgoing materialists, believing that everything came from atoms or particles of matter. There was no life beyond this; all that was human returned to matter at death. Though the Epicureans did not deny the existence of gods, they saw them as totally indifferent to humanity. They did not believe in providence of any sort; and if one truly learned from the gods, that person would try to live the same sort of detached and tranquil life as they, as free from pain and passion and superstitious fears as they.

The Stoics had a more lively view of the gods than the Epicureans, believing very much in the divine providence. They were pantheists, believing that the ultimate divine principle was to be found in all of nature, including human beings. This spark of divinity, which they referred to as the *logos*, was the cohesive rational principle that bound the entire cosmic order together. Humans thus realized their fullest potential when they lived by reason. By reason, i.e., the divine principle within them which linked them with the gods and nature, they could discover ultimate truth for themselves. The Stoics generally had a rather high ethic and put great stock on self-sufficiency. Since they viewed all humans as bound together by common possession of the divine *logos*,

of Idol Worship,'” *BA* 21 (1958): 2–28 and G. T. Montague, “Paul and Athens,” *TBT* 49 (1970): 14–23.

<sup>66</sup> Together with the Cynics, Stoics and Epicureans represented the most popular philosophies of the day. Epicureans received their name from their founder Epicurus, who lived from 341–270 B.C. Stoicism was founded by the Cypriot Zeno (ca. 335–263 B.C.) and was named for the stoa or colonnade in the agora where Zeno had taught.

they also had a strong sense of universal brotherhood. The mention of these schools is not incidental. Paul would take up some of their thought in his Areopagus speech, particularly that of the Stoics, and thoroughly redirect it in line with the Creator God of the Old Testament.

It was not particularly complimentary when the philosophers dubbed Paul a “bab-  
bler.” They used a colorful word (*spermologos*), “seed-speaker,” which evoked images of  
a bird pecking indiscriminately at seeds in a barnyard. It referred to a dilettante, some-  
one who picked up scraps of ideas here and there and passed them off as profundity  
with no depth of understanding whatever.<sup>67</sup> They could not understand Paul’s concept  
of resurrection at all. Epicureans did not believe in any existence after death, and Stoics  
believed that only the soul, the divine spark, survived death .<sup>68</sup> So what was this idea  
of a bodily resurrection (*anastasis*)? “He must be speaking of a new goddess named res-  
urrection (“Anastasia”) along with this new god Jesus he keeps talking about” (author’s  
paraphrase).<sup>69</sup> How ironical that they were making Paul into a polytheist like them-  
selves. Before the Areopagus he would eliminate such thinking with his clear monothe-  
istic exposition of God the Creator.

**17:19–20** Verse 19 has provoked one of the most lively discussions surrounding Paul’s  
Areopagus address. Was Paul tried before a formal Athenian court named Areopagus,  
or did he deliver a public address from a hill known as the Areopagus? The NIV has  
already solved the problem by translating “a meeting of the Areopagus,” which is a clear  
opting for the first possibility. The Greek is not so unambiguous, merely stating that the  
Athenians took hold of Paul and led him “to the Areopagus.” The Areopagus was both a  
court and a hill, due to the fact that the court traditionally met on that hill. The term  
Areopagus means hill of Ares. Ares was the Greek god of war. The Roman equivalent god  
was Mars, hence the KJV “Mars’ hill” (17:22).

This hill was located beneath the acropolis and above the agora. From ancient times a  
court met there that decided on civil and criminal cases and seems to have had some

<sup>67</sup> Robinson fails to convince in his argument that “seed” and “word” are to be derived from Paul’s  
preaching the parable of the sower in the agora (M. A. Robinson, “SPERMO-LOGOS: Did Paul  
Preach from Jesus’ Parables?” *Bib* 56 [1975]: 231–40).

<sup>68</sup> G. D. Kilpatrick, “The Acts of the Apostles, xvii.18,” *TZ* 42 (1986): 431f.

