

TITLE:

- (a) Explain the apologetic method employed in Paul's speech at Athens (Acts 17.22-31). How do you assess its strengths and limitations?
- (b) Write an article for a secular magazine or newspaper, using a similar method to commend Christian faith to people whose world-view is shaped by the New Age movement *or* by scientific materialism *or* by some other '-ism' with which you are familiar.
- (c) Write notes drawing attention to the points at which your article uses the method explained in part (a).

1..... *Paul's Apologetic Method*

2..... *Article*

3..... *Methodological comparisons*

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## 1 *Paul's Apologetic Method*

Paul's task at the Areopagus in Athens was a unique challenge, at least among the speeches recorded in *Acts*. His audience consisted primarily of pagan philosophers, both ignorant and contemptuous of the Jewish background of the Gospel. Luke also tells us that Athenian philosophy had over the centuries become more concerned with academic debate than with fundamental truth. This fits the picture of a trend in Hellenistic philosophy given by Patristic writers such as Clement of Alexandria:

... just as in old shoes, when all the rest is worn and is falling to pieces, and the tongue alone remains.<sup>1</sup>

Paul however is committed not only to truth, but to salvation truth. His aim, therefore, is not to score in rhetoric, but to win the lost. Nevertheless (or perhaps consequently) he chooses to begin where his hearers are, and to proceed as far as possible along lines of logic they could accept before confronting their will, rather than their intellect, with what he considers the salient facts about Christ. The audience then is mildly contemptuous of Paul and wishes to be amused: Paul in fact has little interest in debate and wishes to convict. This may be the main reason for the relatively negative response.

Paul starts by connecting with their culture *via* a topical illustration (the altar to an unknown god), which also sets out his subject as *Knowing God*, in a way that engages with their own concepts of divinity (22-23). In this he would please traditionalists, without offending more sophisticated Stoics and Epicureans. But he also draws attention to a self-confessed

incompleteness of their knowledge of God, which can hardly be denied, and which would strike a chord with any genuine searcher after truth.

Vv.23-4, though firmly grounded in a Biblical worldview, expresses a view which would appeal to Stoics' belief in a Supreme Entity. Epicureans, with their concept of an eternal cosmos as source of both gods and men, would be less impressed, but would agree with his refutation of the low view of the creative principle in populist paganism. Given the premise of 'God', Paul's logic is irrefutable.

Similarly, he argues very reasonably in vv.26-29 in his assertion of God's providence in human affairs, the suggestion that this is intended to prompt them to search for God (search for ultimate truth was after all the purpose of philosophy) and the description of our close relationship to God. Paul's quotations from (?)Epimenides and Aratos of Soli<sup>2</sup> are of course another cultural bridge, particularly to the Stoics. His conclusion about the folly of idolatry, though offensive to the official cult, is fully justified logically. But it also answers the original claim that he was advocating foreign gods (18). If there is one creator God, then not only are multiple gods futile, but national gods also. A Jew has every right to speak of the God of the Greeks.

At this point comes Paul's transition from philosophy to preaching, as he calls for repentance and bases it on God's appointment, through his resurrection<sup>3</sup>, of an historical man to judge the world. And it would appear that at this point Paul also loses his audience, or the majority, having departed from logical argumentation to factual testimony. He has answered the queries

(18) about Jesus and the Resurrection, but not in a way acceptable to the majority.

Is this a weakness in Paul's otherwise strong methodology? He has up to now accommodated his message to his cultural context, and his delivery to cultural norms. He would no doubt have been better accepted had he avoided the specific facts about Jesus, and the demand for repentance dependant on them. But actually these were at the core of his apostolic message, and could ultimately not be compromised, whatever offence they might cause<sup>4</sup>.

Paul's speech might also be criticised on the opposite ground of being an incomplete expression of the means of salvation. But in initial cross-cultural communication, those concepts need to be selected which will best correlate with ideas already current in that culture, and which will not provoke unreasonable prejudice (as, for example, quotation from Jewish Scripture might have done<sup>5</sup>).

In summary, Paul's speech is for the most part an effective cross-cultural communication, using concepts already current in Athenian philosophical circles, and those elements of the Christian message most suited to those circles. If it failed to persuade a majority of the hearers it was because Paul's aim was to produce a '*paradigm shift*'<sup>6</sup> in his hearers, always a difficult thing to achieve, and theirs simply to modify their opinions by reason uninfluenced by a faith commitment<sup>7</sup>.

772 words.

## 2 *Article*

### THE LIMITS OF CHOICE

When the history of this post-modern age comes to be written, the thing that is most likely to amaze our descendants is the epidemic of sheer choice in our society. After all, they are likely to have very much less choice once we've used up all the world's resources. By any standards we have more choice than any other culture in the history of the world.

People returning from lengthy periods in developing countries find themselves almost paralysed by the choice of goods in supermarkets. The rest of us can be almost as bemused by the variety of cultural viewpoints and values around us - what one writer called the Smörgasbörd Factor<sup>8</sup>.

Whether we think of the bewildering variety of lifestyle options, the multiplication of TV channels, or the explosion of information on the Internet, our world is becoming increasingly fragmented into a multitude of smaller worlds. We can all choose which one we want to live in. A lot of people even make their own world, which would once have been called 'madness'. Nowadays, madness is to be seen to be in the straitjacket of old concepts of uniform values.

There's a lot of good in all this. It fosters enormous creativity, and it's certainly never dull.

And you don't find many people calling for less choice. But there is also a downside when an infinite number of individual worldviews struggle for space. If none of us shares the same attitudes, the likelihood of treading on each other's feet increases enormously. The world that modernism turned into a global village looks in danger of becoming a global problem estate.

