

# ACTS 17:16-34 IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

(An Assessment from a N. Atlantic/Western Perspective)<sup>1</sup>

*David A. Reed*

*The relevancy of a given text to contemporary life is the thrust of this article. The writer pays attention to the hermeneutical process by which Africans come to apply the Areopagus speech to everyday life. He shows how African scholars search for relevancy in a text while N. Atlantic/ Western scholars concern themselves with historical-critical questions. "Since Africans are much "religious" like those in Athens addressing the Gospel must start from wherever they happen to be. In modern Africa the educated must be reached with the Gospel. We must engage in top-down approach to missions and evangelism*

## INTRODUCTION

John Mbiti in his book, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, states, "The Bible is the basic source of African theology, because it is the primary witness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Mbiti adds, "No theology can retain its Christian identity apart from scripture."<sup>3</sup> Mbiti contends that, "The Bible is not simply an historical book about the people of Israel," because the Bible is capable of speaking to Africa and Africans, even, as he puts it, "in the midst of our [i.e. Africa's] troublesome situation."<sup>4</sup> Numerous African biblical scholars espouse a similar understanding of the biblical text. E. W. Fashole-Luke, for instance, relates,

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Mr. David Reed is completing his M.A.R. in New Testament at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA, USA. He has earned a BA in Judaic Studies from the University of Cincinnati and has done graduate work in Biblical Archaeology at Wheaton Graduate School of Theology.

<sup>1</sup> I graciously want to thank Kari Wheeler for taking the time to read this essay, offer suggestions, and make corrections to the body of text.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Bible and theology in African Christianity*. (Nairobi: Oxford, 1986), 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

“Now it is universally accepted by all engaged in this quest [i.e. a quest for an authentic African theology] that the Bible is the primary and basic source for the development of African Christian theologies.”<sup>5</sup> Justin Ukpong takes this all a step further in his article “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes” when he speaks of the importance of the interpretation of the Biblical text having practical relevancy to the everyday life of the African.<sup>6</sup> As any student of N. Atlantic/ Western<sup>7</sup> theology knows these views greatly contrast with prevalent N. Atlantic/Western ways of reading a text which have centred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century primarily around historical criticism and form criticism, and, more recently, around feminist as well as post-modern and literary readings of the text.<sup>8</sup> This essay will compare and contrast N. Atlantic/Western readings of the Areopagus speech in Acts 17 with African readings. Although this essay will not discuss in detail the N. Atlantic/Western historical-critical method largely developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the thesis of this essay will assert that, by and large, N. Atlantic scholars are concerned only with historical questions regarding the speech in Acts 17:16-34, while African scholar’s seek the practical meaning of the

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<sup>5</sup> E. W. Fashole-Luke, “The Quest for an Africa Christian Theology,” *Ecumenical Review* 27 (1975): 265.

<sup>6</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (June 1995): 3-14.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term ‘N. Atlantic/Western’ in a wide variety of ways—the term, to my mind, is multivalent in meaning. However, it is the most neutral and all inclusive term I can think of in order to distinguish between American, English, German, Canadian, W. European, etc. readings of a text and those readings originating from Latin America or various parts of Africa. Obviously, the term is defective and, perhaps, too inclusive. It does not, as one might have already guessed, distinguish between female and male theologians and their readings of a text, nor does it distinguish between evangelical and non-evangelical scholars, etc. Furthermore, it does not speak to the differences in approach to the text between Catholic and Protestant scholars. Yet, despite its deficiencies, it will be used throughout this essay to speak of a specific coterie of scholars who inhabit N. America and W. Europe, respectively.

<sup>8</sup> For information regarding these interpretive methods, see I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992); Moises Silva, gen. Ed., *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

text. This paper will end with a summary of African views regarding Paul's speech to the Athenians. First, however, a word or two about African Biblical hermeneutics is in order.

## AFRICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Numerous articles have been written on the subject of "African Approaches to Scripture."<sup>9</sup> Though such articles exist, Tite Tienou, an African evangelical, summarizes the situation best when he states, "African theology is impossible to define in such a way that all interested in the subject will be satisfied."<sup>10</sup> Tienou also questions whether or not an attempt to discern only *one* African theology is even wise.<sup>11</sup> Though Tienou is likely correct, various attempts have been made at defining an "African Approach to Scripture." The most systematic attempt, however, comes from Justin Ukpong.