<sup>69</sup> P. H. Menoud, “Jésus et Anastasie (Actes xvii, 18),” *RTP* 32 (1944): 141–45.

jurisdiction in matters of religion. Since it traditionally met on the Areopagus, it came eventually to be known by the name of the hill, just as for us Wall Street would designate either the street or the stock exchange. So the name will not help in deciding whether Paul gave a public lecture on the hill or made a formal appearance before the court. Although many scholars advocate the public lecture view,<sup>70</sup> several factors tip the scale toward the possibility that Paul appeared before the Athenian court. First, there is quite possibly a conscious parallel between Paul's experience and the trial of Socrates. According to Plato (*Apologia* 24B), Socrates was accused of "introducing [*epispherōn*] other new gods." Paul likewise was described as "introducing" (*eisphereis*, v. 20) "strange ideas," which in v. 18 are described as "foreign gods." If Luke intended the parallel, he likely saw Paul also as appearing before the court.<sup>71</sup> Second, that one of Paul's converts was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus (v. 34), is all the more likely if Paul appeared before that body. Finally, one should note that throughout Acts Paul appeared before the leading magisterial bodies—the magistrates of Philippi, the proconsul at Corinth, the Roman governors at Caesarea, the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Jewish King Agrippa, and finally, at least in anticipation, the Roman emperor. It would fit the pattern well if he appeared here before the venerable Athenian court.

It is probably erroneous to see it as a trial in any formal sense. Paul was not formally charged. Once finished he made an easy exit—there were no deliberations. Perhaps it was nothing but a more-or-less public hearing of the new teacher to satisfy the curiosity of the philosophers who led him there.<sup>72</sup> It probably was not even on the hill of Ares where Paul spoke. The evidence is that in his day the Areopagus met in the *Stoa Basileios* or Royal Portico in the northwest corner of the agora.<sup>73</sup> This would be all the more natu-

<sup>70</sup> A. Ehrhardt, *The Acts of the Apostles: Ten Lectures* (Manchester: University Press, 1969), 97f.; Haenchen (*Acts*, 519, n. 1), who likens the hill to "Hyde Park"; W. G. Morrice, "Where did Paul speak in Athens—on Mars' Hill or before the Court of the Areopagus? (*Acts* 17:19)," *ExpTim* 83 (1972): 377f.

<sup>71</sup> Socrates, however, did not appear before the Areopagus but rather the court of the "King Archon," a special jury. See *Beginnings* 4:212.

<sup>72</sup> Ramsay sees the council acting in its role as regulator of public lecturers (*St. Paul the Traveller*, 245–48). B. Gärtner sees Paul as being taken before the "education commission" of the court (*The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* [Uppsala: Gleerup, 1955], 52–65).

ral since the portico frequented by the philosophers, whom Paul had just encountered, was adjacent to the Royal Portico.

**17:21** Luke ended his narrative introduction to Paul's speech in an "aside," which refers to the insatiable curiosity of the Athenians (v. 21). Their love for novel ideas was proverbial. Perhaps the most telling quip was that of Demosthenes, who remarked how the Athenians were going about the city asking for the latest news at the very moment when the armies of Philip of Macedon were knocking at their door.<sup>74</sup> Luke's remark is quite ironical. The Athenians had accused Paul of being the dilettante (v. 18), an accusation much more pertinent to themselves. Their curiosity had a beneficial side, however. It set the stage for Paul's witness.

### *(2) Paul's Testimony Before the Areopagus (17:22–31)*

**22**Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **23**For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

**24**"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. **25**And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. **26**From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. **27**God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. **28**'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

**29**"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine

<sup>73</sup> C. J. Hemer, "Paul at Athens: A Topographical Note," *NTS* 20 (1974): 341–50. For the view that the court still met on the hill in Paul's day, see T. D. Barnes, "An Apostle on Trial," *JTS*, n.s. 20 (1969): 407–19.

