

THE ALPS OF APOLOGETICS, THE EVEREST OF EVANGELISM – PAUL IN ATHENS

Proclaiming the Attributes of God

Paul thought imperially, as every Christian should, and spread before these philosophers an alpine-top vision of God W. Graham Scroggie
The Unfolding Drama of Redemption Vol.2 p 384



REVELATION REVEALS A GOD BEYOND REASON

The NEED for REVELATION: An ADMISSION of AGNOSTICISM!

This center of universal paganism wanted to be sure that no possible god would go unworshipped by its citizens. Paul used this polytheistic practice as a bridge to gain access to his audience and so be able to introduce the living God to these “religious” people.

Ronald B. Mayers *Both/And: A Balanced Apologetic* p.165

The reference [v.23] is not directly to Jehovah, as one of the foreign deities to whom they had erected altars; nor to the yearnings after the Supreme God, which are said to underlie the grossest forms of polytheism; but simply to the practical acknowledgement of insufficiency and worthlessness, included in the very fact that their religion allowed worship of an unknown god. **Joseph Addison Alexander** *The Acts of the Apostles Explained* p.153

Toward God, says Paul, mankind had ever “groped.” The word he uses

would raise echoes in the mind of every listening Greek. Homer and Plato were familiar reading. Every educated man would remember that the verb is used in the *Odyssey* to describe the blinded Cyclops, groping for the entrance of his cave, and in the *Phaedo*, Plato’s most moving dialogue, for the very search for truth which Paul here envisages on its highest plane: the quest for god. The word, it is true, is used four times, in the Septuagint, to mean “groping in the dark,” but Paul must have had familiar Greek contexts in mind. His easy allusiveness is the impressive point. So far, so good. With astonishing intellectual dexterity, the Jew of Tarsus, the Pharisee of Gamaliel’s school, met the cream of Athens’ intelligentsia on their familiar ground; shrewdly discerned the portion of the audience open to his argument; and, with polished persuasion, in their common speech, put his concept of God before them. **E.M. Blaiklock** *Acts: The Birth of the Church* p.164

1. The SOVEREIGNTY of GOD: ‘The God who made the world and all things in it ... Lord of heaven and earth ... He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things ... He made from one every nation ... determined appointed times and boundaries of their habitation ...’ (vv.24,25,26)

2. The TRANSCENDENCE of GOD: ‘... does not dwell in temples made with hands, as though He needed anything ... we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man’ (vv.24,25,29)

The Stoics conceived of their god as a mighty life force surging through all things and thrusting toward perfection. It was a near pantheism not unlike the Ultimate Reality or the Ground of Being of some philosophic theologians. Hence Stoicism propounded a way of life that was toilsome, enduring, and defiant of an evil world. It is

easy to see why Paul then addressed himself to the Stoics of his audience. He, too, believed in a Purpose working to a vast consummation and the need for man to cooperate with it. He, too, believed that what a man was mattered supremely, not what he possessed. He, too, sought self-sufficiency and superiority above circumstances. His God, too, was transcendent and beyond the patronage of man. There were points of sympathy and contact, a bridgehead of persuasion. It is Paul’s Jewish and synagogue approach, applied to Greek Stoic philosophers. **E.M. Blaiklock** *op.cit.*, p.160

3. The IMMANENCE and OMNIPRESENCE of GOD: ‘... He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things ... He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist ...’ (vv.25,27,28)

In regard to religion, the Epicureans believed in the gods; but to satisfy their own conception of blessedness, the gods were banished to a distant celestial sphere of bliss altogether removed from the disturbances of this life and the cares of providence. So this world

was left to itself; and their view of it was very much that of modern materialism. In fact they held the atomic theory of modern science, although of course in a crude form. Their theory carried with it the denial of life after death. **R.B. Rackham** *The Acts of the Apostles* p.304

The theist, as well as the pantheist, believes that God is not far from every one of us, and that in him we live and move and have our being. The theist, as well as the pantheist, can say, 'Closer is he than breathing, nearer than hands and feet'. The theist accepts all the truth of pantheism, but avoids the error. God is present in the world -- not one sparrow 'shall fall on the ground with your Father' -- but he is not limited to the world. He is not just another name for the totality of things, but an awful, mysterious, holy, free and sovereign Person. He is present in the world, but also Master of the world. **J.G. Machen** *The New Testament* p.110