Ukpong, an African Roman Catholic, has coined the phrase "African Inculturation Hermeneutic (AIH)."<sup>12</sup> Ukpong's AIH, like all systems, is not a panacea, for numerous problems exist within his system. For example, one finds conspicuously absent from AIH African-feminist interpretations of the biblical text.<sup>13</sup> However, in an attempt to synthesize the beliefs of the

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<sup>9</sup> Besides Ukpong's article, one should see, Emmanuel Adow Obeng, "The Use of Biblical Critical Methods in Rooting the Scriptures in Africa," in *The Bible in African Christianity*, (1997): 8-24; N. Onwu, "The Current State of Biblical Studies in Africa," in *The Journal of Religious Thought*; John S. Pobee, "Bible Study in Africa: A Passover Language," in *Semeia* 73 (1996): 161-179; John Riches, "Interpreting the Bible in African Contexts: Glasgow Consultation," in *Semeia* 73 (1996): 181-199; Jean-Pierre Ruiz, "New Ways of Reading the Bible in the Cultural Settings of the Third World," in *Concilium* 1 (1995): 73-84; J. N. K. Mugambi, "Foundations for an African approach to Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (eds. Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong; Nairobi: Action, 2001), 9-29.

<sup>10</sup> Tite Tienou, "Indegenous African Christian Theologies: The Uphill Road," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 14/2 (1990): 74.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ukpong, 3-14.

<sup>13</sup> To encounter the lack of attention given by Ukpong to African-feminist interpretation, one should see Teresa Okure, "Feminist Interpretations in Africa," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, vol. 1 (ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza), New York: Crossroad, (1993), 76-85; idem., "Invitation to African

African worldview, Ukpong argues that four things are always prevalent. These include,

First, the belief in the unitive view of reality whereby reality is seen not in dualistic but in unitive terms, thus, making reality a composite of the visible and the invisible; second, the belief in the divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos; third, the belief in community and the fact that the life of the individual human person and also even of inanimate objects in the cosmos finds meaning and explanation in terms of the structure of relationships within the human community, as well as between human community and nature, and, finally, the belief in the concrete rather than the abstract, on the physical rather than the theoretical.<sup>14</sup>

With these four features of the African worldview in mind, Ukpong goes on to define the procedure of his AIH.<sup>15</sup> The first step in the AIH interpretation process is “identifying the interpreter’s specific context that dynamically corresponds or approximates to the historical context of the text, and clarifying his/her perspective in relation to the text.”<sup>16</sup> The second step is “analysis of the context of interpretation, that is the interpreter’s context which is to form the background against which the text is to be read.”<sup>17</sup> There are five levels to this second step. The first is the “level of phenomeno-logical analysis,” which seeks to clarify, and the second is the “level of socio-anthropological analysis,” which seeks to explicate the issue of a given text in terms of the people’s worldview. The third is the “level of historical analysis,” which seeks to investigate the issue brought about by the text in relation to the people’s life history. The fourth is the “level of social analysis,” which probes into the interconnectedness of the dynamics of the society in relation to the given issue of a text. Finally, the fifth is the “level of religious analysis,” which seeks to show the religious dimension of the situation produced by the text in the life of the people. The third step

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Women’s Hermeneutical Concerns,” in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (eds. Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong; Nairobi: Acton, 2001), 42-67.

<sup>14</sup> Idem., 8-9. Similar points are made in chapter 12 of Bediako’s work. See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, (Edinburgh: Orbis, 1995), 210ff.

<sup>15</sup> Detailed information on the AIH procedure can be found in Ukpong, 10ff.

