

FAITH EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

ACTS 17 – NATURAL vs. DIVINE REVELATION

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR J. AS REQUIRED PER THE SYLLABUS FOR NT6252: THE
BOOK OF ACTS

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MARCH 21, 2008

Natural vs. Divine Revelation

“Some people, I believe, account for all things which have come into exist, all things which are coming into existence now, and all things which will do so in the future, by attributing them either to nature... or chance.”¹

The battle of ideas began in earnest a few hundred years before Paul spoke to the Athenians via the school of Stoic philosophy founded (308B.C.) in Athens by Zeno of Citium (Cyprus),² and it served as a rallying point for Stoic “creationists” to formulate responses to Epicurean materialist philosophy,³ addressed later in slightly more depth. This *tug of war* predates Paul’s arrival on the stoic scene (pun intended), but Paul was firm in teaching while we can know truth (e.g., a creator) via our senses;⁴ this “sensory perception” doesn’t *necessarily* involve just the empirical method.⁵ It was this leftover ingrained pagan epicurean concept of idolatry in human sexuality which regards pleasure as the highest sexual good that Paul spoke to in Romans,⁶⁻⁷ but now Luke records him speaking to a more metaphysical group on Mars Hill. In Acts we find Paul at the Areopagus about to deliver one of his most well-known addresses in the very place Socrates was indicted and condemned for exposing the City’s pagan idolatry.⁸ Matthew Henry continues the point that Socrates was not merely condemned because he did not esteem the city gods, but “because he introduced new demons; and this was the charge against Paul. Now

¹ Plato, *The Laws* (tr. Trevor Saunders; New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1970), 408-447.

² Geddes MacGregor, *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1989), cf. Stoics, 589.

³ Bill Cooper, *After the Flood: The Early Post-Flood History of Europe Traced Back to Noah* (West Sussex, England: New Wine Press, 1995), 24-25.

⁴ Romans 1:20

⁵ Ronald Nash, *Life’s Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 285.

⁶ Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinists: How We Became Hedonists* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 311.

⁷ See my paper, “Romans: Natures Influence On Political Science,” (11-15-2007).

⁸ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), cf. Acts 17:22.

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he [Paul] tacitly owns the former part of the charge, but guards against the latter, by declaring that he does not introduce any new gods, but reduce them *to the knowledge of one God, the Ancient of days.*"⁹ Let's read:

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

⁹ Ibid.

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And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this *matter*.” So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.¹⁰

These searchers for God were able to glean enough truth from nature to realize that there is indeed a Divine Being, but revelation was what they were missing, and this is what Paul had to offer, for Paul knew intimately about this revelation he spoke of.¹¹ He declares quite plainly that it is common knowledge that there is a creator who has authority over people,¹² for “what nature suggests, God himself confirms,”¹³ or as one ex-atheist astutely put it, “Absent **revelation** to the contrary, the expectations of natural reason must surely be that an omnipotent creator would be as detached and uninvolved as the gods of Epicurus.”¹⁴ What did nature at least suggest? Creation, which hit home in the land of materialist hedonists. Paul was saying they were on the right track, so-to-speak, but that when “persons are exposed to the **special revelation** found in the gospel and respond, their minds are cleared through the

¹⁰ *The New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), S. Ac 17:22-34.

¹¹ Acts 9:1-7.

¹² Alister E. McGrath, *The NIV Bible Companion: A Basic Commentary on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 367-368

¹³ Alister McGrath, *Glimpsing the Face of God: The Search for Meaning in the Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 63

¹⁴ Antony Flew, *God & Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 13 – in the new introduction.

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effects of regeneration,¹⁵ enabling them to see distinctly what is there. Then they can recognize in nature what was more clearly seen in **special revelation**.¹⁶ The author continues:

The Psalmist who saw a declaration of the glory of God in the heavens saw it *clearly* because he had come to know God from **special revelation**, but what he saw had always been genuinely and objectively there. ***He did not merely project it upon the creation.***¹⁷

Again, the point is clear, the Psalmist didn't add something to creation, he merely saw clearly now what "UNKNOWN" had been previously. This may sound tricky, but follow a bit further here with some commentary on Romans:

The apostle Paul emphasizes that "all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason...." [Paul] stresses in Romans 1 that the natural man suppresses the truth, Paul leaves no doubt that it is **revealed truth** that is being thwarted.¹⁸

¹⁵ **regeneration** – "*Spiritual rebirth caused supernaturally by the Holy Spirit,*" the opposite of the natural man. George Thomas Kurian, ed., *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 651.

