



Whitefield BRIEFING

March 2002 (Vol.7 No.1)

Acts 17 as an Apologetic Model

Lars Dahle

The Need for Biblical Foundations

Apologetics may be described as the rational justification of Christian truth claims over against relevant questions, objections and alternatives. Despite its prominence historically, apologetics is seen as controversial in many contemporary Christian circles. Wherever practised, however, contemporary apologetics seems largely to be characterised by a neglect of biblical foundations and models. Where biblical material *is* used, Acts 17:16-34 keeps recurring as a biblical paradigm for apologetics.

Acts 17 as a Key Apologetic Text

Acts 17:16-34 is the most extensive example in the New Testament of a dialogue with, and an address to, a pagan and pluralistic context. The passage clearly describes Paul as an apologist in the Athenian marketplace (the *agora*). It seems to have been recorded intentionally by Luke as a positive model from apostolic practice. The basis for this is found *both* in the fact that this passage fits a positive repeated pattern in Acts of key apologetic approaches and arguments *and* that Luke in the Book of Acts argues for the historical and theological truth of the Christian Gospel for Christian converts. This is done by Luke both to confirm the truth-value of their faith and to give them tools and models for their own apologetic ministry.

The passage played a key role as an important bridge historically between the apologetics of Hellenistic Judaism and the Christian Greek apologists of the second century. Throughout the history of Christian apologetics, Acts 17 has continued to influence apologetic discussions, paradigms and argumentative strategies. Paul's approach in Athens is referred to by a number of contemporary apologists as a model for apologetics in the modern secular and pluralistic world, but has never been fully developed as such.

This New Testament model may be outlined in terms of a number of significant features.

The Apologetic Model in Acts 17

1. A normative worldview

Luke's account describes the defining, normative content of Paul's truth claims as consisting of key Judeo-Christian convictions about who God is and how he has revealed himself. *Both* God's transcendence and immanence *and* God's self-disclosure in general and special revelation clearly informed Paul's apologetic strategy in Athens. Thus, Luke describes Paul as an apologist steeped in a genuinely Judeo-Christian worldview in the midst of a challenging pluralistic and pagan context of Athens.

2. A 'proactive' approach

The initial responses in the *agora* to Paul's new teaching were characterized by incomprehension, fascination, and an invitation to the apostle to present his views before the Areopagus Council. Paul perceived that their ignorance was basic to their idolatry. This led to a renewed presentation and justification of Christian truth claims in this new setting. As in Lystra (Acts 14), Paul initially seems to have underestimated the influence of the pluralistic and pagan context on the listeners' appreciation of his Gospel about 'Jesus and the Resurrection'.

This may imply that Paul had to rethink his initial approach in Athens along more 'proactive' lines (probably in view of key Old Testament precedents such as Is. 40ff.), and that the Areopagus Speech constitutes this renewed 'proactive' approach. Whereas Paul's initial 'reactive' presentation resulted in misunderstandings and curiosity, the apostle's later 'proactive' presentation provoked the Athenians to three different reactions: rejection, reconsideration and repentance. Thus, Luke describes Paul as an apologist who gradually sees the need for a proactive approach in *agora* contexts.

3. *Contextual understanding*

The *Lucan* description of Paul as apologist in the Athenian *agora* shows his contextual understanding of relevant questions, objections and alternatives to his truth claims about 'Jesus and the Resurrection'.

Key *questions* to the apostle's claims were the explicit "Can we hear more about this?", the implicit "Who is 'Jesus' and what is 'the Resurrection'?", as well as the implicit "Is there a need for a new altar?". The presence of these questions corresponds to the *Lucan* narrative aside about Athenian curiosity in 17:21.

Key *objections* to the apostle's claims were the explicit "This is foolish!", the explicit "This is foreign!", as well as the implicit "If we are wrong, why is there no plague?". The presence of these objections indicates that (at least) part of the audience had a critical attitude towards Paul.

Key *alternative* worldviews were popular Athenian religion, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. The key role of Paul's polemical engagement with these beliefs indicates that the apostle was aware that such alternative belief-systems shape how the Christian worldview is perceived in a given context and thus affect people's questions and objections to Christian truth claims. Thus, Luke implicitly describes Paul as a Christian apologist with a contextual understanding of relevant questions, objections and alternatives in Athens to the claims about 'Jesus and the Resurrection'.

4. *Appropriate justification procedures*

The *Lucan* description of Paul in Athens includes an increasing awareness of different justification procedures of the synagogue and the informal and formal *agora* contexts. The *Lucan* narrative seems to imply in 17:17 that the proper justification procedure for Paul in the context of '*the Scripture community*' is to demonstrate the consistency between the Old Testament Scriptures (as the assumed shared authority) and Christian truth claims about 'Jesus and the Resurrection' (as confirmed by historical evidence). The Scriptures were thus the common ground in the synagogue context in Athens.