<sup>16</sup> Ukpong, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ukpong, 11.

in AIH interpretation is “analysis of the historical context of the text.”<sup>18</sup> The fourth step is “analysis of the text in the light of the already analyzed contemporary context.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, the fifth step is “gathering together the fruits of the discussion and a commitment to actualizing the message of the text in [a] concrete life situation.”<sup>20</sup> All of this points to the underlying thesis of AIH, which is: If Jesus is alive today, as indeed he is having risen from death, how do we [i.e. as Africans] make him and his message challenge contemporary society and the life of individuals?<sup>21</sup> Again, as stated previously in this paper, the importance of the relevancy/practicality of a text for the African comes through in Ukpong’s AIH and is in fact, as seen above, the final step in the AIH process. However, one should note that Ukpong’s AIH does, as seen in step three, include room for an historical analysis of a text—but it is not the end result of the analysis done on the Bible by an interpreter engaged in the hermeneutical process.

The reason for utilizing Ukpong is that he is one of the few African scholars to tackle the daunting task of creating an authentic, purely African, biblical hermeneutic (at least so far). In other words, Ukpong’s AIH, as previously stated, is one of the attempts by an African at systematizing an approach to Scripture from an African perspective. It is the hope of this writer that as this essay continues in its analysis of N. Atlantic/Western and African interpretations of the Areopagus speech in Acts 17, that the reader will grasp the main thesis of this essay (which is, once again, that N. Atlantic scholars—unlike Ukpong’s AIH—hardly, if ever, ask the question of the relevancy of a given text to contemporary life [Ukpong’s fifth step in AIH]. Before investigating N. Atlantic/Western readings of Acts 17:16-34, this paper will briefly outline the speech itself in order to better orient the reader toward N. Atlantic/Western and African interpretations of this text.

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<sup>18</sup> Ukpong, 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Ukpong, 4

## AN OUTLINE OF THE AREOPAGUS SPEECH (ACTS 17:16-34)

One can easily grasp the basic gist of what Luke records Paul as saying in Acts 17:16-34. The text itself can be subdivided into three parts: First, the introduction (17:16-21), second, the address (17:22-31), and finally, third, the impact of the address (17:32-34).<sup>22</sup> According to the text itself, the fact that the city of Athens contained so many idols (kateido,,lon<sup>23</sup>) exasperated Paul (v.16ff.). The presence of the numerous idols apparently contradicted his perception of Athens as the cultural and intellectual center of the ancient world.<sup>24</sup> The intellectual inhabitant's of Athens were likely too self-conceited and pretentious of knowledge and truth, and contemptuous of other people's viewpoints (v.18). Likely, the Epicureans form the part of Paul's audience that mocked him—especially his teaching about the resurrection of the dead.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, it is they who called Paul a “babbler.”

Despite such criticism, Paul expounded his Jewish monotheism in terms of Jesus and *anastasis*, which is a name and a concept both so foreign to his interlocutors that they mistook Paul for espousing belief in a foreign deity.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Luke presents Paul as challenging all that the Athenians stood for—including their religion and their philosophy, their

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<sup>22</sup> For other possible ways of understanding this speech as well as different ways of dividing it, see Conrad Gempf, “Athens, Paul at,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (ed. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid; Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 1993), 51-54.

<sup>23</sup> For a fuller discussion of this word see Verlyn D. Verbrugge, *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*, (Grand Rapids: zondervan, 200), 374-375.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the city of Athens at this time see John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 513-518.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the Epicureans and their beliefs, see Elizabeth Asmis, “Epicureans,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 550-561.

<sup>26</sup> See the entry in Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third edition, BDAG (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 71-72.

temples and their schools. The setting of the Areopagus is also of great importance to the story. Regardless of whether this setting is a literary device utilized by Luke or is an actual historical fact, the placement of Paul on the Areopagus (or Mars Hill) puts him in the center of Athens' intellectual and cultural scene.<sup>27</sup>

Assuming, as this writer does, that the story actually took place in some form comparable to its rendering in Luke-Acts, Paul begins his preaching on the Areopagus (17:22-31) by acknowledging the Athenians' religiosity (v.22). The point here seems to be that even though the Athenians were idolaters, they were, for better or for worse, searching—and this should, at the very least, be honoured (vv.22-23). Thus Paul's message included the following elements: first, God is the creator of all things (Is. 42:5) who neither dwells in shrines made by human hands (I Kings 8-27 and II Sam. 7) nor do human beings provide for His wants, but rather He provides for all their needs (Ps. 50:2). Second, He made all the nations, fixed their seasons and boundaries (Deut. 32:8). And finally, third, He desired that all humanity should seek and find Him (Is.55:6). During the speech, Paul utilized both Jewish tradition and Greek philosophy to convey his point.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Paul makes use of a quotation from the Stoic poet Epimenides, and follows this with one from Aratus, who, like Paul, hailed from Gilicia.<sup>29</sup>

