


## APOLOGETICS AND PREACHING: LESSONS FROM THE PREACHING OF PETER AND PAUL

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between apologetics and preaching in three sermons by the apostles Peter and Paul, and finds that, for the apostles, apologetics and preaching are not separate disciplines but inseparable and inter-dependent components of gospel ministry and the life of the church. Taking apostolic preaching as paradigmatic for ministry and Christian life today, this paper argues for a retrieval of this organic understanding, on the one hand, of apologetics that aims toward and follows the structure of gospel proclamation, and, on the other, of preaching which features vindication of the whole of counsel of God against unbelief in its various forms.

**Keywords:** *Apologetics, Preaching, Paul, Peter.*



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## Introduction

In what follows, I examine three apostolic sermons and draw conclusions from those sermons regarding the nature of the two items of concern—apologetics and preaching—and the relationship between them. I have selected for this purpose three sermons by Peter and Paul which address, first, a largely Jewish audience, then a mixed audience, then a predominantly gentile audience. This approach prioritizes the testimony of Scripture. Examples of apostolic gospel proclamation are presented as the raw material for our investigation so that the Word of God—rather than a set of arbitrary pre-conceptions—establishes the terms of our investigation from the beginning.<sup>1</sup> This method prioritizes Scripture and exposes even our basic notions of the items at hand—apologetics and preaching—to the critical light of Scripture. We are in a better position to hear from Scripture and to learn from Scripture.

Suspense, of course, enhances the reader's experience; nonetheless, I announce here at the outset the conclusion I draw from the biblical data: apologetics and preaching are distinct but inseparable. Apologetics should serve to exalt the Christ who is featured finally and summatively in pulpit proclamation. That is, apologetics takes its cue and draws its strength from, and draws the unbeliever toward, that great pinnacle of the life of the church, the proclamation of the Christ of the Scriptures from the pulpit, and apologetics leads to gospel proclamation. Conversely, preaching must be apologetically crafted and executed. Cornelius Van Til had good reasons for claiming that a doctrine should be defended as soon as it is uttered, one of which is apostolic example, as shall be demonstrated below. One also observes in these apostolic examples the importance of biblical theology and redemptive-historical hermeneutics for both the proclamation and the defense of the gospel.<sup>2</sup> The point is: apologetics and preaching are distinct but inseparable features of the life and ministry of the church in the already-not-yet.

## The Son of David Enthroned: Peter's Sermon at Pentecost

In Acts 2, Peter addresses the Jews who had traveled to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Verse 5 describes a bustling crowd of "Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven" (2:5). The Jews had come for the Jewish feast day Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, which is observed seven weeks after Passover. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai and the early grain harvest. But redemptive-historically speaking, Jewish feast days were rapidly disappearing, or losing significance, as they were absorbed into the fulfillment-accomplishment of redemption, into Christ himself, the substance of the covenant now made manifest (WCF 7.6, 8.6). Festivals and new moons, Paul says, "are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col 2:16–17).

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<sup>1</sup> This procedure assumes a particular view of the apostolate. See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1979), 89–93; Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, trans. H. De Jongste, rev. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1988), 12–30.

<sup>2</sup> On redemptive historical hermeneutics, see the contributions of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012).

As Paul has written, that the resurrection of Christ signaled the beginning of the new creation, so Peter will utilize Joel 2 to proclaim the eschatological significance of the pouring out of the Spirit that day.<sup>3</sup> Pentecost belongs to Joel's vision of "the last days," says Peter. In other words, the strange events just witnessed are the fulfillment of canonical prophecy, and not just any prophecy—end times prophecy.

Paul has also said that in the eyes of the world, preaching is foolishness (1 Cor 1–2). On this day, apostolic proclamation and Spirit-gifting are slandered as drunkenness. "There came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind"—but no wind, evidently, only the sound—and then "tongues of fire appeared to them and rest on each one of them," and then as "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit," they "began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:2–4). Many were astounded; others mocked, saying, "these men are filled with new wine" (Acts 2:13).

Clearly, Peter is confronting confusion and ignorance, probably spiritual over-excitement, but also skeptics, cynics, and accusers. He is defending the meaning and significance of what has just happened against naysayers, and he will do in extended form what Matthew does repeatedly throughout his gospel, that is to say that "this has happened to fulfill" (Matt 1:22; 2:15, etc.). Peter will preach the apostolic gospel of promise-fulfillment and redemptive accomplishment.

The Jews in Jerusalem are watching the accomplishment of redemption with their own eyes, and they are dismissing what they are witnessing as drunkenness. As Christ was mocked even as he hung on the cross, so the apostles are being mocked as they are equipped with the Holy Spirit for their ministry in fulfillment of redemptive history. So Peter's goal is to vindicate these remarkable events. That is, there are accusers, skeptical of the work of God and the work of the apostles, skeptical of their genuineness and their credentials and their gifting. And these accusers have had evidence of divine activity in abundance: they heard the sound of the wind, they saw the tongues of fire resting upon the apostles, they heard the glories of God declared in many languages—and having the oracles, the covenants, the patriarchs, and so on, they should be predisposed to hear from their God. But still they mock. For this reason, Peter's primary concern is to answer critics, and to vindicate the work of God. In fact, to be more precise, since he will use the Word of God to vindicate God, Peter himself is not involved in vindicating God but in facilitating God's own self-vindication. Nor is Peter interested in vindicating an abstract claim or an isolated fact or two, but Christ himself as the sum and substance of historical redemption. Peter's defense will depend upon the unity of covenant history, upon the fact that there is a singular covenant of grace, and that this one covenant of grace "was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel," but it is one covenant as there is only one mediator between God and men (WCF 8.5; 1 Tim 2:5). It is important to note that while covenant theology is prominent, the very nature of Scripture

