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SHALL WE “BUILD BRIDGES” OR “PULL
DOWN STRONGHOLDS”?

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Shall We “Build Bridges” or “Pull Down Strongholds”?

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Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might

grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’ Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them (Acts 17:16–34 NKJV).

It is quite common today to read this particular passage, first, as an apology for natural theology, then second, as a paradigm for cross-cultural encounter. First, because Paul cites a pagan poet or two, it is assumed that Paul is thereby inviting Christians to look for general revelation within the philosophical and religious speculations of other religions and cultures. Second, because Paul engages with the philosophers of Athens, it is assumed that he has established herein a paradigm for trying to make the gospel relevant to a culture unfamiliar with or hostile to Scripture. Specifically, some missiologists argue that Paul is encouraging Christians today to preserve the worldviews of other cultures as avenues of gospel relevancy.

In the exegesis that follows, I argue to the contrary. Paul’s use of a pagan poet or two does not establish an apostolic principle that other religions should be searched for helpful statements that we can then identify as authoritative general revelation. Paul’s use of a pagan poet or two does not mean that all cultures are neutral conveyers of gospel relevancy. Acts 17:16–34, which contains Paul’s famous Areopagus or Mars Hill speech, is neither an excuse to find general revelation in other religions, nor is it a paradigm for finding relevancy in culture rather than Scripture. The Areopagus sermon is a confrontational, biblical, and evangelistic proclamation of the good news that every man in every culture must hear.

The Contextualization Continuum

In an important but largely neglected missiological text, David Hes-

selgrave and Edward Rommen argue that not all systems of contextualization are helpful. Indeed, there is a “Contextualization Continuum” that stretches from orthodoxy and apostolic contextualization on the one hand to liberalism and syncretistic contextualization on the other. And the key to whether a missionary or church planter will be orthodox and apostolic or whether a missionary or church planter will be liberal and syncretistic depends on their focus on Scripture or on culture. “[T]he closer one gets to classical orthodoxy the greater the weight given to the biblical revelation, and the closer one gets to classical liberalism the greater the weight given to human reason and culture.”¹

Of course, some missiologists, missionaries, church planters, and pastors would argue they are not liberal but orthodox, even generously orthodox, yet they consider cultural exegesis just as important. But Hesselgrave’s definition concerns not only what one says about the Bible, but how one treats the Bible. The key words are “the weight given to.” If you give greater weight to the culture than you do to Scripture, then you are truly acting as a liberal, even if you say you are orthodox. Moreover, Hesselgrave’s definition regards a continuum. There are not only the extremes of orthodoxy and liberalism; there are the intermediate positions of neo-orthodoxy and neo-liberalism. And like the neo-orthodox Karl Barth or the neo-liberal Paul Tillich, today’s proponents of these intermediate theological positions claim to give great weight to Scripture but also give great weight to culture.

Postmodern Applications of the Contextualization Continuum

Although Hesselgrave did not address the work of Brian McLaren and the “emergent” movement or the diverging work of Mark Driscoll and the “emerging” movement, his continuum may provide an excellent means of analysis regarding these movements. If the emergent movement is shaped by a liberal outlook that is moving toward syncretism, the emerging movement may be shaped by a postliberalism that tries to avoid syncretism but still struggles to be considered orthodox.² Of course, the problem with applying Hesselgrave’s analysis to subsequent events is that Anglo-American missiology has begun to embrace various forms of that pop-philosophy known as postmodernism. Modernism and liberalism dared to speak of metanarratives that were true for all cultures, but postmodernism and postliberalism reject metanarratives in favor of speaking about multiple truths dependent upon the individual or his community. John MacArthur

¹David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 148.

²Collin Hansen, “Pastor Provocateur,” *Christianity Today* (September 2007). Driscoll refers to his church, Mars Hill, as “theologically conservative and culturally liberal.”

has issued a clarion call for the identification of McLaren’s “new” kind of Christianity as deceptive.³

MacArthur strikes me as fundamentally correct in his concerns regarding McLaren. For instance, in his chapter on incarnationism, McLaren argues for a new openness toward other religions while he continually puts down traditional orthodoxy, separatism, and even compares the modern missionary movement started by the Northamptonshire Baptists to Taliban-like Islamic radicalism.⁴ McLaren believes there is “good wheat” (cf. Matt 13:24–30) in other religions, and that Christians should be willing to see the evil in their own religion as they learn from other religions.⁵ He argues that inter-religious dialogue should be primarily about apologetics, that it should lead missionaries to a “new place,” and that “the ‘old, old story’ may not be the ‘true, true story.’”⁶ Indeed, he says we can re-discover the gospel through encountering these other religions, apparently believing Christians have somehow lost the gospel. He then throws in this example of syncretizing dark with light, falsehood with truth:

I must add, though, that I don’t believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish context.⁷

McLaren comes to the bizarre conclusion that people may be “Buddhist followers of Jesus” or “Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus.” Women who wear the Islamic veil are just expressing their love for the same God in a different way. Moreover, he is convinced that not all Christians are disciples of Christ, for Christianity has something “rotten” of which we need to “repent.”⁸ McLaren’s missiology should offend both Christians and non-Christians, for it rings not of authenticity but of duplicity. At the same time, such missiology fails openly to proclaim itself as Christianity, even as it undermines the visible churches established by Christ.