<sup>74</sup> Cited by Bruce (*Acts: NIC*, 352) with other similar contemporary allusions to the Athenian inquisitiveness.

being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. <sup>30</sup>In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup>For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

No text in Acts has received more scholarly attention than the ten verses of Paul’s speech before the Areopagus. Debate has particularly raged over whether the core thought of the speech is that of the Old Testament or of Greek philosophy.<sup>75</sup> How one answers that question will very much determine how one views the total argument of the speech. For instance, those who maintain the basically philosophical background to the speech often see its main thrust as being the knowledge of God as perceived through nature. The concluding references to the resurrection and judgment are seen as a sort of afterthought that does not coordinate well with the main speech. The gist of the speech is, however, thoroughly rooted in Old Testament thought throughout. The main theme is God as Creator and the proper worship of this Creator God. ✎ The language often has the ring of Greek philosophy, for Paul was attempting to build what bridges he could to

<sup>75</sup> The work by E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1923) argued for a thoroughly philosophical background to the speech. This approach has been subsequently modified and developed by such scholars as M. Dibelius, “Paul on the Areopagus,” *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: SCM, 1956); H. Conzelmann, “The Address of Paul on the Areopagus,” *Studies in Luke-Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 217–30; M. Pohlenz, who argued for a Stoic background (“Paulus und die Stoa,” *ZNW* 42 [1949]: 69–104); H. Hommel, who defined the Stoic background more narrowly as the thought of Poseidonius (“Neue Forschungen zur Areopagrede Acts 17,” *ZNW* 46 [1955]: 145–79); and Hommel, “Platonisches bei Lukas: Zu Act 17:28a (Leben-Bewegen-Sein),” *ZNW* 48 (1957): 193–200. B. Gärtner’s *Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* argues that the background to the speech is thoroughly that of the OT. W. Nauck sees the background in the Hellenistic Jewish missionary preaching (“Die Tradition und Komposition der Areopagrede,” *ZTK* 53 [1956]: 11–51). F. G. Downing notes the similarities between Acts and Josephus in addressing paganism (“Common Ground with Paganism in Luke and in Josephus,” *NTS* 28 [1982]: 546–59). Like Gärtner, A. M. Dubarle argues a thoroughly OT background (“*Le Discours à l’Aréopage* [Acts 17:22–31] *et son Arrière-plan Biblique*,” *RSPT* 57 [1973]: 576–610).

John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992).

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reach the Athenian intellectuals. The underlying thought remains thoroughly biblical.

The sermon can be divided into five couplets that follow a more-or-less chiasmic structure (an A-B-C-B-A pattern). Verses 22–23 introduce the main theme—the ignorance of the pagan worship. Verses 24–25 present the true object of worship, the Creator God, and the folly of idolatrous worship with temples and sacrifices. Verses 26–27 deal with the true relationship of human beings to their Creator, the central theme of the chiasm. Verse 28 provides a transition, capping off the argument of the relationship of persons to God and providing the basis for a renewed attack on idolatry in verse 29. The final two verses return to the original theme. The time of ignorance was now over. With revelation came a call to repent in light of the coming judgment and the resurrection of Christ.

#### THE “UNKNOWN GOD” (17:22–23)

**17:22** Paul’s opening remark that he had observed the Athenians in every respect to be “very religious” has often been described as a *capitatio benevolentiae*, an effort to win the favor of his hearers and thus secure their attention.<sup>76</sup> Such introductions were a standard device in Greek rhetoric, and Paul probably did have some such intention. He surely did not wish to alienate his audience at the very outset. The term he used for “religious” (*deisidaimonesteros*), however, had a definite ambiguity in current usage. It could be used in a positive sense for one who was very devoted to religious matters. It was also used with a negative connotation for those who were overly scrupulous, even superstitious, in their religious observance. The context in which the word is used determines which connotation it has.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps Paul deliberately chose the ambiguous word. For the Athenians his remark would be taken as commending their piety. For Paul, who was already fuming at their idolatry (v. 16), the negative connotation would be uppermost in his mind. By the end of the speech, the Athenians themselves would have little doubt about Paul’s real opinion of their religiosity.

