

Edited by Michael L. Johnson
and Richard D. Phillips

ONLY
ONE
WAY

Christian Witness in
an Age of Inclusion



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To Him
who is “the way, the truth, and the life.”
—John 14:6 NKJV

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Editors' Preface

A MAJOR shift has occurred in the consciousness of Western civilization, a shift that greatly impacts the Christian church: the movement from *modernity* to *postmodernity*. Modernity was proud, confident, and certain. But its postmodern stepchild is marked by despair, suspicion, and confusion. Some Christians have hailed postmodernity as a breath of fresh air in which the Holy Spirit's hand may be perceived—a refreshing sign of repentance from the sins of modernity. But at least one feature of postmodernity—in fact, a central feature—is its espousal of relativism in matters of truth. So what happens to the exclusive claims of the Christian faith in such an environment? Can we—should we—continue asserting that ours is the one truth from heaven? Is it still necessary to worship only the Christian expression of God? Can we really continue to insist that Jesus is the only Savior, apart from whom we must perish under God's wrath?

This book's contributors are convinced that Christians can continue affirming the exclusive claims of the biblical message—indeed, that we must defend especially these claims if we are to communicate effectively the biblical gospel to a postmodern world. As Philip Ryken asserts, “For all its insights, postmodernism must be recognized as an attack on the very foundations of truth, and we must join the battle at the very place where truth is under attack” (p. 97).

The seven chapters of this book follow a general progression. The introductory chapter by David Wells locates us with the apostle Paul in the pagan Athens of Acts 17. If there has ever been a time since the Protestant Reformation when Christians find themselves in a situation like Paul's Athens, that time is now. In chapter 2, Al Mohler explores Paul's meaning behind, and the importance of, the gospel's one unified truth as laid out in Romans 1–8. Peter Jones follows in chapter 3 by noting that neo-pagan postmodernism, at its foundation, involves a rejection of the biblical idea of God himself. Wells, Mohler, and Jones warn Christians—and especially evangelists and apologists—of our great need to understand the intellectual and spiritual environment of our time. They perceive a threat as well as an opportunity for a biblically faithful and intellectually credible Christian witness to the postmodern age.

The next two chapters tackle specific topics that are under siege by the world and are also in danger of abandonment by postmodern-minded Christians. Chapter 4 considers the Bible's claim that Jesus Christ is the world's only Savior. Can we continue insisting that people must believe in Jesus Christ—and him only—in order to be saved? What is the biblical basis for such a claim? Why is this such a hotly contested doctrine? Philip Ryken then confronts us in chapter 5 with Pontius Pilate's unforgettable question, posed to Jesus himself during the Roman trial: "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Is there one truth from God, or must we agree that there are as many truths as there are perspectives?

The book concludes with two chapters directed not so much to the conflict of ideas between Christianity and the world as to the Christian's embracing of the Bible's call to exclusivity. In chapter 6, D. A. Carson ponders the Sermon on the Mount, challenging the reader to consider whether this exclusivity penetrates our everyday lives. Is there "one way" in which Christians

must live? If so, what is it—and how can sin-riddled people like us ever hope to fulfill it?

Lastly, in chapter 7, Ligon Duncan reflects on the “one people” united through faith in Jesus Christ. If we are to be a people of truth, we must—*together*—be the people we are called to be.

Most of this material originated as conference addresses at the 2005 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology (PCRT),¹ sponsored by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. This book is published as a partnership between the Alliance and P&R Publishing. We chose the theme of the conference, “One Way,” because of our mission to promote “clarity and conviction about the great evangelical truths of the gospel and to proclaim these truths powerfully in our contemporary context.”² We express sincere appreciation to Robert Brady, executive director of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and to our wonderful staff—especially those who work so hard to put on this historic conference year after year. We also join with all the contributors in asking God for his richest blessings on all who consider what we have written. May your faith, hope, and love be strengthened and renewed by the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is the one Way, Truth, and Life (see John 14:6).

To him be glory forever!

Michael L. Johnson
Richard D. Phillips

1. For more on this conference, visit <http://www.alliancenet.org/pcrt>.

2. See Ligon Duncan, “Anglicans and Lutherans,” Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, accessed August 24, 2017, <http://www.alliancenet.org/beta/question-box/anglicans-and-lutherans>.

1

One Among Many

DAVID F. WELLS

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. (Acts 17:24–25)

THAT OUR world has been engulfed by change is indisputable. Some of these changes, in fact, have transformed our world's shape while also massively increasing our ability to act in it.

Let me offer but one illustration. My father was born in 1898. When he was a young man (in fact, below the legal age for enlisting in military service), he joined the cavalry and was trained to serve with the British forces in World War I. He was shipped out to Palestine and, in 1916, was part of history's last successful sword charge. The cavalry, in fact, was rapidly being rendered obsolete by an invention that had just made its debut: the machine gun. This invention was to change the way that war

was waged, and it was only one of many innovations that were to follow. And this is the point. Within the span of little more than one lifetime, we have come from fighting with the sword to using the high-technology weaponry we see on our television screens. We have moved from that earlier hand-to-hand combat to the use of cameras in bomb noses, smart bombs, guided missiles, night goggles, computers in tanks, and the unbelievable escalation in the sheer destructive capabilities that we now possess. All of this has happened in less than one century!