Behind the views of McLaren and the emergent movement in evan-

³John MacArthur, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

⁴Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 247–53.

⁵Ibid., 254–55.

⁶Ibid., 258–61.

⁷Ibid., 260.

⁸Ibid., 264–68.

gelicalism are a number of unorthodox theological assumptions. However, what sticks out the most is the idea that Scripture somehow lacks the clarity and sufficiency that the churches require today. Because Christians have disagreed over the interpretation of, for instance, ecclesiological passages in Scripture, it is claimed that we must put aside discordant interpretations as *adiaphora* (i.e. indifferent). If traditional Christian churches are to be made relevant, they must strive to come closer to the culture in which they are placed. Combining the experientialism common to evangelical piety with a broad view of general revelation, emergent evangelical Christians primarily ask, “What is God doing in this context?”⁹ Out of such questions being answered by the culture, they hope to “reinvent” even “reverse convert” Christianity. “We need a conversion of sorts, a reverse conversion, to the themes, rhythms, and interests of post-secular Western culture.”¹⁰ The emergent movement embraces secularism as it collapses the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The implication is that if churches are going to be “relevant,” they must engage in social surveys and restructure their worship so as not to appear exclusivist.

The Intellectuals Behind the New Movements

The intellectuals or substantive thinkers behind the emergent and emerging movements are some prominent missiologists. One may consider here, for instance, David Bosch¹¹ and Dean Flemming,¹² both of whom are appropriated by all sectors of the Emergent and Emerging movements. What is striking about these two highly-educated missiologists in particular are (1) their demonstrable concern to create new paradigms for missionary contextualization, and (2) their demonstrable dependencies upon the old ecumenical and liberal theological movements. Bosch was known as a “bridge person,” for desiring to bring together the old ecumenical and

⁹Will Samson, “The End of Reinvention: Mission Beyond Market Adoption,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 159.

¹⁰Barry Taylor, “Converting Christianity: The End and Beginning of Faith,” in *ibid.*, 168–69.

¹¹Bosch is highly appreciated by McLaren, and Driscoll cites Bosch first among the works of noted missiologists that he consulted in his own development of the emerging church model (“Church Model 3.0”). McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 247, 255–56; Mark Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” *Criswell Theological Review*, new series, 3 (2006): 88.

¹²Stetzer, who is a leading contributor to Driscoll’s movement, echoes Flemming’s approach to Acts 17 and cites Flemming’s work approvingly. Ed Stetzer, “The Missional Nature of the Church and the Future of Southern Baptist Convention Churches,” in *The Mission of Today’s Church: Baptist Leaders Look at Modern Faith Issues* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 77; *idem*, “Why is Cultural Relevance a Big Deal?” http://www.theresurgence.com/es_blog_2007-01-29_why_is_cultural_relevance_a_big_deal (Accessed 2 March 2008).

evangelical movements in order to transform missions.¹³ Leaning heavily upon the liberal historical critical method of treating Scripture, Bosch undermined the authority of the biblical text. His express purpose was to prepare missionaries to drop the old paradigms of missiology and prepare for a new, transforming paradigm.¹⁴

Dean Flemming, however, is a different case. Flemming is a lecturer in New Testament and Intercultural Communication at European Nazarene College in Büsingen, Germany. As a Nazarene, he possesses some claim to have developed within the bosom of evangelicalism. And yet, in spite of such credentials, Flemming’s work, though perhaps more orthodox by degrees than Bosch’s, is still influenced heavily by theological liberalism. Specifically, while expressing some disagreement, Flemming appropriates the exegetical conclusions of Martin Dibelius.

Dibelius, it will be remembered, was a leading figure in German biblical theology in the early twentieth century. Indeed, he was considered something of a father, alongside his junior colleague, Rudolf Bultmann, in the *Formgeschichte* movement that did so much theological damage to many seminaries and their students only a few decades ago, for instance at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 1960s. *Formgeschichte*, the form critical study of the historical sources behind the biblical text, encouraged skepticism toward the historical reliability of the gospel reports about Jesus. Dibelius not only pioneered in this movement regarding the gospels, with suppositions from “paradigms” to “myths,” but also regarding similar developments leading into the book of Acts.¹⁵

Bosch and Flemming both employ the conceptual language of “contextualization” in their works. For instance, Flemming states that he is concerned to “free” and “enable” the gospel so that it may “come to life in new settings.” He believes that Paul employed the pagan poets as “bridges” to his audience in a classic example of “apologetics” and “pre-evangelism.” He argues that Paul, and, therefore, Christians should take the “risk” to find “common ground” and engage in “building bridges” through discovering “general revelation” through dialogue with other worldviews. He says that, like Paul, we must use “convergences” between the ideas of various religions, and that we must “highlight . . . points of contact and agreement.” While we should not syncretize, Flemming believes that Paul’s speech at

¹³Gerald H. Anderson, “In Memoriam: David J. Bosch, 1929–1992,” in David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

¹⁴Bosch interjects both form criticism and redaction criticism between the reader and the biblical text. Elevating the modern missionary to apostolic status, he argues, “What they did for their time, we have to do for ours.” Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 21.