**17:23a** As so often in the speeches of Acts, Paul began his discourse with a point of

<sup>76</sup> The piety of the Athenians was often noted by contemporary writers. Cf. Sophocles (*Oedipus Tyranus* 260), “Athens is held of states the most devout,” and Pausanias 1.17.1, “The Athenians venerate the gods more than others.” See Conzelmann, *Acts*, 140.

<sup>77</sup> H. A. Moellering, “*Deisidaimonia*, a Footnote to Acts 17:22,” *CTM* 34 (1963): 466–71.

contact with his audience. In this case it was the altars Paul had already observed in the city (v. 16). One in particular caught his attention. It was dedicated “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” This gave him the perfect launching pad for his presentation of monotheism to the polytheistic and pantheistic Athenians. Piety had no doubt led the Athenians to erect such an altar for fear they might offend some deity of whom they were unaware and had failed to give the proper worship. Paul would now proclaim a God who was unknown to them. In fact, this God, totally unknown to them, was the only true divinity that exists.

It has often been discussed whether Paul took a certain degree of “homiletical license” in his reference to the inscription “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” Jerome thought so, arguing in his *Commentary on Titus* (1:12) that there were altars in Athens dedicated to “unknown gods” and that Paul had adapted the plural “gods” to the singular “god” in light of his monotheistic sermon.<sup>78</sup> Pagan writers also attested to the presence of altars “to unknown gods” but always in the plural. For instance, the Traveler Pausanias, writing in the middle of the second century A.D., described the presence of altars to gods of unknown names on the road from Phalerum to Athens and an altar “to unknown gods” at Olympia.<sup>79</sup> Written in the third century, Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* also refers to these Athenian altars “to unknown gods.”<sup>80</sup> There is thus ample literary evidence that Paul did not fabricate his allusion, that there were in fact such altars in Athens. Whether they were invariably inscribed in the plural or whether there was one dedicated to a single “UNKNOWN GOD” remains an open question. Even should Paul have made an adaption, as Jerome alleged, it would have been a small matter. The Athenians would have understood his allusion, and Paul scarcely wanted to expound on gods in the plural. This was precisely what he wanted to deny, as he introduced the Athenians to

<sup>78</sup> For a thorough treatment of the evidence for altars to the unknown gods, see *Beginnings* 5:240–46.

<sup>79</sup> Pausanias 1.1.4 and 5.14.8.

<sup>80</sup> *Life of Apollonius* 6.3.5. By putting this reference to the altars together with another reference from a far-removed context in *Life of Apollonius*, which referred to the philosopher’s having preached against idolatry in Athens, Norden argued that the Apollonius tradition provided the base for the Areopagus sermon (*Agnostos Theos*, 35–56). This view has been almost universally rejected by scholars. See P. Corsen, “Der Altar des unbekanntes Gottes,” *ZNW* 14 (1913): 309–23.



the one true Creator God.<sup>81</sup>

**17:23b** Verse **23b** sets the tone for the remainder of the speech. There is a play on the concept of ignorance. To worship an unknown (*agnōstō*) god is to admit one's ignorance. If he is unknown to you, you are then in total ignorance of his true nature. Thus Paul said, "What you worship in ignorance [*agnoountes*], this I proclaim to you" (author's translation). Two things should be noted. First, Paul referred to "what" they worshiped, not "who" they worshiped. Their worship was totally wrongheaded. They did not know God; they didn't worship *him* at all. Their worship object was a thing, a "what," and not a personal God at all. Second, there is a strong emphasis on ignorance, on not knowing. For Greeks, as for Stoics, ignorance was a cardinal sin. The greatest virtue was to discover truth through pursuing the divine reason within oneself. Not to live in accordance with reason, to live in ignorance, was the greatest folly imaginable. Paul accused them of precisely this ignorance, this sin.<sup>82</sup> He would return to this theme in v. **30** with his call to repentance. The time had arrived when such ignorance of God was wholly without excuse.