The focus of Luke's narrative, however, is on *the pluralistic context of the agora*, both in terms of the open discussions in the marketplace and the more formal setting before the Areopagus Council. Paul encountered Hellenistic people who were biblical illiterates, had no knowledge of the Christian worldview, and did not accept the Jewish Scriptures as the final authority. A justification procedure on the basis of the formal authority of Scripture would thus have seemed largely irrelevant – or even invalid – in these pluralistic contexts. Thus, Paul appeals to available evidence, to Athenian authorities and traditions, and to logic.

These appeals seem to indicate that Paul assumed that there was a common ground between him and the Athenians, not only ontologically but also (at least to some extent) epistemologically. The *ontological common ground* is indicated in the references both to a shared created reality and to a shared, created humanity. The *epistemological common ground* is indicated in what implicitly seems to be considered by Paul as common or shared criteria of truth (i.e. implicit appeals to coherence and consistency, correspondence with reality, and adequacy and relevance).

Thus, Luke describes Paul as an apologist with an awareness of and an ability to apply appropriate justification procedures in various contexts, relative to whether people have any knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and/or belief in these Scriptures as authoritative.

5. *'Positive deconstruction' of alternative worldviews*

The *Lucan* account claims that Paul started where the Athenians were in his follow-up speech before the Areopagus Council. This means that he started with their popular piety and with their Stoic and Epicurean beliefs. Paul claims that Stoicism and Epicureanism are 'half-truths', thus simultaneously identifying and affirming elements of truth (i.e. 'points of continuity and contact') and identifying and challenging elements of error (i.e. 'points of discontinuity and tension') within these worldviews. The apostle saw Stoicism and Epicureanism as influential beliefs, which do not fully or adequately explain both the transcendence and the immanence of God and should not have accepted the popular idolatry.

Paul relates the question of the nature of God to the question of the purpose of humanity. Paul argued in Athens that human beings do not find ultimate meaning on the basis of their own views of themselves, but only on the basis of the one, true God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's implicit claim, then, seems to be that holding a non-Christian worldview, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, in

fact implies being in tension *both* with reality (since human beings do not find ultimate meaning on the basis of their own views of themselves) *and* with God (since humanity substitutes the one, true transcendent-immanent God with counterfeit idols). Popular idolatry, Stoicism and Epicureanism are thus shown by Paul to be inconsistent, as failing to correspond to reality in key areas, and as much less adequate than the Judeo-Christian worldview.

Thus, Luke describes Paul before the Areopagus as a 'proactive' Christian apologist who starts with the beliefs of the Athenians and 'positively deconstructs' these beliefs.

6. *Paul's argumentative approach*

Paul's argumentative approach before the Areopagus Council may be expressed in terms of a move *from* natural theology *through* ultimate authority *to* resurrection.

First, Paul argues that, whereas natural theologies such as Stoic pantheism and Epicurean deism contain elements of truth, a Judeo-Christian *natural theology* provides the most adequate view of God, the universe and humanity. This developed argument has a number of functions in Paul's apologetic: It simultaneously answers the question "Is there a need for a new altar?" and meets the objection "This is foreign!". Furthermore, it provides a credible premise for Paul's claims about God's judgement - since God in fact has ultimate authority as the Creator and Sustainer. Finally, it provides a theistic context for Paul's claims about 'Jesus and the Resurrection'.

Secondly, Paul argues that the claim that the Judeo-Christian God has *ultimate authority* - as expressed in the claims about his final judgment - is plausible, since he is the Creator and Sustainer, and it constitutes an appropriate basis for claims about 'the epistemic obligation' of the Christian faith. This compressed argument has a number of functions in Paul's apologetic: It answers the implicit question "If we are wrong, why is there no plague?" and relativizes or deconstructs any claims to any kind of ultimate authority. It also challenges fundamental Athenian attitudes such as their escapism, attempts at safety-precautions, and feelings of self-sufficiency. Furthermore, it presents God's final judgment (as an expression of his ultimate authority) as the plausible reason for the universal summons to repentance (thus claiming the 'epistemic obligation' of the Christian faith). Finally, it reintroduces the topic "Who is 'Jesus'?" in an indirect and 'proactive' way.