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<sup>3</sup> On the eschatological significance of the resurrection in Paul, see Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994). Also relevant is Geerhardus Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 91–125.

as the self-consistent Word of God is at stake. Peter puts on full display the “consent of all the parts, the [singular] scope of the whole,” and the “true and full sense” of Scripture, “which “is not manifold, but one,” namely, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (WCF 1.5, 1.9; 2 Cor 5:19).

It bears emphasizing that Peter is not in an ecclesiastical context. The reader must not be confused by the fact that he is in Jerusalem, surrounded by Jews. The Jews, as we see even in the life of Christ, are the primary opponents of the grace of God that has now come in the Son. First the Jews, and then the Gentiles. And Jesus has already warned Peter that someone else will dress him and lead him where he does not want to go (John 21:18). Peter, we may suppose, already thinks of himself as a martyr, now hating even his own life, as a steady and unwavering herald of the grace of God and the sufficiency of Christ (Luke 14:26). Peter is well aware that the gospel grace of God will be opposed in its every appearance or utterance, exactly as Stephen will later declare: “you always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). Indeed, it is this summative declaration that provoked that day the thinly veiled ire of Stephen’s listeners.

Jesus makes precisely this argument in John 5, that the Jews of his day rejected him, and they rejected John the Baptist, because they had rejected Moses, and they had rejected Moses because they did not have the love of God within them. Jesus shows us in John 5 that the antithesis is invisible; that the antithesis takes hold even within the church; that the antithesis is spiritual; and that the way to combat it is by biblical vindication of who Christ is as the Son sent to atone for the sins of the church.<sup>4</sup> And this is precisely Peter’s approach in Acts 2.

So, let us think of it this way: On the day of Pentecost, Peter addresses a raucous crowd of Jews, including religious authorities and common folks, locals and visitors from faraway places, on the heels of remarkable sights and sounds that have bewildered and amazed everyone. And Peter is keenly aware of what he is facing: Jews—and not just a few Jews, but in some ways, Israel representatively—on the cusp of missing the substance of the covenant due to hardness of heart. They are lukewarm, halting and limping between two opinions, busy in their religion and national consciousness but spiritually idle, accomplishing nothing (John 15:2). So Peter’s mind that day was set on raising antithetical consciousness, as Joshua did toward the end of his life. Cornelius Van Til often says that the goal of apologetics, covenantally speaking, is to bring about “epistemological self-consciousness.” In Peter’s case, this is done in order to lead the Jews to that crucial reckoning with their sin and their status before God, so that they might see that Christ is the righteousness and the redemption of Israel and of all who call upon his name. Peter’s sermon to the visible people of God is acutely apologetic, and features the gospel unmistakably.

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<sup>4</sup> By “antithesis” I mean Abraham Kuyper’s spiritual antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate, or the covenantal antithesis between ‘in Adam’ and ‘in Christ’. See Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 154; for the apologetic implications, see K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).

Notice also that Peter's sermon is explicitly trinitarian. Precisely as Jesus did in John 5, and on several other occasions, Peter attributes the extraordinary events surrounding Jesus's ministry to God the Father. Jesus indeed performed many miracles. John says that he has recorded only a few of the many things that Jesus did (John 20:30; 21:25)—not the Father, but the Son. But Peter, on this occasion, attributes Jesus' miracles to the Father, as works and wonders by which God attested, to the Jews, to the person and ministry of Jesus. Peter is saying, to the Jews, that God was indicating to them, in so many miracles and remarkable events, that Jesus of Nazareth had been sent by God. God sent Jesus, and God showed his business card; God publicly endorsed the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. God, says Peter, was drawing the attention of the Jews to Jesus, bearing witness among them to Jesus as someone sent from God and, therefore, as someone to whom they should listen.

When Peter says "God," as in, "attested to you by God," he is connecting with Jewish consciousness of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Peter is leveraging Jewish theism in order to cast Jesus in the light of covenant history, in the light of the history of special revelation. Notice that Peter is not telling the Jews that Jesus is the savior they really want. He is not trying to connect with the Jews themselves—their emotional needs, life-questions, spiritual struggles, cultural sensitivities, religious habits, customs, or beliefs.

By contrast, contemporary wisdom emphasizes the importance of doing precisely that. It is often claimed today that a sermon lives or dies on how well it connects with people, on how well it meets them where they are. The gospel must be brought to the people, it is argued, and in order to do this, the gospel must conform to the grammar of thought and life that is already familiar to the people. But Peter is not doing this. He is not conforming the gospel to the people but calling the people to be conformed to the gospel. Indeed, he is appealing to Scripture that they know and that they should hold in high regard, but he does not flatter the people themselves or cater to their sensibilities. To put it directly, he is not trying to connect Jesus to the people; he is trying to connect Jesus with the Word and works of the God of their Scriptures, and thereby to put redemptive accomplishment, which is "objective and central," on full display.<sup>5</sup> Peter proclaims Jesus as sent by God, and he does so without regard for human interpretation of the situation. Peter is not honoring or satisfying popular sentiment, but undermining and subverting it. His goal is to proclaim the self-sufficient God, and the self-sufficiency of gracious redemption in Christ. He wishes to point the people to, as Cornelius Van Til says, "the absolute Christ." Christ is absolute because he, as consubstantial with the Father, is self-existent and because he is, therefore, self-interpreting. He is the Christ of the Scriptures, the Christ of his own self-explanation.