#### THE CREATOR GOD (17:24–25)

**17:24–25** Paul began with the basic premise that runs throughout his speech: God is Creator. He referred to God as the maker of the "world" (*kosmos*), a term that would be familiar to every Greek. The concept of God as absolute Creator, however, would not be so easy for them to grasp. For them divinity was to be found *in* the heavens, *in* nature, *in* humanity. The idea of a single supreme being who stood *over* the world, who created all that exists, was totally foreign to them.<sup>83</sup> This was indeed an "UNKNOWN GOD."

<sup>81</sup> Norden's view that the "UNKNOWN GOD" should be seen as the unknowable, inscrutable high god of the Gnostics (*Agnostos Theos*, 56–83) has also been generally rejected. E. des Places argues similarly (though rejecting the Gnostic thesis) that Paul intended his phrase to refer to the "unknowable" God, which would have appealed to Greek piety ("'Au Dieu Inconnu' [Act 17, 23]," *Bib* 43 [1962]: 388–95). Paul, however, was arguing the opposite—God *could* be known, had *made* himself known through *revelation*, not through human reason.

<sup>82</sup> H. Kulling, "Zur Bedeutung des Agnostos Theos: Eine Exegese zu Apostelgeschichte 17, 22–23," *TZ* 36 (1980): 65–83.

<sup>83</sup> See H. P. Owen, "The Scope of Natural Revelation in Rom. I and Acts XVII," *NTS* 5 (1958–59):

Once granted the premise that God is Creator, two things follow. First, God “does not live in temples built by hands.” This is a thoroughly biblical thought. Compare Solomon’s similar remark at the dedication of his temple (1 Kgs 8:27) and Stephen’s critique of the Jerusalem temple (Acts 7:48–50). The more philosophically minded Athenians would have had no problem with this, however. Plato advocated a religion based on worship of the heavenly bodies as being superior to that observed in earthly temples, and Zeno and Seneca both scorned temples.<sup>84</sup> The philosophers also would have had no problem with Paul’s second critique of human worship, “He is not served by human hands” (v. 25). Paul’s qualifier, “as if he needed anything,” would particularly have resonated with them. It was a commonplace of Greek philosophy to view divinity as complete within itself, totally self-sufficient, totally without need.<sup>85</sup> And they would have agreed with Paul also that the divinity is the giver of “life and breath and everything else.”<sup>86</sup> But there was a world of difference between the philosopher’s pantheism and Paul’s strict monotheism.

Every statement Paul made was rooted in Old Testament thought. The idea of God’s being the granter of life and breath, as indeed the entire point of vv. 24–25, can be found in passages like Isa 42:5 and Ps 50:7–15.<sup>87</sup> It is not the philosophical concept of a divine immanent principle that pervades all nature and humankind. It is the biblical concept of a sovereign Creator God who stands above his creation and to whom humanity as creature is ultimately responsible. Such a God could not be enshrined in human temples or manipulated by human cult. Much of the conceptuality may have struck a responsive chord with the Athenians. Paul probably was struggling to communicate the gospel in terms understandable to them. But on the basic premise there was no com-

133–43.

<sup>84</sup> For a thorough treatment of the philosophers’ critique of temples, see E. des Places, “‘Des temples fait de main d’homme’ (Actes des Apôtres 17, 24),” *Bib* 40 (1959): 793–99.

<sup>85</sup> See R. Bultmann, “Anknüpfung und Widerspruch,” *TZ* 2 (1946): 410–11. Cf. Euripides, *Hercules* 1345f.: “God, if he be truly God, has need of nothing.”

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Seneca, *Epistles* 95.47: “God seeks no servants ... he himself serves mankind.” For other parallels from the philosophers, see E. des Places, “Actes 17, 25,” *Bib* 46 (1965): 219–22.

<sup>87</sup> For the view that vv. 24–25 are based on Isa 42:5, see E. Fudge, “Paul’s Apostolic Self-Consciousness at Athens,” *JETS* 14 (1971): 193–98.

promise. There is but one sovereign God, Creator of all. To know him they must abandon all their other gods. Otherwise he would remain to them the “UNKNOWN GOD.”