Thirdly, Paul argues about the historical *Resurrection* of Jesus - as resonating with ultimate human concerns, as indicating the uniqueness and authority of Jesus, and as being based on sufficient, available evi-

dence. This highly condensed argument has a number of functions in Paul's apologetic: It answers in an indirect way the questions "Can we hear more about this?" and "Who is 'Jesus' and what is 'the Resurrection'?". It also reintroduces the controversial question of the Resurrection (from 17:18) in a theistic context with claims to ultimate authority. The Christian claims about the Resurrection are introduced as more attractive than Stoicism ('the soul lives on after death but is finally absorbed into god') or Epicureanism ('death is the end of all existence'), since the message of the Resurrection ('death conquered!') speaks to ultimate human needs and concerns. Furthermore, it provides evidence of the unique role of the man Jesus as God's appointed Judge. Finally, it implicitly invites the listeners to check the credibility of the historical evidence for the Resurrection.

Thus, Luke describes Paul as a Christian apologist with an overall argument before the Areopagus Council, where he moves *from* arguments about the credibility of a Judeo-Christian natural theology *through* the plausibility and implications of God's ultimate authority *to* the significance and evidence of the Resurrection.

7. *Paul's apologetic aims*

There seems to be an underlying awareness (at least in the Lucan narrative and probably also in Paul's approach) that people's perspectives affect their perceptions. Paul's arguments were met with three different responses: mocking (17:32a), interest (17:32b) and repentance (17:34). These responses seem to a certain extent to have corresponded to what seems to have been Paul's threefold apologetic aim: 'to interest', 'to persuade', and 'to confront'.

The mocking attitude of some Athenians (who obviously persisted in their pagan attitudes and seem to have blinded themselves to the truth) should thus probably be seen as indicating that the apostle *confronted* their untenable convictions at the basic worldview level.

Some Athenians, however, expressed a genuine interest in listening further to Paul's justification of his claims. This corresponds to Paul's positive and immediate aim *to generate further interest* in 'Jesus and the Resurrection'. The apostle achieved this, not just by answering their questions but also by 'proactively' generating genuine and significant questions about the Christian faith. This could be seen as an implicit communicative principle underlying Paul's apologetic approach.

Paul's ultimate apologetic aim was to *persuade* interested Athenians of 'the epistemic obligation' of Christian truth claims about 'one God and one Lord', and the Lucan narrative shows that some Athenians

were persuaded. Thus, Luke presents Paul as an apologist with a threefold apologetic aim: 'to interest', 'to persuade', and 'to confront'.

Contemporary Application: A Postmodern Context

A number of Christian theologians and apologists claim that philosophical and popular *postmodernism* – with scepticism, relativism and hedonism as key components – constitutes a major contemporary 'worldview challenge' to Christian truth claims. If so, the relevance of the Acts 17 model need to be assessed in the light of this influential challenge. Such an assessment would lead to the following conclusions.

The truth claims in the Acts 17 model remain valid and relevant also in the contemporary context as the defining *content* of a Christian worldview. The *general emphases* in Acts 17 regarding contextual understanding, application of appropriate justification procedures and 'positive deconstruction' of alternative worldviews seem valid and relevant in any context. The common contextual features of biblical illiteracy and pluralism point to the relevance of Paul's specific apologetic *approach* to the contemporary postmodern challenge. Paul's *arguments* may be seen as potentially relevant, but need to be further developed contextually, if they are to be seen as properly valid over against philosophical and popular postmodernism. Paul's *aims* seem relevant and valid in a postmodern context, if properly applied and when seen as complementary.

These conclusions indicate that the content, the approach, the arguments, and the aims of the apologetic model in Acts 17:16-34 may justifiably be seen as valid and relevant for contemporary apologetics in comparable 'agora contexts', at least in relation to the postmodern challenge.

Further reading

- D A Carson, "Athens Revisited" in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D A Carson, 384-98. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House (2000)
- E D Cook, *Blind Alley Beliefs* 2nd ed. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press (1996)
- C Gempf, "Athens, Paul At" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G F Hawthorne, R P Martin, & D G Reid, 51-4. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press (1993)
- A E McGrath, *The Unknown God: Searching for Spiritual Fulfilment* Oxford: Lion Publishing (1999)
- N Pollard, *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult* Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press (1997)
- K Prior, *The Gospel in a Pagan Society.* 2nd ed. Fearn: Christian Focus Publications (1995)
- B W Winter, "In Public and in Private: Early Christians and Religious Pluralism" In *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. A D Clarke, and B W Winter, 125-48. 2nd ed. Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press/Baker Book House (1992)

Lars Dahle is Academic Dean at Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication in Kristiansand, Norway, where he lectures in worldviews, ethics and apologetics. He recently completed his Ph.D. on *Acts 17:16-34. An Apologetic Model Then and Now?* at The Open University through The Whitefield Institute as a sponsoring establishment.