As the speech progressed, Paul stressed the immanence of God (v.27b), a doctrine of prodigious importance to both Stoics and Christians, and Paul insisted that human beings should have more sense than to worship human-made images (Rom. 1:23). Upon saying this, Paul began to expound the gospel, indicating that in the past God overlooked humanity's ignorance, but now He commands all to repent and turn back to Himself (v.30). This is then followed by the last words of Paul to the Athenian intelligentsia which

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<sup>27</sup> It is not the intention of this paper to discuss the historical validity of this speech as recorded by Luke in Acts 17. However, for an overview of the issues involved, see C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (ICC, Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1998), 824ff.

<sup>28</sup> See the important discussion in Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (AB Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 168ff.

<sup>29</sup> C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1975), 207-209; A. M. Hunter, *Gospel and Apostle*, (London: SCM Press, 1975), 123-127.

concern the aforementioned *anastasis*, something Paul elsewhere refers to as “folly to the Greeks” (1 Cor. 1:23). According to the text, many scoffed, but others joined him and became believers, though they did not join in droves (17:32-34). Thus, in the words of N. Onwu, “What Paul achieved in Athens was to re-establish the faith that God is still on the throne.”<sup>30</sup> With this brief sketch of the speech in mind, this essay will now summarize the important N. Atlantic/Western readings of the Areopagus speech in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF N. ATLANTIC READINGS OF ACTS 17:16-34 IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Chidi Denis Isizoh states, “Scholars have shown great interest in the [Areopagus] speech.”<sup>31</sup> This statement rings true, especially if one takes into account the copious amount of material written on the passage from a N. Atlantic perspective in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone.<sup>32</sup> A summary of N. Atlantic/Western scholastic views starting in 1955 will now ensue.

#### 1955-1956

Both B. Gartner and M. Dibelius discovered a multitude of parallel ideas between those in the Areopagus speech and those found in other Hellenistic literature.<sup>33</sup> Based on these parallels, both Gartner and Dibelius

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<sup>30</sup> N. Onwu, “Ministry to the Educated: Reinterpreting Acts 17:16-34 in Africa,” in *African Christian Studies*, C.H.I.E.A 4:4 (Dec. 1988): 66.

<sup>31</sup> Chidi Denis Isizoh, “African Traditional Religious Perspective of ‘Areopagus Speech’.” Online: <http://security-one.com/isizoh/areopagus.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> For detailed bibliographic references, see *Classified Bibliography of Literature on the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Tools and Studies, 1966; Chidi Denis Isizoh, *The Resurrected Jesus Preached in Athens: The Areopagus Speech*, (Rome: Tipografica Leberit, 1997); J.-C. Lebram, “Der Aufbau der Areopagrede,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 55 (1964): 221-243.

<sup>33</sup> B. Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, (ASNU 21), Upsala-Lund, 1955; M. Dibelius, “Paul on the Areopagus,” in *Studies in Acts of the Apostles*, ed. M. Dibelius, (London: n.p., 1956), 26-77.



claimed that the speech is more Lucan than Pauline, and is created to function in the perspectives of Luke's tendency in Acts.<sup>34</sup>

### 1964

C. S. Williams opines that the address is in its entirety a Lukan creation.<sup>35</sup> Though he essentially agrees with Dibelius, he further advances the argument by asserting that Luke uses the speech to localize Christianity in the setting of Hellenistic contemporary culture. Williams claims that Luke received his information about Paul's speech to the Athenians from an Areopagite disciple of Paul.