Despite all this there seem to be a few clues that people are unconsciously looking for something which will, after all, unite them. Or perhaps more accurately, there are greater areas of agreement than we like to admit. One such clue was the amazing outpouring of communal grief over the death of Princess Diana earlier this year. The feeling was even international - I had a letter of condolence from a friend in Sri-Lanka, where the event had apparently occupied the media as much as it did here.

It has been said over and over again that Diana struck a chord in many different people's hearts, and generally for much the same reasons. There was a warmth and a compassion in her public life which was balanced by a vulnerability and a suffering in her private affairs. Nearly everyone valued the work she

did, and very many identified with the pain she felt.

Commentators have argued about why she evoked this response in so many. Some say it was the re-emergence of some fundamental human values that have so often been eclipsed in our mechanistic age. Others say that she was an embodiment of that impossible modern ideal, the woman who is at one and the same time a loving mother, a successful achiever and a glamorous human being. And perhaps most of all, she was a survivor.

Except that we discovered she wasn't, and so the world wept in grief. Even the cynics only criticised her because they doubted she matched her image, rather than because they denied the value of what that image stood for.

Now that she is gone, there is a sense of pessimism in the air, and it's not just because of the realisation that New Labour will not bring about Utopia. The mountains of floral and verbal tributes were a requiem not only for Diana, but also for the unspoken hope her image stood for. The hope that our society's welter of choices might begin to coalesce into something we could all share. Something of lasting value. Perhaps, even, love. Yet we all know

in our hearts that we cannot bring that hope to fruition. As the song says:

Loveliness we've lost,  
These empty days without your smile.<sup>9</sup>

There is a very real sense in which the world feels itself poorer without Diana.

But at the risk of offending the post-modern mind, I wonder if we ought to be quite so pessimistic. Diana's qualities may have died with her, but there is another person whose life has touched even more lives than hers has, only we have been so overwhelmed by the kaleidoscope of choice on the smörgasbord that we may have overlooked him.

There are something like 1½ billion people in the world who see in Jesus Christ the epitome of that uniting of compassion and strength which our fractured world needs; yes, and the suffering with which it identifies as well. Only unlike those who mourn the loss of these things in the passing of Diana, many millions of these people testify that Jesus rose from the dead, and that in some deep way he has met them and turned their lives around.

To them encountering Jesus is not just another lifestyle choice - how many such choices can we make before we become tired of change itself? No, to them it is proof that beyond the endless variety and

uncertainty of this world, there is a universal truth that all of us can lean on and find solid.

It's an amazing thing that even after 2,000 years of Christian history nobody else has even claimed that someone has risen from the grave and is still alive. No one would believe them if they did. The claims for Jesus are unique.

They were first made by a group of men and women who had very little to gain, and everything to lose, by fantasising about it. In our time their testimony has not been shaken by two hundred years of modernist dissection. Post-modernist criticism has not so far been any more successful at weakening it. But perhaps post-modernism has less to gain by even trying, for the possibility of the supernatural that threatens rational modernism holds no fears for the post-modern mind.

The only fear for today's Pluralist Man comes from the universal implications of this one individual's resurrection. If Jesus Christ alone of all humankind has risen, then despite all the dishes weighing down our table there is only one which remotely looks like satisfying our appetite.

The resurrection of Jesus makes demands upon us that, inevitably, must sweep away our relative values and the autonomy of our worldviews if we

acknowledge them. It tells us that behind life and death there stands not a fathomless question which we answer, or ignore, in whatever way we fancy. Instead there stands a personal God who questions us about our lives, and about how we intend to respond to the man who overcame death by giving up his life.

Put bluntly, although our society presents us with a near-infinity of choices, all choices except one would appear to end up in death. That rather restricts the options, doesn't it?

*1151 words.*

### **3     *Methodological comparisons***

- i     Recognition of the audience's worldview ('post-modern pluralism' ≡ 'religion' in Paul).
- ii    Topical allusion (death of Diana ≡ altar to unknown god).
- iii   Attention drawn to the shortcomings of the prevailing worldview (desire for unifying values ≡ admission that God unknown: failure of Diana to fulfil our hopes ≡ futility of idolatry).
- iv    Mention of God's closeness (Jesus well known ≡ God close to each one etc).
- v     The historical importance of the resurrection of Jesus.
- vi    The demands that God, through the uniqueness of the resurrection, makes on us.

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- vii Mention of judgement (God calls us to account  $\equiv$  God commands men everywhere to repent).
  - viii God is personal and unique.

*Differences:*

- The existence of God is less stressed than in Paul because despite the many views of God, monotheism is still well-recognised especially in association with Jesus. It is therefore assumed more than stated.
- Judgement is expressed implicitly rather than centrally mainly because it is one of the Christian concepts consciously rejected by the society. It would take a separate article to make an apology for it.

*193 words.*

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**References**

- <sup>1</sup> *Στροματα*, 1.3. Clement goes on to quote Solon of Athens:  
*'Look to the tongue, and to the words of the glozing man,  
 But you look on no work that has been done;  
 But each one of you walks in the steps of a fox,  
 And in all of you is an empty mind.'*
- <sup>2</sup> *Φαενομενα* 5: also attributed to Cleanthes, leader of Stoicism for many years.
- <sup>3</sup> Gooding, 1990, p.304.
- <sup>4</sup> *'A lecture which God uses to bring even one human being to reconciliation with God...cannot rightly be called a failure.'*  
*Ibid.*, p.313.
- <sup>5</sup> Burnett, 1990, p.239f.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.222ff.
- <sup>7</sup> This also seems surprisingly common in modern academic theology.
- <sup>8</sup> Guinness, 1983, ch.5.
- <sup>9</sup> *Candle in the Wind* 1997, ©Elton John & Bernie Taupin.

***Bibliography***

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