In other words, Peter distinguishes Jewish religion from divine revelation. He distinguishes Jewish religion from objective redemptive reality—from the kingdom of God—by contrasting Jewish rejection of the Messiah with divine vindication of the Messiah. "This Jesus," he says, whom "you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men," was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (2:23). "You crucified

<sup>5</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1975), 6.

and killed him,” but “God raised him up.” Then Peter substantiates this contrast by quoting Psalm 16.

Peter introduces Psalm 16 by saying, “David says concerning him.” That is: David speaks in the third person. But the Psalm is in the first person: “I saw the Lord always before me . . . you will not abandon my soul to Hades.” So, who is the speaker? Is it David? Has David said that he, the youngest son of Jesse and successor to Saul, will not see the corruption of the grave?

Well, no. It cannot be the case that David is the person characterized in Psalm 16 because, as Peter says, pointing out the obvious, David “died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (2:30).

We then find in the text an indication of Peter’s hermeneutics. He has first pointed to the text itself, saying simply that David has said this and that. In his book *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, Edmond Clowney warns against moving prematurely from the text to application.<sup>6</sup> If that were to happen here, the Psalm’s victory over death by divine protection could be preached as something anyone can appropriate. Such a sermon might go this way:

God is faithful, he goes before you, so he will give you victory over death. We can say this Psalm with David because God himself takes on the challenges of life with us, he takes the initiative, he walks into battle before us and absorbs the assaults of the enemy. Be encouraged! As Paul says, if God is for us, who can be against us?

Notice two things about this use of Psalm 16: first, it really preaches. It has considerable appeal. It is exciting for the preacher, and it will be encouraging to the hearer. The congregation will be moved, and even the unbeliever will appreciate the sermon’s motivational power. But notice also that it is a Christless sermon, and because it is Christless, it is about what you can do, not about what God has done in Christ. There is no mention of who Christ is, nor of where he is, enthroned in heaven. And the hearer will depart not thinking about the text or about God or sin or salvation but about the better life I can live and the comfort I may enjoy because God is busy doing things for me. A sermon like this one is easy to design, and exciting for all, but it is a selfish misuse of Scripture, it is powerless to save, and it will lead to spiritual dismay and defeat.

Peter, by contrast, emphasizes the redemptive historical context of the psalm. And he begins with a simple fact, namely, that the author is dead. “His tomb is still with us.” Since the Psalm obviously describes evading death by means of protective intervention of God, this fact alone raises an interesting interpretive issue. It appears that the claim of verse 27 is false, and the hope of the whole psalm is empty.

A broader redemptive-historical context is needed. And so, Peter reminds his hearers that David was the one to whom God had made an unforgettable promise, that God himself would set a son of David upon the throne, and that this son of David would be enthroned

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<sup>6</sup> “All manner of arbitrariness and irresponsibility enter in when we seek to make a direct and practical reference to ourselves without considering the passage in its own biblical and theological setting.” Edmond Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1961), 88–89.

forever. The Lord will give David rest from his enemies, and the Lord will build for David a house by raising up his offspring after him and by establishing his kingdom. “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:13). Peter points out that David is the one to whom this promise was made. Peter also points out that David received this word from the Lord, believed this word from the Lord, and preached and wrote about this word from the Lord. David, says Peter, was a prophet who not only received this promise but “foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of Christ,” so that the first-person singular of Psalm 16 is in fact Christ himself.

David speaks in the first person for two reasons. One reason is that the person envisioned in Psalm 16 is a son of David, and that son of David is a gift to David. It is a gift from God to David that a son of David will sit on the throne. David thus takes personal joy in this great blessing, and of course, he takes personal joy in the fact that the throne will eternally be held in his name. A son of David will reign forever. So even if David does die—and he will, he did—still his throne will be established forever. So, in light of 2 Samuel 7, David can say to the Lord, “you will not abandon my soul.”

A second reason, even more important than the first, is that David can speak in the first person because, as Peter will later write (1 Pet 1:10–12), Christ himself is the primary author of Psalm 16. It is the Spirit of Christ in David that is here prophesying about the grace that will be preached and presented to the church in the name of Jesus Christ. In and with Psalm 16, in David’s day, in Peter’s day, and in our own day, Christ is calling his people to himself.

Peter then declares: “This Jesus God raised up” (Acts 2:32). And there it is, David’s hope, his clinging to the promise of 2 Samuel 7, is vindicated by the empty tomb. As we have said, this means that 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 16, and David’s hope are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. But it means something more. It means that 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 16, and the hope of David already presupposed the person and work of Jesus (WCF 8.6).

David prophesied, he says, looking forward to the resurrection as he held fast to the promise of God that a son of David will sit on the throne. This hope of David is satisfied at last when God raised Jesus from the dead. Peter says, effectively, that it was for the sake of the promise to David that God did not allow Jesus’ flesh to see corruption but raised him from the dead.