#### THE PROVIDENTIAL GOD (17:26–27)

These verses form the center of the speech. As such, they should be central to Paul’s argument, and they are. They contain two emphases: (1) God’s providence over humanity and (2) human responsibility to God. The two verses comprise a single sentence in the Greek text. The sentence consists of a main clause (“From one man he made every nation of men”) and two subordinate purpose clauses. The thought thus runs: God made humanity for two purposes: (1) to inhabit the earth (v. 26) and (2) to seek him (v. 27). The dominating thought is thus still that of God as Creator.

**17:26a** God “made” every human nation. There is the added nuance, however, that he made every nation “from one man.” The reference is most likely to Adam, and the emphasis is on the universality of humankind’s relationship to God. Although there are many nations, though they are scattered over the face of the earth, they are one in their common ancestry and in their relationship to their Creator. One can see the significance of this in an address before Gentiles. The God whom Paul proclaimed was no local Jewish cult God. He was the one sovereign Lord of all humankind.

**17:26b** The precise meaning of verse 26b is somewhat problematic. To what do the “times” (*kairoi*) refer? They could either refer to the seasons or to historical epochs. The same ambiguity exists in the term “exact places where they should live.” Does this refer to the habitable areas of the planet or to the boundaries between nations? If Paul was talking of seasons and habitable zones, he was pointing to God’s providence in nature.<sup>88</sup> If the reference is to historical epochs and national boundaries, the emphasis is on God’s lordship over history.<sup>89</sup> In either instance Paul’s point would be the same—the care and providence of God in his creation. These statements do seem to contain an underlying

<sup>88</sup> This is the position of Dibelius, “Paul on the Areopagus,” 30–32. A similar position is taken by W. Eltester with the difference that he sees the “boundaries” not as habitable zones but as the boundaries of the creation account, the “firmament” or boundary between the earth and the watery chaos (“Schöpfungsoffenbarung und natürliche Theologie im frühen Christentum,” *NTS* 3 [1957]: 93–114).

<sup>89</sup> See Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 146–51.

thought of “natural revelation.” Much as Paul argued in [Rom 1:18–20](#) and in the speech at Lystra ([14:17](#)), God made himself known in some sense by the works of his creation.<sup>90</sup> All people, Gentiles included, have experienced this and to that extent are responsible before God. This led to the climactic statement about seeking God in v. 27.

**17:27** Verse 27 gives the second purpose of humankind in God’s creation—“that men would seek him.” The idea of seeking God is common in the Old Testament,<sup>91</sup> but that does not seem to be the background here. For the Old Testament writers, the call to “seek God” was always made to those within the covenant community, to Israel to whom God had already made himself known. In the present context it is a call for Gentiles for whom the true God is “unknown.” The connection is with the preceding verse and its emphasis on God’s providence in his creation. God’s purpose in all this is stated as his desire that people might seek him and find him. The Stoics would have been in complete agreement. They would have argued that the divine principle was to be found in all of nature and that one should strive to grasp it as fully as possible through cultivating reason, that part of divinity that dwelt in one’s own human nature. They firmly believed that through the proper discipline of reason one could come to a knowledge of divinity. Paul would not have agreed. Even a knowledge of God from nature would still not be a human attainment but a *revelation* of God in his works. But Paul was not confident in the human ability to grasp such a natural revelation. Perhaps that is why he used the optative mood in v. 27, a mode of Greek grammar that here expresses strong doubt. God created humans, Paul said, so they might seek him and just possibly grope after him and find him. He had his doubts. People likely would not discover God in this fashion, even “though he is not far” from them. There is no question about God’s providence; there *is* about humanity’s ability to make the proper response. There is also no question about God’s purposes. God *did* create humans “to seek him.” This is the proper response of the creature. The responsibility of humanity is the worship of God.<sup>92</sup>

#### THE WORSHIP OF GOD ([17:28–29](#))

<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between [Rom 1](#) and [Acts 17](#), see the commentary on [14:14–18](#).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. [Isa 55:6](#); [65:1](#); [Ps 14:2](#); [Prov 8:17](#); [Jer 29:13](#).