¹⁵Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 243–51.

Mars Hill was intended by Luke to serve as “a model of missionary preaching.” In this model, there must be a balance between “an ‘identificational’ approach that proclaims the gospel in culturally relevant forms on the one hand and a ‘transformational’ approach that resists compromising the gospel’s integrity in a pluralistic culture on the other.” He argues for a middle ground between “both contextual relevance and courageous fidelity to the transforming word of salvation.”¹⁶

In light of such statements, we must be careful not to place hurriedly Flemming and his emerging followers on the liberal and syncretistic end of Hesselgrave’s contextualization continuum. They are too concerned to renounce syncretism to be counted as liberal. Conversely, we must be careful not to assume naively that Flemming and his emerging followers therefore deserve to be placed on the orthodox and apostolic end of the continuum. Their concern to “make” the gospel relevant to postmodern culture may indicate a less-than-orthodox view of the power of Scripture proclamation. Rather, Flemming and the emerging movement, as well as such missiological methodologies as the Camel Method, seem to fall somewhere in between. If their authors’ words are to be trusted, these missiologists are not syncretists. However, it is yet to be seen if they may be classified as orthodox. Exactly where they fall in the remaining categories of neo-orthodoxy or neo-liberalism, or perhaps in some new category, is an issue best left to further research.

A Convergence Interpretation of the Mars Hill Speech

Instead, let us examine the text of the Mars Hill speech of Paul in Acts 17. Before hearing my exposition, let us hear the alternative and (from what I can tell from my students) the currently dominant interpretation of the speech. Our text, according to Flemming, is the “platform” created by Paul and incorporated by Luke for cross-cultural missions as convergence. It provides for the use and critique of what should be regarded as general revelation.¹⁷ In this, he echoes Dibelius, who said, “Luke wrote this speech as an example of a typical sermon to Gentiles and put it in the setting of Athens.”¹⁸ The speech is, moreover, “the climax of the book,” and “the focal point” of the movement into Greek culture with the Christian religion.¹⁹

Dibelius claimed, “What we have before us is a *hellenistic* speech

¹⁶Dean Flemming, “Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul’s Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication,” *Missiology: An International Review* 30 (2002): 199–208.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁸Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven (London: SCM Press, 1956), 73.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 26, 76.

about the true knowledge of God.”²⁰ This idea is what attracts Flemming to Dibelius in the first place, for contextualization as Flemming defines it demands a “convergence” of biblical and non-biblical worldviews. Dibelius indeed enables a convergence exposition by Flemming, but at what cost? After all, in order to make this a Hellenistic speech, Dibelius progressively isolated the speech from the Old Testament, from the New Testament, from the writings of Paul, even from the context in which it was placed in the book of Acts.²¹ In other words, Dibelius expositied the speech apart from its canonical context and inspirational authority, and thereby turned it into Hellenistic philosophy with only a veneer of Christianity devoid of honest evangelism.

Recognizing that the Hellenistic claim of Dibelius had its detractors—detractors with whom Flemming does not agree—Flemming opted for a view that would only slightly modify Dibelius’s *Formgeschichte* conclusion. Dibelius allowed Flemming to see the speech as a Hellenistic construct, even as Flemming tried to maintain orthodoxy. Unfortunately, Flemming seemed to ignore the fact that liberalism is an inappropriate theological foundation for apostolic contextualization. Yet, Flemming marches forward, mixing liberal exegesis with evangelical theology. As a result, he concludes:

While it is true that the speech’s theology is firmly rooted in the Old Testament and Judaism, Paul is able to clothe biblical revelation in the language and categories of his Greek listeners. He takes advantage of the convergences between the Jewish Scriptures and Hellenistic thought in order to construct apologetic bridges to his listeners. Paul views Greek philosophy as an appropriate conversation partner in his attempt to contextualize the Jewish Christian gospel for his educated contemporaries.²²

Incorporating a form of biblical exegesis that usually leads to syncretism, Flemming argued that the Areopagus speech was primarily about finding convergences between the Hellenistic worldview and the Hebrew worldview. Flemming recognized some negative statements made by Paul about Greek religion, but he stressed the convergences rather than the corrections.²³ Flemming thus appropriated the acidic critical work of Dibel-

²⁰His italics. *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹*Ibid.*, 56–77.

²²Flemming, “Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens,” 203.