The resurrection serves a purpose. The purpose of the resurrection is the fulfillment of the promise to David. And what of the enthronement of the son of David? He is enthroned, says Peter, in the heavens. And again that terrible contrast: “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). And this gives way to Peter’s trinitarian explanation of the events that day. This son of David has been enthroned in the heavenly places and on this day has wielded his power and authority to pour out the Spirit, as “you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33). And David prophesied about this enthronement, even declaring that the enthronement of his own son according to the flesh would establish that son as Lord over even David himself. “The Lord said to

my Lord" (Acts 2:34; Ps 110:1). And what David foresaw has come to pass: "God has made him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

The Jews Peter addressed on that day were practicing a false religion. That is, they believed in a false god and worshipped that god according to their own extra-biblical traditions and rituals. This is not easy to recognize because their religion lay at a dangerous and misleading proximity to the thought patterns of biblical religion. Their religion sounded a lot like the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures.

And yet, their religion could not save. Theirs was a cultural Judaism, a cultural and uncritical imitation of biblical religion, even a Jewish, nationalistic prosperity gospel, awaiting the restoration of the glories of Solomon's Israel. Peter does not complete this religion; he subverts it. Rather, he preaches a gospel that subverts it. Peter does not acknowledge the truths that they believe; he exposes their suppression and curates a reckoning with the hidden covenantal antithesis that the person and work of Christ had exposed.

To the praise and glory of God, on that day, the Spirit of God convinced many of Peter's hearers of their sin and misery, enlightened their minds in the knowledge of Christ, renewed their wills, and persuaded and enabled them to embrace Jesus Christ (WSC 31). The Lord was pleased on that day to make Peter's preaching efficacious by his Word and Spirit.

### **Paul at Pisidian Antioch: Jewish Rejection and the Apostolic Gospel**

At Pisidian Antioch, Paul addresses a mixed crowd: "men of Israel and you who fear God" (Acts 13:16, 26). Paul's audience includes both Jew and gentile. Does Paul preach primarily to the Jews? There is some sense in which he does, but he clearly has the gentiles in mind throughout his sermon. In this sermon, Paul traces the historical priority of the Jews, but proceeds without hesitation to the inclusion of the gentiles, and ends his sermon on that explosive note.

Paul begins with the Exodus and retells Israel's forty years in the desert and the conquest of Canaan. He mentions judges and Samuel, Israel's request for a king, then Saul, and finally David. As Peter did, Saul emphasizes David: "Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus, as he promised" (Acts 13:23). Same as Peter: Jesus is the promised offspring of David. Paul then jumps to John the Baptist, who preached, effectively, "it's not me; it's him."

Paul then brings Scripture to bear on the immediate situation. He highlights the ministry of the apostles, saying, "to us has been sent the message of this salvation" (Acts 13:26). And the message of this salvation is, as Jesus instructed his apostles in Luke 24, that all that has occurred in Jerusalem, regarding his own ministry, death, and resurrection, has happened to fulfill the Scriptures. Paul highlights precisely that fact, and even the troubling detail that the Jews in Jerusalem fulfilled the plan of God by killing the promised son of David, because they had not understood the prophets. Paul even reminds them that the prophets were read every Sabbath. That is, every Sabbath, the Jews in Jerusalem had read



to each other their Holy Scriptures, but they had failed to understand them. In fact, their ignorance of the meaning of the Scriptures was so great that when at last the Scriptures were fulfilled, they found themselves on the wrong side. And yet, while Satan thought he had won, through even the pious fury of the Mosaic people, he had secured his own defeat.

Paul argues from the Psalms that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of the adoption of Israel (13:32–33), and that the resurrection of Jesus in the flesh was the hope of David and the Davidic hope of Israel (13:34–37). Paul adds exactly the conclusion of Luke 24: “through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (13:38), and he adds two more things, expository, it seems, of Jesus’s addendum, that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). To fulfill that component, Paul says, first, that the accomplishment of Christ surpasses the law of Moses, and second, that the Scriptures foretell Jewish disbelief. But again, the Lord will utilize the work of Satan to accomplish his holy will, the fulfillment of Abraham’s call in the gospel of the second Adam.

What can we learn from this? We must, first of all, appreciate the redemptive-historical moment at which this event unfolds. Paul’s use of Scripture to warn the Jews indicates the fact that his apostolic ministry is still within the accomplishment phase of biblical history. He himself is doing work that is foretold by the prophets. Again Luke 24:47: “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem.” What is Jesus describing here? He describes apostolic ministry as fulfillment of the Scriptures, as the necessary fulfillment of “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). “The announcement of redemption,” writes Herman Ridderbos, “cannot be separated from the history of redemption itself.”<sup>7</sup>

Paul issues an astounding cautionary word. He reads Scripture, Habakkuk 1:5, “look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish,” and warns the Jews that they are about to fulfill it, specifically by rejecting the substance of the very covenant they are claiming to defend. And Habakkuk 1:5 is a remarkable text to introduce. There the Lord is saying that he will raise up the Chaldeans, a “bitter and hasty nation,” and utilize their arrogance and violent nature, to rebuke his own people.