When we add to this the many other kinds of change that happened during the twentieth century—and the many kinds of change that happened in every century before it—we realize that as soon as we start traveling back in time, we quickly find ourselves in a world and a time that are quite unlike our own. There are no cars, TVs, or video equipment; no aspirin, antibiotics, or surgery; no movies, Internet pornography, or white-collar identity theft; no public transportation or airliners; no air conditioning, heating, or oil deliveries; no birth control pills, no hospitals, no insurance policies, no retirement accounts, and no Social Security. This, in fact, is the world in which the apostle Paul lived, and in so many respects it is different from our own. This being the case, we may well ask how anything that he wrote, or any apologetic that he launched, could have any bearing on our world and the issues that we face.

This, of course, was the argument frequently stated among the churchmen and theologians of liberal Protestantism. The modern world, they said, had progressed so far that it was threatening to leave Christianity behind in its dust. Without assiduous updates, biblical Christianity would soon be rendered obsolete and outdated—a kind of pitiful brontosaurus that was doomed for extinction.

The liberals were right on one point. It is true that the world has undergone massive, breathtaking changes. But what they

overlooked was the fact that, in the midst of all this change, some things have not changed at all. God in his character, counsels, and knowledge has not changed; the human being, though fallen, remains in the image of God; sin in its nature has not changed across the ages; the significance of God's acts in history has not changed; the abiding truth of God's Word has not changed; the reality of the incarnation and the results of the cross have not changed; and so neither has the gospel. It is the same gospel that is to be believed in all places and times and among every tribe, ethnic group, culture, and generation. It is no different today for those in the Builder generation than it is for those who are Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, or Millennials, though you would never guess this from listening to the more adventurous, entrepreneurial evangelical leaders who are busy growing their own churches in selected generational niches.

The revelation that God has given us in his Word is enduring in its relevance, throughout all places and times, precisely because it corresponds to what does not change. It is not simply a reflection of the changing culture of a world long since vanished—the cultural world in which it first arose. It is God's truth for the church in all ages and all seasons.

This is a little distinction that postmoderns typically do not understand. They think that there is no abiding truth—that all “truths” are the product of their own social environments and therefore never have any more than a local or personal applicability. Truth for one person may be quite different from truth for another. There are many even in the evangelical world who are, perhaps in a different way, captivated by the whirl of contemporary change. Fashioning the church in the emerging postmodern light (on the fallacious assumption that there are few, if any, realities that are enduring and unchanging), they too are in danger of ending up with a purely individualized sense of truth. Why would they do this?

The reason, I believe, is that the fascination with what is changing is proving to be more compelling than considerations about what is not changing. What is in flux offers a more immediate access to the postmodern soul than what is stable. The problem, of course, is that so many in the postmodern world have become addicts to change. But change is no panacea for the gospel. It is from the soil of our bored lives that fads and fashions sprout, each one suggesting something new, something different, something that is riding the crest of what is “in,” or some new potential for us that is just coming into sight. This is true not only of cars and clothes, music and hangouts, but of belief and behavior, too. The adaptations that so many evangelicals are willing to make to this mood are, I believe, adaptations not to what is innocent and inevitable but to what is sick and deformed. These proclivities should be challenged, not weakly accepted.

With our current infatuations with what is slick and breath-takingly *au courant*, might Paul’s address on Mars Hill in Acts 17 have anything to say to us in the 21st century, since it arose in a world that disappeared long ago? Were their issues so different from ours as to be almost incomprehensible to those of us who live in the Western, postmodern, highly urbanized, commercialized, image-saturated, and hyped-up world?

As I answer this question, let me begin by suggesting two important points of connection between Paul’s world and our own (besides the many realities in the nature of God and in human nature that have not changed), which may better help us to see with fresh understanding the pertinence of his apologetic. These additional connections are important because they enable us to grasp the fact that Paul’s apologetic, though developed centuries ago, is actually addressed to a world that is not so different from our own. In fact, what Paul said stands as a remarkable model for how we should be addressing our

own postmodern world, which is urbanized and full of religious pluralism and relativism. Today, Christ is only one among many options—and that is the exact situation that Paul addressed at Mars Hill in Acts 17.

Paul's World and Ours

One snapshot from this ancient time that I want to look at is the picture that we have of Athens on the day Paul made his stand before its intellectuals on Mars Hill. Two things stand out. I'll describe these briefly and will also note the parallels with our own world.