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 196.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority, vol II* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 84.

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When a person “refuses to come to Christ.... he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God’s Spirit on his heart.”¹⁹ Or as another theologian put it so well,

Distinguishing Assent from Saving Faith. Saving faith is distinguished from the convergence of probabilities, from purely private experience, and from direct infusion of knowledge from God.... It is an act of the will by which one offers free submission to **God’s revelation**.... Lacking personal trust, bare intellect assent is hardly sufficient for salvation. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder” (James 2:19).²⁰

Man can often clearly see God’s nature around them, but regeneration by the Holy Spirit is needed to apply the final puzzle piece. Cicero (106 – 43B.C.) is one prime example of a man noticing the “UNKNOWN” god’s hand on nature, in contradistinction to the materialist/hedonist²¹ philosophy of the Epicureans:

When you see a sundial or a water-clock, you see that it tells time by design and not by chance. How then can you imagine that the universe as a whole is devoid of purpose and intelligence when it embraces everything, including these artifacts themselves and their artificers? Our friend Posidonius as you know has recently made a globe which in its revolution shows the movements of the sun and stars and planets, by day and night, just as they appear in the sky. Now if someone were to take this globe and show it to the people of Britain or Scythia

¹⁹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 35.

²⁰ Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology, vol. III* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 139-140.

²¹ Peter Hicks, *The Journey So Far: Philosophy Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 73-74

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[barbarians at this time] would a single one of those barbarians fail to see that it was the product of a conscious intelligence.²²

How was this obvious insight suppressed? Materialists are very good at suppressing this information gleaned from nature. The two chief causes of anxiety, according to Epicureans, were fear of the gods and fear of death, so they sought to nullify both by teaching an evolutionary atomic theory, much like today's materialist. Democritus likewise believed that even the "human soul, thought and emotion could be explained by the movement and collision of atoms."²³

Dr. Wayne House points out in his book, *Charts on Systematic Theology*, that there is a difference between the "Epicureans" of the world and the "Ciceros" who responded and followed Paul after his Mars Hill message, that is, "truth of being and truth of knowing."²⁴ This distinction will not be dealt with herein, but it is well worth reading about.²⁵ Acts records that some men and women joining Paul and believing;²⁶ these persons chose to follow the harkening of revealed truth via the Holy Spirit that they only saw dimly through nature and heretofore suppressed.

²² Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* (tr. Horace C. P. McGregor; New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1972), 159.

²³ John Blanchard, *Does God Believe in Atheists?* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2000), 32

²⁴ (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2006), 101.

²⁵ See pp. 232-234 of Carl F.H. Henry's, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. I (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999).

²⁶ Acts 17:34.

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Stressed here in this encounter is what Paul was getting at in Romans 1, a real-world example, if you will. The Athenians were aware of several things about God on the universal self-disclosure:

- (1) God is the invisible Creator and Sovereign of the universe (v. 24);
- (2) God is self-sufficient and dependent on the creature for nothing (v. 25a);
- (3) God is the source of life and everything humans value as good (v. 25b);
- (4) God is an intelligent Being, for he has established the times and bounds of man's habitation on the earth (v. 26);
- (5) God is immanent in the world (v. 27);
- (6) And, amplifying the idea advanced in verse 25b, God is the very ground of human existence (v. 28).²⁷

Aquinas touches on this in-depth by making distinctions that the soul has the capacity for "abstraction, contemplation, and reasoning. This ability allows humans to arrive at principles and causes that can explain the observable world even if those principles and causes are themselves unobservable."²⁸ Hence the "UNKNOWN" God that can via natural revelation give the above six principles, putting the general theist or monist on the cusp of becoming a Christian via Divine revelation, as well as leaving the non-believer without excuse.²⁹

²⁷ Gordon R. Lewis & Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Three Volumes in One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 69.

²⁸ Donald Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy: The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2001), 130.

²⁹ Romans 1:20.