There appears to be a double meaning in Paul’s use of Habakkuk here. First and most obviously, the Lord will exalt the gentiles in order to shame the unholiness and waywardness of his own people. But in Habakkuk, the gentiles are an arrogant, fearsome people, whereas in Pisidian Antioch the gentiles prove themselves eager to hear and receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, if the situation in Pisidian Antioch is illuminated by the situation in Habakkuk 1, how can we explain the mismatch between the Chaldeans, proud and violent, and the gentiles, who waited eagerly, and rejoiced to hear that the gospel of the Hebrew Scriptures was available to them?

The answer is this: here again, the Lord is drawing Satan into the open field of battle by bolstering his wicked lust for victory. He is provoking and agitating in order

<sup>7</sup> Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 15.

to strike a fatal blow. The truly horrible reality that is visible before us in this passage is that while Satan surely knows that he cannot win, he does everything within his power to bring image-bearers down with him. In fact, Satan does not care to win; he only cares that image-bearers lose. And in this invisible clash of spiritual kingdoms, God is showing his winning card: the Jews will reject the Messiah, but the gospel will go to the nations. The wrath of God is not in gentile violence but in the hardness of Jewish hearts. Thus in Paul's sermon, the Lord exposes the steel of his sovereign power and authority. But the Jews are so captive to sin that they are unable and unwilling to reverse, repent, and be saved. This is an unrepeatable redemptive-historical moment, but it sets a repeatable and oft-repeated pattern.

We know that Paul loved the Jews. Indeed, his heart burned for them. He even says that he would be willing to be accursed and rejected by God for their sake. Paul knows, of course, that this is not only impossible but also impious—but so great is his love for his people, and so intense is his hope for their salvation. And yet, the Lord would not make Paul's preaching among the Jews successful. Paul preached the apostolic gospel again and again to the Jews, but the Spirit hardened their hearts and withheld mercy. And this was to accomplish the Lord's will. It was to fulfill Paul's role in redemptive history, that he would be an apostle to the Gentiles, not to the Jews. Paul's preaching, like the preaching of Jesus, was used by the Spirit to harden the hearts of the Jews so that the gospel would go to the Gentiles. And Paul would live with this tension in his heart all his life. He preached with all his heart to the Gentiles, hoping that he would provoke the interest of the Jews. We may suppose that Paul breathed his last breath still with a frustrated love for the Jews burning in his heart.

Even today, our preaching, too, must be comprised of two things: steadfast, indeed uncompromising, faithfulness to the gospel of the Christ of the Scriptures, and deference to the work of the Lord—the sovereignty and grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul's entire life led to this ministry and this preaching. Surely there was scarcely a man in all the Greco-Roman world who could exegete the Scriptures as well as Paul, scarcely a philosopher who could refute him. How it must have amazed him to see before his very eyes the grace and freedom of the Spirit in the reactions of different people to his preaching: some hearts the Spirit hardened, others the Spirit replaced with hearts of flesh. All his knowledge and conviction, and Paul could do nothing to command or control the will and work of the Spirit. But he preached nothing but Christ and him crucified, the gospel according to the Scriptures (1 Cor 2:2; 15:3, 4)

We too have no control, ultimately, but we also have no choice: if we will be useful, we must preach an apostolic gospel. God accomplishes his purposes—whatever they are—through the faithful preaching of his Word.<sup>8</sup> Surely Paul could have flattered the Jews if he had reworded the gospel somehow. He could have preached a less offensive

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<sup>8</sup> Along these lines, Cornelius Van Til suggests that history itself is a process of differentiation, the elect from the non-elect. See Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015), 79–113.

gospel. And in fact, others in his day had tried to preach a gospel that flattered the Jews and appealed to their sense of merit. But Paul says that this is no gospel at all because it offends the sufficiency of Christ.

Cornelius Van Til describes what he calls the “synthesis view” of culture, cultural engagement, and apologetics. The synthesis view holds that “by giving man the gift of reason God has given him the ability to interpret the universe about him with essential truthfulness up to a certain point.”<sup>9</sup> Those who hold this view believe that unregenerate man, the sinner in the state of sin, is capable of a certain kind of true belief that is open to the gospel, even conducive to it. In other words, the synthesis view says that the gospel may be presented to an unregenerate man or community as the satisfaction and completion of their sincere and genuine philosophical or religious ideas. On this view, the preacher or the apologist must work to fuse the thought patterns of unbelievers with the gospel claims of Scripture. “The great advantage of this synthetic view, according to its advocates, is that on it we need not, from the outset, antagonize those whom we are seeking to win for Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

As it turns out, this is precisely Van Til’s primary objection, that the synthesis view compromises and fails to challenge unbelief: “The first and most basic reason why the synthesis point of view cannot be . . . the basis for a believer’s approach to the problem of culture is that this approach does not challenge the autonomy of man.”<sup>11</sup> “Paul,” by contrast, “did not use the synthesis method.”<sup>12</sup> While Paul “is most courteous to those whom he seeks to win for Christ,” still “he knows that they are idolaters since they worship the creature more than the creator.”<sup>13</sup> As Van Til understands the apostle Paul, and as he understands the state of sin, only preaching which holds fast to the antithesis between belief and unbelief, or between the principles of wrath and grace, autonomy and obedience, can proclaim a gospel with the power to save. Christ must be proclaimed as absolute, self-sufficient in himself, and sufficient for salvation. Addressing Christian teachers on this topic, Van Til says:

The final issue—the destinies of men—we leave in the hands of our Savior while, with fear and trembling but with great joy in believing, we place before our students the choice of rejecting Christ as their Lord with the issue being everlasting death, or of accepting Christ as their Lord with issue being everlasting joy. Who is sufficient for such things? Our sufficiency is of Christ who has made us able servants . . .<sup>14</sup>

The absoluteness of Christ, and the sufficiency of Christ’s mediation—these comprise the gospel. If Christ alone is not sufficient to atone for the sins of the church, then there is no gospel to preach; there is only a flimsy if endearing claim that Jesus really gave all he could give because he loved people so much—but he lacked power. This makes a mess of

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1979), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, 13–14.