²³In a later work, Flemming spent more time detailing the problems with Greek religion, but he still argued that Paul’s speech was primarily positive. “Although distressed about the idolatry he finds in Athens, Paul refuses to flatly condemn the pagans or their

ius even while trying to remain orthodox. Why? Because liberal exegesis, which evidences a high view of philosophy and a low view of Scripture, allowed him to employ Paul's speech as a paradigm for cross-cultural engagement. Unfortunately, Flemming thus made three critical mistakes: First, he incorporated a hostile form of exegesis from which to construct a theology of contextualization. Second, he downplayed the confrontational aspects of Paul's sermon in order to stress convergences. Finally, he even asserted that gospel preaching could occur without reference to the cross.²⁴

A Contextual Interpretation of the Areopagus Sermon

Paul's speech upon Mars Hill must be read contextually, not only within the culture of ancient Athens, but especially within the seventeenth chapter of Acts, the book of Acts, the context of Paul's thought, the context of the New Testament, and the context of the Old Testament. When approached in this way, the speech can no longer be seen as an attempt to build bridges through pre-evangelistic apologetics; rather, Paul was attempting to proclaim the Word evangelistically with confrontational power. The text clearly teaches the confrontational nature of the sermon, the biblical nature of the sermon, and the evangelistic nature of the sermon. Because my European ancestors worshiped false gods, I am so glad that Paul did not cater to European culture, but proclaimed the truth of our evil ways without compromise. Surely, we should be careful to present the same courtesy of forthright speech as we proclaim the gospel to other cultures.

1. The Directly Confrontational Nature of the Sermon

First, contextually, we must see that the sermon was not delivered in an attempt to hold a genteel, detached, and ambiguous apologetical dialogue. It was a confrontational sermon that called into judgment the false beliefs of the Athenians, demanding either conversion or divine judgment. The direct and confrontational nature of Paul's sermon may be seen in the context of the passage, the explicit contradictions of Greek philosophy made by Paul, and some implicit contradictions.

The Context. The account begins by noting that Paul's spirit was provoked (*paroxuneto*) as he looked at a city filled with idols. This was not a man who spoke dispassionately, for his spirit was prompted to paroxysms,

religious and philosophical systems. Instead, he recognizes that the Athenians, their past, and even their religious yearnings, have been touched by the grace of God."Therefore, our missiological "attitude" should be "to recognize the signs of grace wherever they are found." Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 83.

²⁴Flemming, "Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens," 206.

spasms, fits, convulsions of concern, over the false worship of the Athenians. Paul was so provoked that when he came to speak to the Areopagus itself, he let the men of the Athenian academy know they were ignorant people (*agnoountes*) (vv. 23, 30). Imagine, if you will, standing before an august gathering of the finest academics in the world at the Sorbonne, or Cambridge University, or Harvard University, or right here at Southwestern Seminary. Would you have the courage to call such a faculty, “ignorant”? This sermon was not intended to generate a feel-good moment; nor was it a detached and dispassionate dialogue; this sermon by Paul was a convictional confrontation with the admitted ignorance of the purported intelligentsia of the ancient hedonistic world. Yet his accusation of ignorance was not made out of a sense of personal superiority but out of sorrow over their coming judgment.

And the cause of the convulsions in the apostle’s spirit was the false worship of the idols (*eidolon*). The city was filled with thousands of them; some commentators say there were more idols than inhabitants. Scripture views idols, not as “points of contact,” but as “points of separation,” for behind idols lie false gods, also known as demons. Revelation 9:20 places in parallel the worship of “demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood.” In 1 Corinthians 10:19–21, Paul queries, “What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons.” Paul could never see demons as compatible with Christianity: “What communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? . . . ‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.’”

And it is here, with regard to the demonic, that Paul became utterly confrontational. Within Middle Stoicism, which was popular when Paul was in Athens, Poseidonius taught that the demons (*daimonion*), who were believed to inhabit the air, functioned as intermediaries between gods and men.²⁵ And Augustine felt it necessary to devote two books in his magisterial *De Civitas Dei* to contradicting this still popular belief some four centuries later.²⁶ When Paul heard the philosophers refer to Jesus and the resurrection as *daimonion*, it became necessary to deliver a direct response.

²⁵Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, *Greece and Rome* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1946), 422–23.

²⁶Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (reprint; New York: Modern Library, 1993), books viii–ix.

The philosophers were utterly confused: *ton Iesoun* (“Jesus”) and *ten anastasin* (“the resurrection”) are not demons. With forthrightness, Paul came before the assembly, and the first thing he said to the academic court was, “I perceive that you are very religious,” *deisidaimonesterous*, for they venerate demons. This is where the King James Version shows some superiority. There, *deisidaimonesterous*, literally “pious toward demons,” is translated as a negative “superstitious” rather than a positive “very religious.”²⁷ Our Lord is not a demon, Paul argued, and His resurrection is not a female demon. Attempts to turn Paul’s direct speech into a friendly commendation of pagan religiosity are based more upon ambiguous sentimentality than contextual translation.