First is *urbanization*. Athens was obviously a great cosmopolitan city that drew people like a magnet. They evidently came from many places, and some from far away. This city was the crown jewel of the Greek world, renowned for its intellectual traditions, its eclectic atmosphere, and its artistic accomplishments. Perhaps most remarkable of all was the Acropolis, which was visible from about forty miles away, and some of which still stands to this day. Yet this was by no means the only spectacular aspect of the city. On all sides, Athens was a city of great cultural accomplishment, and it drew people from across the then-known world. On the day when Paul took his stand in this city, among those present were foreigners mingling in the marketplace (see Acts 17:21) and philosophical adherents—the Epicureans and the Stoics (see v. 18).

One of the curiosities Luke records was that the people of Athens spent their time in nothing except “telling or hearing something new” (v. 21). How trivial, we may think! And how strange! Here was a city, renowned for the depth of its intellectual life, that was apparently infatuated with what was on the surface—with what was ephemeral and so often inconsequential.

However, in this respect Athens was a notable forerunner of what is a pervasive reality today in the West. We too are busy satisfying the same insatiable yearning for novelty (albeit in different ways and on a scale that would have made these ancient Athenians drool!). Our appetite for knowing what is new in the world is partly satisfied by the incessant news delivered to our smartphones. We quickly get bored unless the news items are constantly changing. We're deluged beneath the daily flood of blogs, online magazines, journals, and tweets that make a living out of touting—sometimes even fabricating—what is new, fashionable, and “hot.” The temptation, therefore, to think that these Athenians must have been very superficial people, to be so interested in what was new and hot, needs to be tempered by the realization that our judgment of them has far-reaching implications for ourselves as well!

What we see in Athens was really just a foretaste of what was to come in our world today. There are far more parallels between their world and ours than simply their interest in novelty. For example, and far more important, urbanization has become one of the signature marks of our time. Of course, cities aren't new. What is different about this modern development is, first, the number of people who are now living in cities as a percentage of the population and, second, the size of those cities. We've moved from a world that had been predominantly rural to one that is predominantly urban. At the time of this book's publication, more than half of the world's population live in urban areas. The world's dominant social organization is the city, with cities defined as containing ten million people or more no longer being considered remarkable.¹

1. For more on megacities, see the data booklet *The World's Cities in 2016* released by the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, available online at http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/urbanization/the_worlds_cities_in_2016_data_booklet.pdf, p. 2.

What we see in Paul's Athens is what has become common and typical in our own cities. Cities draw large numbers of people into close proximity with each other. People of different ethnicities, worldviews, religions, cultural habits, and mores are forced to live side by side. It is in this enforced rubbing of shoulders that the edges tend to be taken off the distinctiveness of all belief systems.

Cities tend to produce a kind of coerced civility. This civility may have good aspects, but more commonly it is bad. It is good if it decreases the kind of bellicosity that diminishes people's ability to live in proximity without harm. It is bad when it produces such tolerance that belief systems are considered true only for the adherents. This, of course, is what has happened throughout the West, as all beliefs have felt the pull to concede to the pressures of relativism. Tolerance, in other words, is a virtue as applied to behavior, but it can be a vice when it surfaces in belief.

Those of us who are married are only too keenly aware of how much we have depended on the virtue of our spouses to show kindness, patience, and consideration toward us as we stumble through life, sometimes in unhappy ways. In short, we are dependent on them to exercise this beautiful virtue of tolerance. Without their tolerance in this sense, we would be doomed!

However, tolerance in the contemporary sense, pervasive throughout our culture and even demanded in our multicultural, religiously diverse societies, is the death knell of historic, orthodox Christianity. But Paul faced this same ideological threat in Athens, and he refused to trim his message of truth to fit into that context.

Secondly, Athens was a city of great *idolatry*. Remnants of the Athenians' gods and goddesses are still visible on the Acropolis today, but in Paul's day there were many additional deities scattered throughout the city. There were as many deities as

people in Athens, and certainly the main ones were all present and worshiped, such as Neptune, Bacchus, Mercury, Jupiter, and Venus. The city, Luke tells us, was “full of idols” (v. 16). His language suggests a kind of wild, uncontrolled, cancerous growth. Here were gods and goddesses proliferating in every direction, on every corner, holding sway—indeed, holding court!—over the whole city. No part of it was immune to their presence. These superstitions were, from Paul’s perspective, like a dreadful pall that hung over the entire population. The Athenians, he said as he began his address, were “in every way . . . very religious” (v. 22). He said that he had observed their objects of worship. This included one altar that apparently sought to cover any bases otherwise left uncovered, with its inscription to “the unknown god” (v. 23).

Everybody in that ancient world knew about Athens, and no doubt Paul had heard about this city from the time he had been a small boy. When he arrived there on this occasion, it would have been very natural for him to be awed by what he saw as we might be today on visiting Paris, Venice, or New York for the first time. Indeed, Paul apparently did exactly what we typically do when visiting a large city—walking around it and taking in the sights and sounds. What were his impressions? What struck him most?