<sup>12</sup> Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, 17.

the Trinity because it dims the glory of the justice of God, who must acquit the righteous. If God is truly holy and just, then the incarnate son who fulfills his humiliation without sin must be raised and receive and send the promised Holy Spirit. He has earned the right to become the life-giving Spirit. That is the gospel, and Paul understands that he has no gospel to preach if he flatters Jewish pride. Paul's heart breaks because he knows he cannot help them. Only God the Holy Spirit can help them. Is God unjust? Well, who are you, Saul of Tarsus, to answer back to God? (Rom 9:20)

A second observation is that Paul's preaching was a rich biblical theology of his own message. He preached and defended using Scripture. Paul's gospel comes, we note, with abundant evidence: the facts of redemptive history which are fulfilled in Christ. The Exodus is Paul's defense of the facts and meaning of the work of Christ. The judges, Samuel, Saul, and David, are all evidence for the gospel of Christ. Paul does not preach the gospel in a vacuum. He preaches the gospel as the self-vindication of the grace of God accomplished by God. Paul preaches the gospel as the fulfillment of redemptive history. This means that Paul presupposes a Christian-theistic view of history. The gospel is not the story of miraculous interruption, of divine incursion into the realm of a purely mechanical nature order. Nature is not the context for the work of God; the work of God is the context for nature and human experience. Paul presupposes the whole Christian system, and presents Christ as its sum and substance.

Paul preached the facts and meaning of redemptive history. Paul preached a thoroughly biblical exposition of the facts of redemptive accomplishment. He announced that accomplishment, and explained and explicated it from the Scriptures. He was not worried about alienating or offending Jew or gentile. He was determined to introduce his hearers to the Christ of the Scriptures. Amazingly, the Jews detested the fulfillment of their own religion; and the gentiles rejoiced to hear that the hope of Israel was now extended to them as well. They rejoiced when they heard Paul's message of repentance unto forgiveness for all who call upon the name of Christ.

Here is what we can learn from this. It is a great advantage to the evil one that Christians hesitate to use their Bibles in the proclamation and defense of their faith. When we prefer abstract arguments about generic theism, when we flatter autonomous reason, when we present brute evidence for the unbeliever to ponder, we fail to acknowledge Christ before men. Do we wish that Christ would acknowledge us before the Father? If we do, then our proclamation and our defense of the truth must acknowledge Christ before men. We must not ask men to accept God on their own terms. We must not invite the unbeliever to incorporate a modified theism into his unbelieving and autonomous worldview. This does not honor our Lord, nor does it point the unbeliever toward hope.

This is why Peter enjoins us to set Christ apart as Lord in our hearts (1 Pet 3). Setting Christ apart as Lord in our hearts is necessary preparation for the defense of the faith. Christ must truly be Lord in our hearts so that we fear God more than we fear man. If we fear God more than we fear man, then we will know that the man who affirms a vague

theism is still in danger of the wrath of God. The man who is willing to accept only the version of God that makes sense to him gravely offends the God whom he knows. If his thoughts are not taken captive to Christ, he still sits in judgment over the revelation of God that is within him and all around him. Hell will be populated with theists of all kinds.

### **The Latest at the Areopagus: Paul's Cultural Apologetic in Athens**

With its architectural intricacies and visual abundance, a Hindu temple boggles the mind. The whole scene is something spectacular, and it seems designed to overwhelm the senses, to strike the visitor with sensory bliss. And yet the boldfaced idolatry is troubling. With this in mind, perhaps we can imagine how Paul felt as he wandered around Athens, waiting there for Silas and Timothy to join him. He marveled, but he was deeply troubled: "His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16).

The apostle, moved by what he saw, set himself to a campaign of evangelism. In the synagogue, he engaged Jews and gentile followers of the Jewish religion, and in the public square, he engaged anyone who happened to be there, including Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. And Luke recorded this unforgettable observation, that "the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). They are a trendy bunch. They have what today is called "fear of being left out." Athens has a reputation to maintain, and Paul gained an audience by enticing 1<sup>st</sup>-century intersectional fancy. He was an intriguing specimen.

Athenian interest in what Paul has to say is disparaged here by Luke. The Athenians "wish to know more" (17:20) not because they are seekers but because they are shallow and self-absorbed. Athenian interest in the gospel that Paul preached was of a different temperament from what the apostle had faced elsewhere. The Athenians were interested and open, and in that sense they welcomed Paul and even gave him a public hearing, but Luke hints here that the city was ruled by self-assured urbanites who had no idea what was coming.