### 1965

In his *Magnum opus*, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Ernst Haenchen averred that Luke was in fact the author of the address in Acts 17:16ff.<sup>36</sup> Unlike his predecessors, Haenchen unearths a specific literary technique, namely the "motif technique," which he claims Luke employed in the composition of the address. With such a device, Luke drives his reader headlong to the penultimate point: the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus. Against those who espouse Pauline authorship for the speech, Haenchen points out the absence of the Pauline "curse" on the Gentiles as is attested to in Romans 1:21-24, 25-27, 28-31. Furthermore, he argues that Pauline theology stresses that Natural Law is to the Gentiles what the Torah is to Israel. The fact that this seminal Pauline theology is absent in the Areopagus speech leads Haenchen to conclude that the speech is non-Pauline. Thus, for him, Acts 17:16-34 is at best Jewish-Hellenistic missionary propaganda that Luke utilizes for his theological purposes.

### 1966

Hans Conzelmann rejects the speech as an extract from a Hellenistic-Jewish missionary address.<sup>37</sup> Instead, Conzelmann asserts that the address arises from Luke's own literary imaginativeness and is not an actual

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 73-75.

<sup>35</sup> See note 27.

<sup>36</sup> E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, (ET by B. Noble and G. Shin; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).

<sup>37</sup> H. Conzelmann, "The Address of Paul on the Areopagus," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*; eds. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966).

sermon delivered directly or indirectly by Paul. Thus, according to Conzelmann, Luke's Paul says in this speech what he judges relevant given the circumstances.

#### 1974

C. K. Barrett takes the Lukan tendentious purpose in Acts for granted and, consequently, states that Luke's principal intention is to portray the triumphant advancement of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.<sup>38</sup> According to him, Peter and Paul became the vehicles of the Gospel, and they must be allowed to tower above all the other characters in the narrative. Barrett takes this as a peculiarity of Luke's writing style. However, the main concern of Luke-Acts is the spread of the Gospel.

#### 1977

F. F. Bruce maintains that Luke presents a vivid account of Paul's apostolic witness in Athens.<sup>39</sup> Bruce is of the opinion that according to 1 Thess. 3:1, the apostle Paul spent time in the city of Athens during which he delivered the address that Luke faithfully documents.

#### 1980s-1990s

V. Gatti sought to show the relevancy of the inter-testamental literature to the speech.<sup>40</sup> He utilized the religious and Hellenistic sapiential works to better understand the meaning of the pericope in question. In 1990 and 1995, respectively, P. de Meester and P. Bossuyt with J. Radermakers made a move toward biblical context-ualization, thus moving toward the idea of inculturation biblical study in order to better comprehend Acts 17:16-34.<sup>41</sup>

What this brief survey shows is that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the major questions regarding the speech were literary and historical-critical ones. That is to say that for N. Atlantic/Western scholars, the concern was whether or not Paul actually said what is recorded in Acts 17:16-34 or

<sup>38</sup> C. K. Barrett, "Paul's Speech on the Areopagus," in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyerr*, eds. M. E. Glasswell and E. W. Fashole-Luke; (London: SPCK, 1974).

<sup>39</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Free Spirit*, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 236-247; Idem., *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text*, (London: Tyndale, 1951), 335.

<sup>40</sup> See note 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

whether Luke entirely fabricated the speech, basing it on some previous knowledge of the incident in Paul's life. As this essay turns to Africa and its scholars, one will see that these literary and historical questions are not the main concern of African biblical scholars.

### AFRICAN INTERPRETATIONS OF ACTS 17:16-34

Africans have written many studies on the subject of the Areopagus speech. The most recent and most complete comes from Chidi Denis Isizoh. His doctoral dissertation, published in 1997, focuses entirely on this text.<sup>42</sup> As this essay progresses, it will be necessary to state some limitations. First, this essay, as with N. Atlantic/Western interpretations of Acts 17:16-34, cannot fully cover the entire gamut of African books and articles published on the subject. Furthermore, this essay will not focus on the African exegesis of Acts 17:16-34. Instead, this essay will pay attention to the hermeneutical process by which Africans come to apply the Areopagus speech to everyday African life. Again, the purpose of this will be to show how African scholars search for relevancy in a text while N. Atlantic/Western scholars concern themselves with historical-critical questions.