Paul was likely impressed with the greatness of Athenian culture. Its art, architecture, and intellectual life were renowned. Athens was the very center of ancient learning. And Paul was no country bumpkin who was unable to appreciate these achievements. Instead, he was a sophisticated, traveled, learned person of wide acquaintance and brilliant intellect. It would have been very natural for a person of his depth, as he wandered the streets of Athens, to find it breathtaking.

Perhaps this happened, but Luke tells us nothing along these lines. Rather than recording Paul’s awe, he instead emphasizes

the disturbance in his spirit at seeing all the idol worship (see v. 16). It is, indeed, the same language as is typically used of God's own revulsion over idolatry, in which the human need to worship is misdirected toward lifeless substitutes for God himself. What ignorance it was to suppose that these idols possessed eternal life, ruled providentially, and could meet the deep needs that suffuse the human spirit in this fallen world!

But Paul's own revulsion was not simply over human miscalculation, error, and foolishness. Far more profoundly, it was about the fact that what should have been ascribed to God alone was being ascribed to human creations. God was being robbed of his glory, which was instead given to these human-made artifacts that were invested with powers they could never have, powers that were God's alone. That was what so provoked Paul.

This situation of proliferating, tangible idols may seem quite remote to us sophisticated Westerners today, who have long since grown out of primitive beliefs like these. So it may seem. There is, however, an argument for saying that despite all our intellectual sophistication we are returning to a situation that is not unlike what Paul faced.

One of the truly startling developments of the last few decades has been the resurfacing of a spirituality that has many connections with the kind of paganism that Paul confronted. And although this spirituality may not worship tangible idols, many of its assumptions are still pagan.

In America, nearly 90 percent of people say that they are spiritual, but over half of these immediately add that, although they are spiritual, they are not religious. By *not religious*, what they apparently mean is that they do not subscribe to any doctrines that have been passed on to them and that are not self-generated, to any corporate practice of their beliefs, or to ethical norms with which they themselves do not agree. On the grounds that they have God "within" them, 70 percent of Americans say that

they do not need church. They are spiritual but not religious. By *spiritual*, what they have in mind is some kind of mysterious access to an unseen power; and this, many feel, has nothing to do with “religion.” It is no surprise, then, that George Barna has found that when it comes to spiritual satisfaction, roughly 7 percent of Americans find it in the Bible, only 6 percent in helping others, only 2 percent in other believers, and only 3 percent in God (presumably the God of traditional Christianity). Most Americans look for help from the power within rather than the God without, the God of religion. This pattern of surging spirituality that is largely antithetical to organized religion is evident throughout the West, not just in America.²

It is not hard to see that this spirituality is quintessentially postmodern: self-generated, self-defined, subject to no outside authority, intensely therapeutic, and unabashedly pragmatic. It’s a spirituality that illustrates, as Augustine reminded us, that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.³ In our modern world, with all of its complexity and pain, so many people are simply lost. They are anxiously reaching out for Something larger than themselves that will offer some solace, meaning, and mystery. At the same time, while this new spirituality is undoubtedly postmodern, it is also quite pagan. This is especially evident in its confusion between the searcher and the sacred, the creature and the Creator. This kind of pantheism was at the heart of all paganism. It is once again being heard in the voices of those Americans who say that, inasmuch as they

2. For more on religious trends in the United States, see “Meet the ‘Spiritual but Not Religious,’” Barna Group, April 6, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-spiritual-not-religious/>, and “Meet Those Who ‘Love Jesus but Not the Church,’” Barna Group, March 30, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church/>.

3. A more faithful English rendering is “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee” (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 1, chap. 1).

have God “within,” they do not need the church, and that in life’s crises they look to the power “within” for help, not to the God of traditional Christian faith. This is extremely close to what Paul himself encountered in Athens when he confronted the reigning worldviews of his time.

It is, then, rather striking that despite the passage of time, Paul’s apologetic requires very little adaptation to our own contemporary situation. We begin where he did. We begin with the same God, the same Christ, the same human nature, the same sin, the same truth, and the same gospel. Furthermore, we are bringing all of this into a world that in some profound ways is like his, too. Our world is multiplying cities like the Athens of Paul’s day. Here, today, are cities that draw people of every variety—of many races and ethnic groups, of all kinds of beliefs and behaviors—into close proximity with one another. The “marketplace” that Luke mentions in Athens functioned much like the workplace in our modern cities. This enforced proximity of people to one another almost inevitably produces a climate of religious pluralism. The difference between the religious pluralism of Paul’s day and of ours is less one of nature and more one of scale. Whereas in the Roman world there were few cities like Athens and relatively few people who lived in cities overall, today there are many cities like Athens and a high percentage of people who live in them.