Now, if Luke knew the cultural context, Paul certainly knew it as well. And he could have become discouraged. Paul, we know, was not discouraged; he seized the moment. In his well-known address at the Areopagus, Paul does essentially two things: he critiques Athenian theism, even their entire concept of religion, and then he preaches judgment. Paul appeals to their conception of God, not as commendable or good as far as it goes but as absurd and shameful; he exposes the incoherence of their over-abundant religiosity and preaches the resurrection and coming judgment. Paul re-interprets Athenian religion in light of Christ and calls men to repentance. It is certainly worth noting that what we see Paul doing in Athens in Acts 17 matches precisely with what he says in Romans 1:18–32 about gentile religion and religious consciousness.

Paul leads, in verse 18, with divine wrath, but the divine wrath that he describes is, he says, not objectively unexpected. Every conscious human being always and already knows God, namely, because God has made himself known. Paul is not saying here that

God has made himself knowable, that he has released information about himself that he is accessible to the human knower. Romans 1 teaches neither that God is knowable nor that image-bearers are capable of knowing God in the same way that they are capable of understanding, for example, the shape of the earth or heliocentrism. Rather, Paul teaches in Romans 1 that knowledge of God precedes research and reasoning. He says that the very grammar of human thought is knowledge of God because God has made himself known in the things that have been made, and one of those things is human consciousness. Subjective experience, the experience of having one's own thoughts and experiences, is itself theologically rich and irreducibly religious.

Not only that, says Paul, but there is in all men a very clear sense of divine holiness and moral perfection, and of the clash between the holiness of God and our own sins and sinfulness. All men know that God is there and that God cares about how we behave. All men are keenly aware that moral perfection exists and that it does not originate within ourselves, that it is personal, and that it demands satisfaction (Rom 1:32).

Paul also says that all men—not only Athenians—respond to this religious and moral awareness in more or less the same way, although responses take different forms.<sup>15</sup> The basic pattern is suppression and replacement—suppression of, or resistance to, what is known. And that suppression is accomplished by replacement of the one true God with false gods.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout Scripture, sin is characterized as religious infidelity, even marital infidelity in particular. Marital infidelity is, in fact, an apt metaphor for the suppression/replacement dynamic that underlies all unregenerate cultural and religious activity. When a man is unfaithful to his wife, he is still fully aware that he is married. No one would believe that he does not know what he is doing, that he is in cognitive darkness regarding his transgression. Nor would anyone believe that the adulterer does not know that what he is doing is wrong. But he will explain it. He will rationalize it. He will insist that, on some level, it makes sense. He will present a logic for his transgression, and he himself will strive to believe his own sophistry and deception. His friends may even play along, and they may be not only complicit but also involved in adulteries of their own. And so the culture and the broader social mind encourage this shameful infidelity, even perhaps to the extent that it becomes 'normal' in this man's context. But despite popular approval, it is all a sham, and the incoherence and selfishness of it are obscene. This is precisely what Paul observes in Athens.

Notice what Paul means when he says that the Athenians are "in every way very religious" (Acts 17:22). At this point, he has already spent several days engaging Jews and gentile devotees in the synagogue. He has, in that sense, engaged the local Jewish diaspora, a minority immigrant population. He also engaged the average Athenian in the

<sup>15</sup> Thus Cornelius Van Til's definition of apologetics: "Apologetics is the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life." *Christian Apologetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), 17. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> See Johan Bavinck, "Human Religion in God's Eyes: A Study of Romans 1:18–21," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994): 44–52. Where most English translations use the word "suppression," Bavinck argues that the psychological resistance known as "repression" may be applicable.

marketplace on a daily basis, so he became acquainted, in other words, with the concerns of the city's busy populace. He also conversed with philosophers, the great pontificators, and the peddlers of ideas of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Athens, and it was indeed a lively time in the history of Greek philosophy. Paul also observed idol worship and pagan religion, ubiquitous in Athens at the time. And, as he soon confirms, he already knew their literature. In other words, by the time Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus, he was familiar with the art, religion, philosophy, economy, and demographics of Athens, and he had spent many hours engaging all sorts of people and bearing witness to Christ. Paul was an expert in Athenian culture, and a pioneer evangelist.

So when Paul tells the Athenians that they are "in every way very religious," he is not talking only about their religion, in the sense in which we modern folks tend to think of religion. We should notice that Paul says that the Athenians are religious "κατὰ πάντα," which means through and through, throughout everything, in everything that they do. So in his speech at the Areopagus, Paul is not engaging Athenian religion; he is engaging the entire Athenian philosophy of life, and his entry point is religion. He appears to believe that Athenian religion exposes or expresses the soft underbelly of Athenian society. Paul appears to believe, in other words, that religion—even crass Athenian polytheism—represents a promising apologetic and evangelistic entry point into the culture itself.

Does Paul believe that of all entry points, or contact points, that culture offers the apologist, religion is always the most expedient? Or to ask it another way: why does Paul choose to discuss religion and religiosity rather than, say, philosophy, economics, social justice, or art and literature? Paul certainly could have engaged philosophical ideas, which were surely more developed and sophisticated than popular religion. But Paul bypassed those carefully crafted metaethical and metaphysical speculations, preferring to engage the messy polytheism of the Athens of his day. One reason for this might be that Paul wanted to communicate with the broadest possible audience. And for that purpose, perhaps popular religion was the best option. Or perhaps Paul had the Jews in mind, as indeed he always does, and knew, or hoped, that while he was engaging the Athenians regarding their doctrine of God, the Jews too would be provoked. Or it may be that, in Paul's view, Athenian religion had a controlling influence upon Athenian philosophy and culture overall. Whatever the reasons are, Paul's apologetics first makes contact with the Athenian heart and mind at the point of its religion.