Explicit Contradictions. The effort to turn this speech into a non-confrontational dialogue primarily seeking religious convergences between the Hellenistic and Christian worldviews fails before the very context of the speech. It also fails when the explicit content of the speech is considered. In addition to the remarks regarding the idols and the demons, there are five negative comments explicitly made by Paul about Hellenistic religion. Consider these explicit contradictions of Hellenism:

- v. 24: God does not dwell in the Athenians’ man-made temples.
- v. 25: God does not need the Athenians’ man-made sacrifices.
- v. 29: God’s nature is not composed of the elements of the world. This is an implicit refutation, by the way, of the Stoic philosophy that God is to be identified with the world-soul or with one of the beginning elements of the world, such as the “designing fire.”²⁸
- v. 29: God’s nature may not be represented by human art (*technes*), the work of human hands.
- v. 29: God’s nature may not be discerned or perceived by the human imagination (*enthumeseos*). The attempts of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, as well as similar attempts by

²⁷Foerster maintains the negative and positive senses occurred in the Greek world, but then inexplicably limits the Lukan use to the positive sense. Foerster, “*deisidaimon, deisidaimonia*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 20. Marshall gives credence to both views. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 285.

²⁸Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 1:387–88. Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 1, *Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 307.

Platonists and Aristotelians are thereby declared futile. The Epicurean philosophers equated truth with mentally derived images (*eidola*) of beauty.²⁹ Paul contradicted both the Stoics and the Epicureans as he stood in their midst.

Implicit Contradictions. Finally, at least five other references of the speech to Greek philosophical religion are implicitly confrontational. Consider the following five implicit condemnations of Hellenistic religion. First, the Greeks tended to speak of the gods (*theoi*), in the plural, a fact that Jews and Christians found unacceptable. Even when Greek philosophers used the singular *theos*, they did not consider themselves monotheistic, but used the term to indicate either the highest god (Zeus), or the nexus of the gods, or an impersonal principle. Apparently, no prominent Greek writer ever considered *theos* to be a unique and personal God.³⁰ Thus, Paul set out to undermine their beliefs with the very first words of the body of his speech: *ho theos*, literally, “the God,” who made the world and everything in it; He is the one and only God (v. 24).

The second implicit condemnation in Paul’s sermon concerns the times (*kairous*) and boundaries (*horothesias*) of the nations (v. 26). The ancient world considered certain gods to be identified with certain nations. It was in the conflict between the gods that the temporal rise and fall, and the physical expansion and constriction of the nations were determined. And at Mount Olympiad, the Greeks even erected a statue to *kairos* (“time”) as a god.³¹ Against such nonsense, Paul claimed that it was God who determined (*horisas*) the bounds of our nations, not the national gods and not even time itself.

Above, we noted the Middle Stoics considered demons to be air-born intermediaries between men and the gods. This brings us to the third implicit condemnation of Greek religion. Against the Middle Stoics, Paul posited a direct origin between God and men. He even cited one of their poets, Aratus, against them in the process: “For we are also His offspring (*genos*)” (v. 28). *Genos* indicates a father-son connection between God and men. In other words, Paul was saying there is no need for a demon, who has nothing in common with man nor with God, to mediate between the two. In quoting a Stoic poet, Paul undermined Stoicism itself. In a previous statement in verse 28, perhaps derived from Epimenides’ poem where Minos addresses Zeus, Paul also undermined the idea that there is any airspace between God and man that requires a demonic intermediary: “He

²⁹Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 1:402.

³⁰Hermann Kleinknecht, “*theos*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 65–79.

³¹Gerhard Delling, “*kairos*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:457.

is not far from us, for in Him we live and move and have our being.”³² The transcendence of God is not overcome by demons residing in the air but by God’s own immanence.

Please note that there is no indication that Paul taught that the statements of either Aratus or Epimenides should be considered general revelation; rather, he utilized pagan philosophers as counterfactual illustrations in a confrontational sermon against yet other pagan philosophers. The pagan poets have no religious authority for Paul; only the Word, the gospel of Christ, has such authority for Paul. Those seeking a theology of general revelation should turn to Romans, where general revelation is limited to the basic ideas that God exists, that God is powerful, and that God is going to judge. By no means should Paul’s statements be taken out of their original context.

The fourth implicit condemnation concerns the refutation of the Stoic philosophy that an impersonal fate determines all things, even God, as opposed to Scripture’s presentation of the God who personally guides history. Several times in the speech, Paul refers to the doctrine of providence. God has created all men from one man (v. 26). God has “determined” (*horisas*—aorist active participle, indicating a completed activity) the preappointed times and boundaries of human nations (v. 26). God has “ordained” (*horisen*—aorist active indicative, indicating a completed activity) the redemptive activity of the man Jesus (v. 31). The Epicureans denied there was such a thing as providence, for the gods are unconcerned with human history; man’s only purpose is to avoid pain before he dies and ceases to exist.³³ The Stoics affirmed there was such a thing as “fate,” but even the gods and the world-soul are subject to determinism; the wise man was counseled to resign to this impersonal fate.³⁴ Against both the Epicureans and the Stoics, Paul advocated the biblical worldview that God is personal, that God personally guides history, and that God calls for a personal response of repentance rather than impersonal resignation.