The resurgence of the new spirituality, even in the midst of the secularized cultures of the West, may seem to be breathlessly advanced, but it is so ancient as to be little different from what Paul encountered. The gods and goddesses may have disappeared, but the confusion between the spiritual searcher and the sacred is as evident as it was in the paganism of Paul’s day. We would do well, then, to pay heed not only to what Paul said in his address but also to how he went about meeting his pagan contemporaries intellectually. For his experiences are, in many ways, ours.

Paul's Apologetic

The three recorded missionary addresses of Paul in Acts (13:16–41; 14:15–17; 17:22–31) are interesting for many reasons, and not least for how they show his sensitivity to his audience. In the first, he was speaking to Jews and God-fearers, so it was natural that he would appeal to the biblical narrative with which they were so familiar. In Athens, however, his audience was quite different and would have had no idea what he was talking about. The only literary appeal Paul made, therefore, was to an unnamed Greek poet, presumably familiar to his audience, who had said that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). There was no commonly owned authority to which Paul could appeal, so this was not where he started.

Luke has provided us with only a bare, brief summary of Paul's points, and there is much that we might like to know that is omitted from his sparse account. How was Paul so familiar with the views of his audience? When did he study their philosophies? How long did he speak on this occasion? Was he interrupted? How did he flesh out each of the points that Luke records? We do not know. What we can reasonably surmise is that this address, which we have in summary form and can be read in a matter of minutes, was originally much longer. Yet even the summary we have is sufficient for us to see that Paul's foundational point of engagement with his audience dealt with the matter of worldviews.

On that day, Paul might have begun with a simple gospel message, but he did not. It is only at the very end of his address that we hear for the first time the issues of repentance (see v. 30), divine judgment, and the resurrection of Christ (see v. 31). This seems rather startling to us. Rarely do we do what Paul did. Our inclination is to get the audience to the gospel in the

shortest possible time and in its most stripped-down version. If inquirers have questions, they come later, not at the beginning. Paul, however, was different. Before speaking about Christ and the gospel, he spoke about worldviews.

The reason for this is rather clear. Jews who heard Paul's gospel were people well prepared by the Old Testament in their understanding about the nature of God and his relation to the creation, his holiness, the reality and consequences of sin, and the necessity of sacrifice. The pagans to whom Paul spoke were at sea in all of these matters. It was therefore important to Paul that the worldviews of his listeners be confronted first. Otherwise, the gospel might have been absorbed into false worldviews in which its nature and uniqueness might well be lost. The gospel, after all, is not a disembodied message that can be assimilated into just any worldview. Rather, it comes within its own understanding of the world, outside of which the gospel makes no sense at all. It is true that, without believing the gospel, Paul's hearers would not know the God from whom they were alienated because of their sin and because of God's righteous indignation against that sin. It is also the case, however, that without an understanding of God as Creator and Judge, Paul's hearers could not understand the gospel. It is to the Christian God that Paul takes his hearers first, and he takes them there before he takes them to the gospel. What he argued for were three main characteristics that defined the reality of God—characteristics that also define how we should view our own world.⁴

4. Some of the material in this chapter is drawn from my book, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). I am also indebted to D. A. Carson, "Athens Revisited," in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 384–98.

The Creator God

Paul began his apologetic with what may seem like a conventional point: God “made the world and everything in it” (Acts 17:24). In so saying, he established a distinction between the Creator and creation, between the One who makes and what is made. We do not know how he elaborated on this distinction, but we can be certain that if he drove home this distinction he did so in ways that reasserted truths from the Old Testament revelation. God, Paul said, does not need anything but instead “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (v. 25). The world, in other words, is entirely dependent on God for its life; he is not dependent on the world for his. God is independent, self-sufficient, and self-existent, whereas the life of the world is derived from, borrowed from, and dependent on him. The world has no existence apart from God; he, however, exists apart from the world.

Every form of paganism rested, in one way or another, on a pantheistic view of reality. This view is what Paul, in these brief recorded statements, demolished. In one stroke he laid low all pagan ideas about sacred reality being infused in matter, matter transmitting that sacred reality, or the Creator and creation being indistinct from each other in important ways. God is the source of all that there is, Paul insisted. What exists outside of himself is different from him and exists, not on its own account, but as it is sustained by him.

This would have been quite startling to pagan ears. In their view, the gods and goddesses were quite dependent on humans. They were incomplete, sometimes lonely, and sometimes needing humans for their plans, the exercise of their whims and fancies, and even their sexual satisfaction. In this ancient world, the deities were quite pint-sized, filled with human weaknesses, foibles, and needs. The biblical God, by contrast, is not. He needs nothing; he is complete in himself.

The Sovereign God

The second aspect of God's nature that Paul spoke about was his sovereignty. God is "Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24). It is no surprise to hear Paul spelling this out in terms of God directing the whole course of human history in accordance with his will, "having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place" (v. 26) for every nation on earth. This assertion of God's sovereignty was not simply an "in-house" theological point that Paul was making. It actually cut right to the heart of the pagan impulse in two main ways.