#### N. Onwu

N. Onwu, in his article, "Ministry to the Educated: Reinterpreting Acts 17:16-34 in Africa," argues that the Areopagus speech is a "lesson in realism, showing how to effect genuine and lasting social and religious change by dealing with the root cause of sin, not mere symptoms of the problem."<sup>43</sup> He takes note of the fact that Paul in the Areopagus speech reaches out to the elite of society (the cultural elite as well as the intelligentsia). Onwu argues that this needs to be appropriated in modern day missionary contexts.<sup>44</sup> He notes that missionary activities often focus on trying to convert the poor and the needy in society. Though there is ample scriptural precedent for such, Onwu argues that the oppression of the poor is caused by the elite; especially in places like S. Africa. Thus, Onwu believes that the text of Acts 17:16-34, "Challenges the Church in Africa to focus its ministry on the educated through whom modern Africa has been

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<sup>42</sup> Isizoh, *The Resurrected Jesus*.

<sup>43</sup> Onwu, "Ministry to the Educated," 68.

<sup>44</sup> Onwu, "Ministry to the Educated," 67.

ruined.”<sup>45</sup> This, then, is a top-down approach to missions and evangelism. The elite and educated in a society are to be targeted because, as Onwu notes, it is they who hold the most sway and influence.<sup>46</sup>

### **Chris Ukachukwu Manus**

In Manus’ article, “The Areopagus Speech (Acts 17:16-34): A Study of Luke’s Approach to Evangelism and its Significance in the African Context,” he discusses some of the historical-critical questions applicable to the text. Then proceeds to state that his main concern with regard to the Areopagus speech is, “What approach does Luke’s Paul adopt in evangelizing sophisticated Athens?”<sup>47</sup> He argues that “Luke’s text has . . . a special appeal for developing churches of Africa and beyond.”<sup>48</sup> He avers such, because the Areopagus speech, “presents us [i.e. Africa] with a model worthy of emulation for mission in Africa where the inhabitants are still as much ‘religious’ as the Athenians of antiquity.”<sup>49</sup>

From the speech itself Manus derives six motifs. They are: first, the fact that Luke does not allow Paul to quote many O.T. proof-texts from prophecies, which would be unfamiliar to the heathens. Thus, if he uses any at all, he subsumes it in his arguments on natural revelation, opting instead for direct quotations from local poets and wise men. Second, the fact that Paul does not argue from “first principles,” but instead from the point of view of biblical revelation. Third, the fact that the Paul of Acts preaches from the “known” to the “unknown.” Fourth, the fact that from the realm of God and his knowability as creator of all things Luke’s Paul comes to a theological anthropology. Fifth, the fact that Paul’s next step, after coming to a theological anthropology is to show the Athenians that God’s ultimate purpose in giving human beings the earth is that they might seek and find him because they are his offspring. And, finally, the fact that the climax of the speech is an invitation to surrender to God who has overlooked

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<sup>45</sup> Op. cit., 68.

<sup>46</sup> Op. cit., 66ff.

<sup>47</sup> Chris Ukachukwu Manus, “The Areopagus Speech (Acts 17: 16-34): A Study of Luke’s Approach to Evangelism and its Significance in the African Context,” *ATJ* 14:1 (1985): 13.

<sup>48</sup> Manus, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

humanity's past ignorance.<sup>50</sup> Thus, with these six points in mind, Manus can say, "Throughout the length and breath of Africa especially prior to the advent of Christianity and even now in many remote villages there existed and still exists several shrines (altars) and idols kept and patronized by devotees of Traditional Religion."<sup>51</sup> It is, then, the task of the missionary—whether Western or African—to address the Gospel to these people starting from wherever they happen to be.<sup>52</sup>

As Manus notes, "Luke's address enjoins us [i.e. Africans] to preach the Gospel to the contemporary African from his 'known,' namely, from his native religious culture to the Lordship of our Lord, Jesus Christ."<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Christian missionaries should glean from the Areopagus speech the fact that "the employment of 'quotable quotes' from folk literature proves that heathen wisdom supports Christian interpretation and contextualization."<sup>54</sup> Thus, Manus concludes, "From Luke's approach, we must come to a realization that the Gospel of Christ liberates man [sic] and assists him to express his faith within his local ambience."<sup>55</sup>