The fifth implicit contradiction of the Hellenistic worldview concerned the doctrine of immortality. The Epicureans tried to free men from the fear of death by rejecting human immortality and denying that the soul would be judged. Rather, the Epicureans said the soul was materially derived from atoms and returns to such at death.³⁵ The beliefs of Stoics

³²F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 338.

³³Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 1:404–407; Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 1:302–4.

³⁴Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 1:389–90, 394–95; Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 1:305–307.

³⁵Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 1:404.

with regard to immortality exhibited more variety. The Middle Stoics also denied immortality, while Later Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius taught a limited immortality or reabsorption by the world-soul.³⁶ Against all the philosophers, Paul taught that the soul continues to exist, for it was created personally by God, continues to live in closeness to Him, and will be judged by Him. The only hope, Paul said, is in the resurrection available through the death of Jesus Christ (vv. 18, 31). And it was here, with regard to the resurrection that the philosophers really had difficulty with Paul.

The speech delivered by Paul was honestly confrontational, as the context indicates, as Paul himself made explicit, and as Paul implicitly argued in his debate with Greek philosophy and religion. The speech was also supremely biblical.

2. The Biblical Nature of the Sermon

In arguing that the sermon delivered by Paul is biblical, I am not arguing that every word comes from the Old Testament, but that the worldview was biblical as well as the mode of argumentation. I am not arguing he never used Greek terms, for he was active in translation. He most certainly did use Greek terms, but—and this is absolutely critical—Paul was always careful to define Greek terms with biblical meaning. Moreover, it is highly probable that the apostle followed an expository method of Bible proclamation,³⁷ perhaps by focusing on two texts he would have known by heart. This understanding runs counter to the presentations made by Flemming and other scholars, who argue that Paul’s speech is defined by Greek rhetoric with regard to rhetorical style and therefore meaning.³⁸

Dibelius asserted that the motif of the sermon was philosophical in character rather than historical.³⁹ But the content of the sermon begins with creation, progresses through the history of national cultures, and ends with judgment. Unlike the Greek philosophers, who typically possessed a cyclical view of time, Paul advocated a linear view of time. Moreover, time did not bind God but was bound by God, for He personally created the world and time, directed its history, intervened in it personally, and will bring it to a final conclusion. The biblical view of the world is that of

³⁶Ibid., 1:421, 437.

³⁷Ellis concludes that Paul was not much of a rhetorician. “His speech on the Areopagus was apparently exceptional, but here also its substance, as B. Gärtner showed, was the exposition and application of Old Testament texts.” E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 147–58.

³⁸Dean Zwick, “The Exordium of the Areopagus Speech, Acts 17:22, 23,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 94–103; Karl Olav Sandnes, “Paul and Socrates: The Aim of Paul’s Areopagus Speech,” *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993): 13–26; Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 74–75.

³⁹Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 33–39.

divine history. The intellectual content of the sermon, therefore, seems to contradict Dibelius directly.

We may delineate ten progressive aspects within Paul's biblical worldview as propounded in this speech. Of great interest to the expository preacher is the fact that all ten of these truths may be successively found, indicatively or prophetically, to have been drawn from two Old Testament passages: Genesis 1–2 and Isaiah 66. It appears that it was Paul's intent to progress carefully through the biblical texts, boldly expositing the Word of God. Restricting himself to a translation and exposition of his Bible, even while employing illustrative material from the Greek context, enabled Paul to present the gospel of Jesus Christ with authority and assurance.

Paul's Exposition of Genesis 1–2 in Acts 17:24–28. Paul begins by teaching that God made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24). While Paul uses the Greek term *kosmos* ("world"), much abused by the philosophers, he carefully explains its meaning in biblical terms by reference to "heaven and earth." The point is that God is creator and not created, and that as Lord of heaven and earth, He is creator of everything in the cosmos. This is the consistent message of Scripture, beginning with Genesis 1:1. Paul begins here because he understands that divine creation is fundamental to a proper understanding of all that is. Second, God did not depart from the world and remain aloof. Rather, God maintains His personal interaction with the world, because He is Lord over the world. He continues in His role as "Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24). Again, this is the message that begins in Genesis 1:1, but does not end there.

Third, Paul notes that this God gives life to all things (Acts 17:25). Nothing comes into existence or continues in existence apart from His personal power in creating and sustaining it. The first chapter of Genesis again delivers this profound and non-negotiable Christian truth in the six days of creation. And Paul, expounding thereupon, teaches that God has given "life" and "breath" to all. The paralleling of "life" and "breath" introduces the twofold nature of man in Genesis 1–2. This man is comprised of a body formed by God, into which the very Spirit of God has breathed a living soul (Gen 2:7). Fourth, God made Adam, "the one" (Acts 17:26). This message was garnered from Paul's reading of Genesis 1–2, as well. The one was given the very image of God (Gen 1:26–27), and the one was made a living soul through the breath of the very Spirit of God (Gen 2:7). In this way, God may be said to have created man as His own *genos* ("offspring"): by His image and by His breath, God created the one to have a personal relationship with God.