First, this universal sovereignty distinguished the God of the Bible from every pagan god and goddess. Their "sovereignty," such as it was, was always local. Pagan deities ruled merely over this circumstance or that, over this city or that, in this moment or in that. They ruled over a river, over a field, in the ocean, in warfare, or at parties, but their rule was always partial, almost unpredictable, and often capricious. They, like us, were subject to bad moods and bad days. They, too, woke up on the wrong side of the bed, and sometimes their actions were irrational and incomprehensible. Not so the God of the Bible! His rule is universal, and his actions are always predictable in the sense that they are defined by, and are the outgrowth of, his unchanging holy character. As a result, his actions are always consistent with each other. That is why the theology of the Old Testament was very largely a theology of recitation—of rehearsing the actions of God in the past because these actions offered strength, encouragement, and hope for the future. His actions in the past, they knew, carried within them the blueprint for what he would do in the future. God's redemptive plan is running its course through time, and nothing in all of life is ever an impediment to the realization of his sovereign, righteous will. In contrast to the very pagan idea of deity, God is the Lord of heaven and earth.

Second, this sovereignty is realized in matters of salvation. In Luke's account, Paul does not draw this connection other than to declare that God is Lord, or sovereign, over the earth—and that surely includes matters of salvation. Later on in his address, he goes on to speak of God's role in judging the earth and of the need for repentance and belief. While these matters are not explicitly related to the working of God's sovereign, saving will, it takes little imagination to connect the dots that Luke has given us and that Paul may very well have specified in his total address.

Paul understood how different from the biblical gospel was the pagan approach to salvation. When it came to receiving benefits from the gods and goddesses, everything was based on a *quid pro quo*. They had to be approached, appeased, and satisfied through offerings and sacrifices—even child sacrifices. It was, at the crudest level, a kind of business deal. The actions of gods and worshipers were in reciprocal relation to each other. The pagan deities responded to what humans did. In this sense, pagan worshipers influenced the gods; it was the worshiper who tried to determine outcomes through what he or she did. In this way, the deities' bad moods could be deflected, their wrath averted, or their blessings secured.

It is because of this pagan context that some translators of the New Testament have been wary of using the language of propitiation where it seems to be demanded by the text. Not only does this word declare that there is kindled in the being of God a wrath whose outcome will be destructive, but it seems to suggest, along pagan lines, that human beings can take actions that will prevent this wrath from breaking out. This, critics say, is entirely inconsistent with the thinking found in the New Testament.

However, it is a mistake to abandon the language of propitiation. It should be used but also understood in its own biblical context. In the Bible it is God, not the worshiper, who

provides the propitiation by which his own wrath is averted (see Rom. 3:25; cf. 1 John 2:2; 4:10). There is never any thought of a business deal here—a bribe, a quid pro quo, or the sinner doing something that changes the mind of God. God does not negotiate or “deal” with sinners. God needs nothing from them and is under no obligation to them. Quite the reverse! It is they who are under his rule. It is he who provides salvation, and he provides it not on their terms but on his. He is the Lord, and his gift of salvation is received only as he offers it. He is sovereign, and men are not. He rules, and they are subject to his rule.

God the Judge

Toward the end of this address, we come to the place where Paul is about to speak of Christ and the gospel. Yet there is a third component in the doctrine of God that still needs to be discussed: his moral nature. God, Paul said, “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). This, too, was a startling thought.

That there was a single norm of righteousness, sustained by the character of God, was as unknown in the paganism of Paul’s day as it is rapidly becoming in ours. The gods and goddesses did not always behave morally, and the existence of multiple spheres of sacred influence, with all their competing claims and agendas, only reinforced the idea that there was no single norm. Certainly it was evident in this city that was given over to idolatry—there was obviously no single deity whose norm it was. They might just as well have said, in language that is current in many circles today, that there are no metanarratives remaining, no ultimate structures of meaning that are the same for everyone, for that is what they meant. The truth is that both paganism and

postmodernity, for different reasons, nevertheless end up at the same place, and that is one of complete relativism.

Paul's claim cut right across the bows of all paganism, just as it does our present world. There is indeed a single, overarching Story, a structure of meaning that is the same for all people in all places and times, because the God whose "story" it is likewise is one God. In the presence of this Story, all of our small personal stories and efforts to spin and fabricate meaning apart from him are called into question. It is the character of God that asserts itself in his judgment, and it is before that divine being, in all of his holiness, that all people are summoned.

Paul's Gospel in Athens

It is now evident how Paul has set up the structure of understanding without which the gospel would have either been incomprehensible or been perverted. Before speaking of this gospel, he has led his audience to consider that God is their Creator and is wholly independent of creation. This means that there is no way in which he can be accessed intuitively from within creation or through the self, as if the sacred were met in some way within the self. God stands in a relation of complete independence from the creation, though Paul also did not want this to be misunderstood as if he were espousing a deistic understanding. Given the fact that all people are recipients of his general, non-saving providence, "they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:27).