### **M.-L. Martin**

M.-L. Martin in her article, "Acts 17:16-34: Paul's Approach to Greek Intellectuals," makes one very practical, yet, salient point. Citing verse 26 of Acts 17, "He has appointed boundaries of their habitation," Martin argues that this phrase notes the fact that God "directs the history of each nation."<sup>56</sup> However, Martin also points out the abuses of this phrase at the hands of human beings. She relates, "No justification for theories of separation of races or nations or of the expulsion of whites from Africa should be introduced into this verse, as is sometimes done."<sup>57</sup>

### **Chidi Denis Isizoh**

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<sup>50</sup> All of these points are expanded upon in Manus, 13-14.

<sup>51</sup> Manus, 14.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Manus, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Manus, 16.

<sup>56</sup> M.-L. Martin, "Acts 17:16-34: Paul's Approach to Greek Intellectuals," *Ministry* 3/1 (62):23.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

In Chidi Denis Isizoh's article, "African Traditional Religious Perspective of the Areopagus Speech," Isizoh utilizes Acts 17:16-34 to conceive of how Paul might have interacted with African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR is difficult to define because, as John Karanja has noted, there is always a question as to whether or not ATR has defined itself based on its reaction to the faiths of Islam and Christianity.<sup>58</sup> However, as shown above, Ukpong has discerned four things that are common to ATR and the overall African worldview. Whatever the case may be with ATR, Isizoh, after examining Acts 17, concludes that the vocabulary found in the Areopagus speech would not be foreign to ATR and that Africans should utilize Paul's missionary strategy in Acts 17 as a way of reaching fellow Africans who still participate in ATR.<sup>59</sup> Thus, he relates, "If the speech had been addressed originally to the Africans, it would have well received by an appreciative audience."<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, Isizoh argues that despite early missionary rejection of ATR as well as traditional African culture, Africans have received the Gospel. Therefore, the only question that remains for Isizoh is: If the foreigners misunderstood many of the positive values of ATR and culture, have the Africans really made them understandable today?

## CONCLUSION

David Tracy has said, "There is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text,"<sup>61</sup> Given this, no matter whether one interprets the biblical text from an African perspective or a N. Atlantic/Western perspective, every interpreter is ethically responsible for her/his interpretation of the text and the impact it has upon its readers. Even if no practical or relevant point is made, even if the interpreter stays strictly

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<sup>58</sup> This statement was made by John Karanja at a guest lecture given at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, Ambridge, PA, on Friday, May 10, 2002

<sup>59</sup> See note 29 for the online information regarding this article.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 79.

within the realm of the historical-critical method, every interpreter is responsible for what he/she says and does not say.

With this in mind, the reader should note that this essay has not sought to make a judgment call on whether or not N. Atlantic/Western interpretations are superior or inferior to African interpretations. Nor has this essay sought to do the reverse. If the reader has, with the evidence submitted, made a judgement call regarding which method is better, then, this is the sole responsibility of the reader; for, as Tracy noted above, "there is no innocent interpretation (i.e. reader)." Every reader, and every interpreter, brings his/her own cultural baggage to a text—and no one is truly bias-free. However, what this essay has tried to do is show that, by and large, N. Atlantic/Western interpreters of the Areopagus speech approach the text from an historical-critical point of view. Their main concern is whether or not this speech is authentically Pauline or a creation from the imagination of Luke. In contrast to this, the brief survey of African interpretations of the same speech shows that African biblical scholars have a practical concern that is often lacking in the West. African scholars are not as much concerned with the historical-critical questions brought about by exegeting the text as much as they are concerned with how the text applies to current missionary efforts in present day Africa.

Regardless of how one might feel about each of the perspectives presented here, it is important to keep in mind the words of Justin Ukpog. He writes, "Different cultures are today considered to have contributions to make to our understanding of the biblical message, and such contributions are considered as not only legitimate but necessary for a fuller appreciation of the gospel message."<sup>62</sup> Whether one speaks of N. Atlantic/Western or African hermeneutics, one must realize the need of each perspective to embrace the other. Each must realize, in great humility, that everyone has something to take from the text as well as to contribute to it.

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<sup>62</sup> Ukpog, 13.