<sup>92</sup> R. F. O’Toole, “Paul at Athens and Luke’s Notion of Worship,” *RB* 89 (1982): 185–97.

**17:28** Verse 28 is transitional, linking up with the theme of God's proximity in v. 27b and providing the basis for the critique of idolatrous worship in v. 29. It also serves the rather unique function of providing the "scriptural base" for the speech. In this instance it isn't a matter of Scripture at all but rather a quote from a pagan philosopher.<sup>93</sup> Scripture would have been meaningless to the Athenians. Paul still continued to address them as much as possible in their own terms. Some argue that two quotes from Greek poets are in v. 28, but more likely the verse contains only one. The phrase "in him we live and move and have our being" seems to have been a more or less traditional Greek triadic formula.<sup>94</sup> Paul surely did not understand this in the Greek sense, which would emphasize the pantheistic view of the divinity residing in human nature. His view was that of v. 25: God is the giver of life and breath and all that is. Through God the Creator people live and move and have existence. The second statement is introduced as the quote from the Greek poets. It is generally agreed that the quote is found in the Stoic poet Aratus of Soli, who lived in the first half of the third century B.C. Aratus may himself have been quoting a hymn to Zeus from the poet Cleanthes, which would perhaps explain Paul's plural reference to "some of your poets." For Aratus "we are his offspring" referred to Zeus and to humanity's sharing in the divine nature. In the context of Paul's speech, it referred to God and to humanity's being his creation.

**17:29** In v. 29 Paul returned to his earlier critique of artificial worship with which the speech began (vv. 24–25). Earlier he had critiqued temple and cult. Now he attacked idolatry. The attack was based on the previous statement that humans are God's off-

<sup>93</sup> J. Calloud notes that the Greeks often viewed their poets as inspired ("Paul devant l'Aréopage d'Athènes: Actes 17, 16–34," *RSR* 69 [1981]: 209–48).

<sup>94</sup> Those who argue that it is a quotation attribute it to Epimenides of Crete, basing this on a reference in the ninth-century Syriac commentary of Ishodad of Merv, who may have been dependent on Theodore of Mopsuestia. The poem of Epimenides consists of a hymn of Minos to his father Zeus. Minos attacks his fellow Cretans as being liars for building a tomb for Zeus, but Zeus is very much alive, and Minos praises him with the words "in thee we live and move and have our being." It is interesting that the tradition of Cretans being liars in [Titus 1:12](#) seems to come from this same poem of Epimenides. Pohlenz ("*Paulus und die Stoa*," 101–4) gives a rather strong case for questioning the Ishodad tradition. For the argument that the statement is based on Euripides, *Bacchae*, see P. Colaclides, "[Acts 17:28A and Bacchae 506](#)," *VC* 27 (1973): 161–64.

spring. The idea is that of people being made in God's image. If humankind is the true image of God, the work of God's hands, it follows that no image made by human hands can render proper homage to God. If humanity is like God, then God is not like gold or silver or any such material representation. Only the creature can express the true worship of the Creator, not the creation of the creature, not something made by human design and skill.

Here Paul spoke very much in the line of the Old Testament critique of idolatry.<sup>95</sup> The Stoics would have agreed. They too saw idolatry as the folly of popular religion. But if they truly understood Paul's teaching of the one true Creator God, they would have realized that they too were idolaters. In their attempt to reach the divine through their own striving, in their view that the divine indwelt their own human nature, they had transgressed the relationship of creature to Creator. If they had genuinely accepted Paul's major premise that God is Creator, they would have had to acknowledge their own self-idolatry, their own need for repentance.