Fifth, bringing the first part of his sermon to the academics gathered at Mars Hill to a close, Paul addressed the genesis of the nations as well

as their providential progress (Acts 17:28). Paul taught that God guides the history of all human nations that He brought forth from this one man Adam, whom He created. This God continued to care providentially for mankind as Adam’s descendants, the various nations, went out to fill the earth. The genesis of all cultures in the creative action of God introduces the concept of a universal deity responsible for the times and boundaries of all nations, contradicting the ethnocentric idea that every nation possesses (or is possessed by) its own deity. Paul is not so much interested in the progress of individual cultures, but in their inhabitants’ universal responsibility to know and submit to this one God, who rules them all.

Paul’s Exposition of Isaiah 66:14–24 in Acts 17:27–31. Turning from Genesis, Paul then takes up the proleptic Great Commission found in the prophet Isaiah (66:14–24). Here, Paul introduces the Fall and its relationship-breaking consequences. Paul then uses this as an opportunity to introduce the hope of Jesus Christ. There are five discernable connections between the Isaiah passage and Paul’s Areopagus sermon.

First, due to our sinfulness, a sinfulness that began with Adam and which we each make our own, our relationship with God has been severed. Robbed of God’s revelation of Himself, man suffers from searching in the darkness for God, groping after Him, hoping to find Him, but we are never able to reach Him on our own (Acts 17:27). The very existence of idolatry in the midst of the people called Israel is an indication that they are seeking their own worship of God (Isa 66:17). Yet God, by His providence, continues to draw the hearts of men to Himself.

Second, the fall of mankind into sin has introduced not only a break in the relationship between God and man, but it has a grave consequence for man’s future. Because men in their religious cultures have decided to worship idols rather than the true God, there is a judgment coming upon mankind. “The Lord will judge all flesh,” Isaiah prophesied (Isa 66:16–17). And Paul, echoing the biblical text, proclaims, “He has appointed a day on which He will judge” (Acts 17:31).

Third, this judgment will come harshly and permanently upon every man unless he knows “Jesus” as His mediator, for this one “Man” is also the judge (Acts 17:18, 31). The *daimonion* cannot mediate for human beings, who lay under divine judgment; only this man can mediate for us. Isaiah 66:18 tells us that God will judge both the “works” and the “thoughts” of man, so Paul warns that the artistic works of man and the inventive thoughts of man will bring judgment (Acts 17:29).

Fourth, our only assurance against the impending judgment comes about through the fact that God has raised this man Jesus from the dead. The “assurance” of which Paul speaks in verse 31 has two parts to it: first,

there is death (*nekron*); second, there is resurrection (*anastasin*). As Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 15, the gospel includes both the death of Christ on the cross and the resurrection of Christ from this death. As Isaiah prophesied, there is hope to “escape” and see God’s “glory” (Isa 66:19). It is through his death for our sins that all men of every culture may be reconciled to God. It is through his resurrection from death that we may be raised into eternal life. Finally, it is here, with the climax of history in the gospel of Jesus Christ that a decision is demanded. This brings us to our final point regarding the nature of Paul’s speech.

3. The Evangelistic Nature of the Sermon

Proponents of the convergence interpretation of the sermon have argued that Paul was trying to speak with *insinuatō*, in an obscure manner, avoiding outright or significantly delaying evangelism.⁴⁰ It has also been argued that by using the term *dielegomai* in verse 17, Luke was indicating that the intent of Paul’s speech was to dally in philosophical dialogue alone.⁴¹ In other words, the original Mars Hill sermon, it is said, was not intended to be a Christian sermon.⁴² I would argue to the contrary that the use of *dielegomai* may not indicate ambiguous dialogue, but open Christian proclamation. After all, in Acts 17:2–3, Paul “dialogued” in the synagogue while explicitly referring to Scripture, and with a view to convincing the listeners of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Similar instances of the evangelistic use of *dielegomai* may be found in Acts 18:4, 9; 19:8–9; 20:7, 9. Moreover, elsewhere in the passage, we are told that Paul was both proclaiming (*katangelo*) and “preaching,” literally “evangelizing” (*euangelizeto*).

Dibelius also argued that the speech addressed the Greeks in a Greek way as “a matter of thinking” rather than biblically as “a matter of the will.”⁴³ And yet, if this is so, there is the problem of Paul’s call to repentance (*metanoein*), which is most certainly an act of the will. Against these various attempts to turn Paul into a philosopher rather than recognizing he was a passionate preacher of the gospel calling sinners to repentance and faith, we cite Kenneth Gangel. In response to the question, “Did Paul preach the gospel in Athens?” Gangel said, “Verses 31 and 32 firmly testify to evangelical witness.”⁴⁴ Paul’s speech was not intended to be a dry dialogue or an incomplete philosophical apology. As a result of his appeal to the will,

⁴⁰Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 74–75; Sandnes, “Paul and Socrates,” 19.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 21.