4. The GRACE of GOD: '... these times of ignorance God has overlooked ...' (v.30)

5. The RIGHTEOUSNESS of GOD: '... God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent ... He will judge the world in righteousness ...' (vv.30,31)

Indeed, the deliverance of man from the fear of the gods was one of the purposes of the Epicurean philosophy. **J.G. Machen** *op.cit.*, p.109

The further assertion however that *God made of one* (man or blood) *every race of man* was a serious blow at Greek pride in general. Very much like the Jews in this respect, the Greeks divided the world into two kinds of men -- Greeks and Barbarians, -- and the latter were of no account. Hence it was necessary for S. Paul to preach to Greeks as well as to Jews

the doctrine of catholicity, and this is marked by the characteristic recurrence of the word *all*. [9 times in Greek] **R.B. Rackham** *op.cit.*, p.316

6. The OMNIPOTENCE of GOD: 'God who made the world and all things in it ... He will judge the world ... raising Him from the dead.' (vv. 24,31)

7. The OMNISCIENCE of GOD: 'He ... has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitations ... He will judge the world in righteousness ...' (vv.26,31)

The whole address remains a model for those who seek to present the Christian faith in such circles. In addition, it is a warning to those who, in misguided moments, have seen a virtue in crudity and a loyalty to truth in a disrespect for the views, habits of thought, and attitudes of intelligent people who fail in all points to follow them. Confrontation there must be but with a preamble of courtesy, with the tolerance which is not incompatible with earnestness, and with the sincerest of efforts to see good where good has found a place. **E.M. Blaiklock** *op.cit.*, p.166

How did Paul become 'all things to all men'?

"As also some of the poets among you." Aratus of Soli in Cilicia (ab. B.C. 270) has these very words in his *Ta Phainomena* and Cleanthes, Stoic philosopher (300-220 B.C.) in his *Hymn to Zeus* has *Ek sou gar genos esmen*. In 1 Cor. 15:32 Paul quotes from Menander and in Titus 1:12 from Epimenides. J. Rendel Harris claims that he finds allusions in Paul's Epistles to Pindar, Aristophanes, and other Greek writers. There is no reason in the world why Paul should not have acquaintance with Greek literature, though one need not to strain a point to prove it. Paul, of course, knew that the words were written of Zeus (Jupiter), not of Jehovah, but he applies the idea in them to his point just made that all men are the offspring of God ... It has been said that Paul left the simple gospel in this address to the council of the Areopagus for philosophy. But did he? He skilfully caught their attention by reference to an altar to an Unknown God whom he interprets to be the Creator of all things and all men who overrules the whole world and who now commands repentance of all and has revealed his will about a day of reckoning when Jesus Christ will be Judge. He has preached the unity of God, the one and only God, has proclaimed repentance, a judgment day, Jesus as the Judge as shown by his Resurrection, great fundamental doctrines, and doubtless has much more to say when they interrupted his address. There is no room here

for such a charge against Paul. He rose to a great occasion and made a masterful exposition of God's place and power in human history. **Archibald T. Robertson** *Word Pictures in the New Testament* p.289,291

... Paul is not suggesting that God is to be thought of in terms of the Zeus of Greek polytheism or Stoic pantheism. He is rather arguing that the poets his hearers recognized as authorities have to some extent corroborated his message. In his search for a measure of common ground with his hearers, he is, so to speak, disinfecting and rebaptizing the poets' words for his own purposes. **Richard Longenecker** *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Acts* p.476

Paul really began with the note of conciliation, and from beginning to end there was nothing calculated to offend, or drive away the men whom he desired to gain. In this address he recognized the religious instincts. Every idol proved capacity for God. Every temple demonstrated man's need of worship ... The whole address is characterized by the spirit of conciliation, of courtesy, of kindness. He would capture these men by an attitude before he proceeded -- as he did ere he had done -- to denounce their activities, to show the unutterable folly of their methods, and finally to proclaim to them the great evangel. Again, his method was apologetic, in the true sense of that word. **G. Campbell Morgan** *Acts of the Apostles* p.327