#### THE JUDGMENT OF GOD (17:30–31)

**17:30–31** Paul now directed his attention to the Athenians, returning to the theme of ignorance with which he began. They were guilty of ignorance. All their acts of piety were in vain, for they did not know or worship the one true God. In his forbearance God formerly "overlooked" such ignorance (cf. [14:16](#); [Rom 3:25](#)). The times of forbearance had now ended because their ignorance had now ended. Now they knew the one true God through Paul's proclamation. He was no longer an "unknown God"; and should they continue in their false worship and fail to acknowledge his sole lordship of heaven and earth, their sin would no longer be a sin of ignorance but a high-handed sin.

Only one course was open—repentance, a complete turnabout from their false worship and a turning to God.<sup>96</sup> The concept of repentance must have sounded strange to the Athenians. Even stranger was Paul's warning of God's coming day of judgment (v. [31](#)).<sup>97</sup> Strangest of all was his reference to the resurrection of Christ. Paul's train of

<sup>95</sup> Cf. [Deut 4:28](#); [Ps 115:4–8](#); [Isa 40:18–20](#); [44:9–20](#); [Song of Songs 3:10–4:2](#); [5:7–16](#).

<sup>96</sup> E. des Places, "Actes 17, 30–31," *Bib* 52 (1971): 526–34; J. Dupont, "Le discours à l'Aréopage," *Nouvelles Etudes*, 410–23.

<sup>97</sup> A. J. Mattill, Jr., argues that the occurrence of μέλλω in v. [31](#) implies an imminent judgment

thought was clear enough. God is the one true God and should be acknowledged by his creatures. All people must ultimately stand before God and give an account for their relationship to him. God appointed “the man” who would carry out this judgment. (The “man” was Christ, “the Son of Man,” in his role as judge; cf. [Dan 7:13f.](#)) God clearly demonstrated this truth by the miracle of raising him from the dead. Just as Peter had pointed to the resurrection as proof to the Jews that Jesus is Messiah, so to the Gentiles Paul pointed to the resurrection as proof that he is the coming judge of all humanity. Paul had reached the climax of his testimony and made his appeal. He may have had more to say, but he had said enough to convict at least one Areopagite (v. [34](#)). In any event, with the mention of resurrection the jeering started, and Paul’s speech ended (v. [32](#)).

Commentators often have said that the Paul of the epistles would never have preached the Areopagus sermon because its thought would have been alien to him. Such is not the case. The appeal to a “natural revelation” is certainly present in [Rom 1:18–32](#) even though the application differs. More significant are passages like [1 Thess 1:9–10](#), where Paul summarized his preaching to the Gentiles at Thessalonica. There the elements are strikingly the same as in the Areopagus speech: turning from idols to a living God, the return of the Son from heaven, the resurrection, the wrath to come. This is almost a summary of the appeal in [Acts 17:29–31](#).

What of course is unique in the Areopagus speech is its appeal to Greek philosophical thought. Paul was attempting to build bridges with the intellectuals in Athens in the hope of winning some (cf. [1 Cor 9:19](#)). He used their language, quoted their poets, and sought to reach them in terms they would understand. As such his speech in Athens became a model for the Christian apologists who later attempted to present the faith to the pagan intellectuals of a later day.<sup>98</sup> It should be noted that Paul never compromised the basic Christian principles of God as Creator and Judge and the resurrection of Christ. In the end these were the most difficult concepts for the Athenians to grasp, but

(“Näherwartung, Fernerwartung, and the Purpose of Luke-Acts: Weymouth Reconsidered,” [CBQ](#) 34 [1972]: 281–83).

<sup>98</sup> H. Gebhardt shows how the second- and third-century Christian apologists developed the same basic arguments as in the Areopagus speech (“Die an die Heiden gerichtete Missionsrede der Apostel und das Johannesevangelium,” [ZNW](#) 6 [1905]: 236–49).

John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992).

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there could be no accommodation on these. Bridge building is essential in Christian witness, particularly when addressing different cultures, as missionaries must often do. Paul's Areopagus address provides both a precedent and a pattern for this essential task.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>99</sup> See K. O. Gangel, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," *BibSac* 127 (1970): 308–12.