⁴²Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 27.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁴Kenneth O. Gangel, “Paul’s Areopagus Speech,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127 (1970): 312.

Paul’s audience was split into fragments by His invitation to repent and believe in the gospel. Some mocked him; some wanted to hear more; and a few, including Dionysius and Damaris, “joined him and believed” (vs. 33). The fact that people believed and joined with Paul in a local Christian church indicates that Paul was most certainly preaching evangelistically.

All of the necessary factors for a confrontational, biblical, evangelistic presentation of the gospel are present in this passage: divine sovereignty, human lostness, the death and resurrection of Christ, the coming judgment, a call to repent, and a willingness to believe. Moreover, the subsequent joining of some with Paul indicates that a church actually came into existence. At Athens, Paul openly confronted the deceptions of the Athenian culture, proclaimed biblical truth, issued an evangelistic appeal, and gathered a local church. The church that Paul planted in the ancient city of Athens was not built upon cultural relevancy, but upon biblical fidelity and honest evangelism.

Five Applications to the Postmodern Context

Perhaps there are some lessons that could be learned as a result of the difficulties we are experiencing in discerning a proper interpretation and subsequent application of Paul’s Mars Hill sermon. These lessons relate especially to the problematic language of the emergent and emerging movement, as well as a proper understanding of general revelation.

1. To speak of “enabling” the gospel or of “making” it “relevant” appears to imply a low view of Scripture. It appears to assume either that grace actually resides in us rather than in Scripture, or in the culture rather than in Scripture. Scripture understands the Word of God to be living and powerful and effective by reason of its relationship to God (Heb 4:12–13). The Christian is called to proclaim that Word and trust God to work in the act of proclamation itself by reason of His own power, not by reason of ours. We must remember that he has graciously made us necessary instruments of evangelism, but we are still mere instruments, not originating causes. God’s Word enables us to preach His Word; God’s Spirit enables the hearer to believe His Word. Let us humbly admit that relevancy is determined by God’s Word and not by man’s culture, nor by the preacher. Our focus, therefore, should be upon translating the Word for proclamation and not upon trying to make it culturally relevant.

2. Culture is never a neutral category. Culture may be summarily defined as a pattern of social interaction in human thought and deed. Because culture is human, culture is fallen, too. While we recognize that God directs the times and bounds of human cultures, he allows man freedom to obey or disobey him. In his sinfulness, man often exalts evil in his culture, just as the Greeks did with the idols and demons or false gods; just as my own ancestors did. Realistically, therefore, our pattern should never be culture, but the cross. We are not called to be disciples of culture who survey society in order to discover truth or even rediscover the gospel. Rather, we are called through proclamation to become disciples of Christ who proclaim Scripture to save the lost from the cultures in which they are headed to hell. To pursue cultural convergences without discrimination invites the concurrent dangers of forsaking the cross, of embracing human sin, and of fostering deception. We must remember that the doctrine of holiness, or separation, is not only a characteristic of God, it is also a divine command.
3. Culture is simply not a reliable source of general revelation beyond what has already been defined by Scripture. In Romans 1, Paul lays out the leading truths about general revelation: God exists; God is powerful; God will hold us accountable. There may be a few other items that Scripture defines as general revelation. However, we must limit ourselves to defining as general revelation only what Scripture defines as such. The Pauline command, “not to think beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6), should be the motto of every Christian theologian. We can be sure that Paul was not thinking of the Koran or the Bhagad Vita, or Sigmund Freud or Burrhus Frederic Skinner, or Joan Osborne or Salvador Dali when he was developing a doctrine of general revelation. We ought not brazenly claim apostolic authority for ourselves by trying to expand the concept of general revelation beyond what is written in Scripture.
4. Cross-cultural communication of the gospel is commanded in the Great Commission. It is here that we must applaud the emerging movement, for it displays a zeal for the proclamation of the gospel across cultural boundaries, a zeal similar to that long displayed in the Southern Baptist Convention itself. Let us never forget that evangelism is the

sole reason why God left us here on this planet. We must go to the nations; we must make disciples; we must baptize them; and we must teach them all that Christ commands. Like Paul in Athens, we must evangelize people in the synagogue, in the marketplace, and in the academy, wherever we can find lost people (vv. 17, 19). And all of this comes out of and is empowered in God’s Word, which is crystal clear, sovereignly sufficient, and powerfully proactive.

5. Finally, let us remember that in evangelism, we must build bridges of honest communication through proper translation of Scripture; however, like Paul we must also burn bridges of deception resident within all human cultures. Yes, let us build bridges to God by translating His Word while simultaneously we also destroy demonic deceptions by applying His Word. Or, perhaps to introduce Pauline language into the question: While we are busy building bridges by translating the Word into other languages, should we not also be busy about “pulling down strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought captive into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:4b–5)? Christians of European cultural ancestry should be thankful that Paul was faithful to confront the culture of our ancestors with the evils in our worldview. In turn, let us be sure both to affirm humanity in other cultures and to present faithfully to them the saving gospel from the Bible, which stands in judgment over all human cultures.