The point that Paul was making in asserting God's self-sufficiency was simply that God is separate from his creation. But that does not mean that he is remote or absent from life. It is impossible that Paul was suggesting that pagans might find this God in their own way, on their own terms, unless he

was guilty of serious contradiction. After all, in Romans Paul argues that, given the impulses of sin, “no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:11). The reconciliation of these two statements, that people “should seek God” and that “no one seeks for God,” is best made by considering that we who retain the image of God even in our sin, whose hearts are indeed restless until they find their rest in God their Creator, find ourselves always frustrated in this search outside of Christ. We need him and yet do not want him. We need God, but we will not accept him except on our own terms—unless God’s grace intervenes! These are the contradictions that rattle through the being of every sinner.

And this is really the way in which the nature of sin, as it were, exposes itself. It is as if someone were determined to embarrass him or herself by stripping in public. After all, how did our internal, misunderstood yearning for something larger than itself come to expression? The answer, of course, is in crass idolatry! We “ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man” (Acts 17:29). Idol makers inevitably set themselves up as being somewhat on a par with the idols they have made, and we likewise think that God can be had on our terms as consumers. We think God can be accessed internally, when it is convenient, on our own terms. We are making a mistake that is as foolish and crass as the one the Athenian idolaters were making. God forbore in the past, but no longer. The command has gone out to repent (see v. 30).

By this stage in his address Paul has already set up his doctrine of human nature, and he now goes on to add that of salvation. On the former, contrary to pagan notions and, for that matter, modern notions, there have not been multiple origins of the human race. Then, they thought that every ethnic group had its own original starting point, and today many think that the human race had several spontaneous originations along the

evolutionary way. Not so! He “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (v. 26). There was a single origination, and though Adam and Eve are not mentioned, this clearly was what Paul had in mind. Nor does Luke record whether Paul then set up a parallel, as he was to do in Romans, between “one man” through whom sin has come and the “one man Jesus Christ” from whom we receive grace and righteousness (Rom. 5:12, 15, 17). Yet this is clearly the direction in which Paul’s mind moved.

What Luke does record for us is that Paul connected this salvation to two other, related truths. First, it is by this Christ that divine judgment will be discharged in this world; second, the evidence that this is the case lies in his resurrection (see Acts 17:31). What else Paul said on that day we are not told, because it was the resurrection that immediately provoked such scorn among some of the listeners and brought his address to an abrupt end (see v. 32). Yet here are lines in Pauline thought with which we are quite familiar. It was the resurrection that showed Christ to be the Son of God and Lord (see Rom. 1:3–4). The connection between resurrection and salvation is stated directly in another Romans passage, where Paul says, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Without this resurrection, Christian witness is fraudulent, preaching is empty, sins are unforgiven, and all hope is lost (see 1 Cor. 15:14–15, 17–19). Perhaps the conceptual connections between these ideas—how the cross is related to divine judgment on the one side and to Christ’s resurrection on the other—were spelled out on that day, though in his brief summary Luke makes no mention of this. Yet we do know that for Paul there could be no gospel without Christ’s cross, no cross without a resurrection, and no resurrection without salvation and judgment.

A Model Engagement

Changed as our world may be, Paul's missionary address to the pagans in Athens is as current as it was on the day when he first delivered it. More than that, it is a model for how we should be engaging our own world. Some evangelicals have tried to see in Luke's account an example of how Paul was able to exploit the culture for the sake of the gospel. What they mean is that he was able to capitalize on their cultural habits in order to "sell" the gospel. They could not be more wrong! What we see is Paul confronting his culture, not trying to use it. This is evident from the fact that he starts not with the gospel itself but with that culture's competing worldviews—each one of which he demolishes. It was only after this work of demolition was completed that Paul then turned to the gospel, and that happened only at the very end of his address.

In the example that we have of Paul's pioneering engagement with pagan culture, two main ideas stand out. First, Paul declared the unique truth claims of Christ and rejected every other truth claim. He passed up every opportunity that his setting offered him to suggest that Christ was not the exclusive way to God. Had he conceded that there are many ways to God, his audience would have been rather pleased, because the exclusivity of Christian claims was an aggravation to them. Certainly they found his message "strange" (Acts 17:20) because they found the idea of the resurrection of Christ strange. Paul, however, refused to go down the path of religious pluralism.

Early in his address, Paul cited the reality of natural revelation—the fact that people have within them an awareness of the sacred or divine. This sense found expression then in the rampant forms of pagan worship that Paul had witnessed in the city. It is finding expression today in the West in the rampant forms of spirituality that we see on every side. It would have

been so simple then to say, as many evangelicals are finding it convenient to say now, that pagans had started down the right road but had not traveled far enough; that they had come a long way toward finding Jesus, and that all they had to do was to take a few more steps.