Paul sees incoherence in Athenian religion. The incoherence that he detects is exposed in the abundant religiosity of Athenian life but also in the fact that they have more gods than they have names for their gods. Their religiosity is over-abundant. It spills over into incoherence and contradiction. An idol to an unknown God is indeed a contradiction. The idol itself signals the fact that the worshippers know—or think that they know—that this god is there, and they know—or think that they know—about this god, that he, she, or it needs to be honored, glorified, perhaps placated. So they know, evidently, that this god is morally concerned for human conduct, that this god has the ability to affect the realm of

human experience, and that, therefore, it is in the interest of the people to appease him or her or it. All of this they seem to know, and yet they do not know this god's name, which is to say that this god's identity is hidden. It means even more: that we have not heard from this god.

The Athenians claim to be honoring whatever or whoever it is who manages the world, who upholds and guides the realm of human experience. In this sense, they are looking for what can only be the one true God. They know, specifically, about his "eternal power and divine nature," and yet they domesticate the god of their quest. They name him. As parents name their children, the Athenians name their gods, and shelter them in houses made by men. But even so, somehow god resists domestication. God becomes gods, even more gods than they can name. Their theological instinct, their insuppressible religious impulse, is more than their religion can withstand.<sup>17</sup>

Paul hopes to reconcile the Athenian idolaters to the god that they already know, to the God whose revelation they reject, whom they have replaced with idols and images of their own design. And Paul appeals, in the end, not only to their religion but to their sense of justice, morality, and final reckoning:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

It is important to recognize that here Paul is utilizing a distinction similar to that which figures so fundamentally in Peter's preaching, as examined above, namely, the distinction between human religion and divine revelation. Johan Bavinck articulates this distinction for the missiological encounter: "There is no continuity between the gospel and human religious consciousness, although definite continuity does exist between the gospel and what lies behind human religious consciousness, namely God's general revelation."<sup>18</sup> Bavinck recognizes that the religious state of man must be understood in historical sequence. As man began in Eden originally righteous, his consciousness of God was a holy and righteous response to the knowledge of God that was part of his very consciousness and the knowledge of God that surrounded him everywhere. That is to say, in the garden before the fall, the distinction between human religious consciousness—awareness of God, thoughts of God, and an implicit and pervasive religious self-understanding—represented an obedient and loving response to the self-revelation of God in and around the image-bearer. At the point of the fall, this changes. The image-bearer makes what Van Til calls a "grand monistic assumption," and religious consciousness assumes a univocal mode. He writes:

<sup>17</sup> Relatedly, see Nathan D. Shannon, "Herman and Johan Herman Bavinck on the Uniqueness of Christian Theism," *Mission Studies* 39, no. 1 (2022): 50–69.

<sup>18</sup> Johan Bavinck, *The J.H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul Visser, trans. James A. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 297.



Having made alliance with Satan, man makes a grand monistic assumption. Not merely in his conclusion but, as well, in his method and starting point he takes for granted his own ultimacy. To the extent that he works according to this monistic assumption, he misinterprets all things, flowers no less than God.<sup>19</sup>

Here is the relevant point: univocism represents a direct rejection of grammar of divine revelation. Univocism is methodological assertion of the claim that God is not God. Accordingly, a univocal religious consciousness is antithetical to the only presupposition of human experience, that of creatureliness in the presence of God. When Johan Bavinck says that “there is no continuity,” in fact he understates; there is suppressive hostility. Paul seeks not to connect with Athenian religion but to subvert and replace it. Similarly, when Paul connects with Greek literary tradition—“as your own poets have said”—he is not endorsing worthwhile half-truths but highlighting the resilience of divine revelation, even in the midst of industrious suppression and replacement. For this reason, Paul’s oration is controlled by, and culminates with, not an invitation to religious supplementation, dialogue, or ecumenism but with a call to repentance.

In Athens, Paul’s spirit was troubled because he saw rampant suppression of the truth. He saw sinners willingly captive to darkness and suppression. Paul’s heart broke for them and their condition; he had compassion, as Christ himself had done. Then Paul engaged in a broad cultural apologetic, listening, learning, and engaging. Then when the Lord presented an opportunity, Paul was ready to give a reason for the hope that he had. Paul’s defense for his hope, Paul’s apology at Athens that day, was both proclamation and defense. It was richly both preaching and apologetics to the glory of Christ.

## Conclusion

When they preached, the apostles acted as heralds of the accomplishment of redemption, but they also acted as defenders of the faith. They proclaimed “not themselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5). They preached the gospel according to the Scriptures as the self-vindication of God and as fulfillment of divine promise. They engaged wayward religion, both Jewish and gentile, pointedly and fearlessly destroying arguments and taking every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). And in so doing, they acted with gentleness and respect, they set aside fleshly weapons such as sophistry and sophistication, and they sought to declare Christ and him crucified, looking to the Spirit and to the mercy of God to bring sinners out of darkness into light by the power of the name of Christ (1 Peter 3:15; 1 Cor 2:1; 3:6–9; 1 Pet 2:9; Rom 10:13). In this sense, for the apostles as should be the case for preachers today, apologetics and preaching though distinguishable are inseparable. And in both apologetics and preaching, the church’s goal is one, that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD (Hab 2:14).

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<sup>19</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 65.

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