The truth of the matter, however, is that natural revelation does not provide us with the building blocks from which we can assemble a knowledge of God that is saving. The saving knowledge of God is not assembled by us but is given by God. It is not harvested from the fragments of our experience in this world but is created *de novo* by the sovereign working of God. It is a knowledge that comes from *above* in conjunction with the person of Christ and his grace; it does not come from *below* in our strivings to make spiritual connections with the larger Whole. We contribute nothing to our salvation except the sin from which we need to be redeemed. We are accepted by God through Christ only on his terms and not on our terms at all.

Second, Paul's apologetic would have fallen flat on its face had he not been so knowledgeable of the world in which he lived. He was conversant with his culture. He had a detailed knowledge of its philosophies and religions. He apparently knew them like the back of his hand. That was why, when this unexpected invitation came to speak to the intellectuals assembled at Mars Hill, he could avail himself of it on the spot. He was clearly at home in this kind of world, and he showed how the people in this sort of setting could be engaged without the Christian gospel being compromised.

Paul's assumption on this occasion was quite different from what passes in much of the evangelical world today, at least in the West. Paul assumed that his culture was fallen, that its religions were mistaken, and that redemption meant a clean break with all "natural" religion. We tend to assume the opposite. We assiduously read Barna polls to find the best ways to capitalize on

the culture, to find the latest personalities to whom the gospel wagon can be hitched. Evangelicals rush in droves to embrace what they think is “culture” (though what they are really talking about is mostly passing fads and fashions) in the forlorn hope that they will find in it the recipe for their own success and acceptance. Paul was driven by a contrary mind, by a clear sense of antithesis to much of what he saw. He did not do what so many evangelicals are doing, which is seeking to identify with what is culturally au courant, with the latest, with what is most “in,” so as to win some supposed acceptance in the postmodern world. Here is the old liberal “Christ of culture” position. What a pathetic spectacle it is! Surely the angels must be averting their eyes as today’s Christian media revels in reporting all that is happening as if it were normative and, indeed, admirable!

What results from this kind of accommodation to the culture is that the Christian gospel seems little different from the kind of general spirituality that is now pervasive throughout all Western cultures. Evangelicals have been in the business of minimizing and reducing the gospel to its bare essentials, putting it in the most appealing secular form, selling and marketing it, and stripping it of its doctrinal framework. Any kind of doctrine present in the framing of the gospel, it is believed, will put people off; and so, in order to assure more success, all doctrine has now gone. The gospel is reduced to purely relational terms: sin is only what prevents us from reaching our full potential; God is anxiously yearning for a relationship with us, which he has been unable to bring about because he has not been able to catch our attention; for a one-time admission of weakness, people can receive the eternal benefits of having God on their side. It is all so easy! Why would anyone even hesitate to clinch such an advantageous deal?

What is rapidly filling evangelical churches, however, is not the kind of spirituality that is the fruit of the gospel but the

kind of spirituality that can be had without Christ at all. The kind of spirituality that is being offered—a spirituality without doctrinal truth, without the full recognition of the reality of sin, without any sense of the due holiness of God, and without too much need for the cross—is little different from the spirituality pervasive in the culture, a spirituality that is often not religious. The gospel being marketed to postmodern consumers is a gospel perverted by these same postmodern consumers, who have been encouraged to think that they can “buy” on their own terms. And those terms have far more in common with paganism than we realize or might like to know!

The issue, then as now, is whether we can approach God on our own terms, take him as we want, and use him as we will, or not. Pagans then were not like the children of the Enlightenment: rationalistic, naturalistic, and reductionistic. No—they were spiritual people, but people whose spirituality was sought as an insurance policy against the hazards of life. The hazards they feared were very different from the hazards we fear. They feared the dark forces outside themselves: the forces of the gods and goddesses. We fear the dark forces within us. We are therefore on the hunt for insurance policies against ourselves—against our own boredom, emptiness, anxiety, and sense of being adrift in an ocean that is so vast as to make its far shores invisible. This is where people today have their vulnerabilities. And this is precisely where the church is mostly pitching its message: to those who live a privatized existence, haunted by their own emptiness and hungry for therapeutic relief. And biblical truth, apparently, has little to do with that!

The problem with this approach is that the gospel today has become little different from any of the other therapies and self-help regimes that are on the market. This is precisely what Paul resisted when it was open for him to say that the gospel was, in fact, just another form of the kind of religion that was

already present in Athens. He refused to walk down that road, and so should we.

The Choice

The gospel we preach will be different from the “gospel” of our current, postmodern spirituality only when we learn to do what the apostle Paul did in Athens. He analyzed and critiqued the worldviews of his day within which paganism was nestled. We do not. He worked hard at this. We do not. He did this because his spirituality was up to the task. Ours often is not. This is work that requires tough intellectual slogging. It requires stringent moral judgments. This is no superficial activity but one that should spring from the depths of our being. It won’t yield quick and easy results. But it’s possible, if we will but pay the price, that a foundation will be laid for authentic Christian believing. And why would we want anything else?