



# MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

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Maxon Mani

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Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools

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# ***MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY***

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*Melanesian Journal of Theology* is committed to the discussion of Christian faith and practice within the context of Melanesian cultures. Article submissions of up to 8,000 words (including footnotes) should be sent to the editor. All submissions are subjected to a double-blind peer-review process involving the editorial board and other international experts, designed to ensure that published articles meet appropriate scholarly standards.

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# DEDICATION TO IDOLATROUS WORSHIP IN ACTS 17:22–23 AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND MELANESIAN RELIGIONS

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## Abstract

Acts 17:22–23 is part of the introduction of Paul's teaching, a new teaching which sound strange upon the hearing of the Athenians' city council, which makes them want to hear and know more about it. Paul began his discussion with an altar he came across in the city on which is written "to the unknown god." The issue that this article seeks to address is whether the inscription "to the unknown god" is a dedication to an idol or to God because whatever hermeneutical position one takes would have a critical implication on his or her contextual theology approach, faith, and missionary endeavour. The paper challenges the assumption that it was a dedication to God based on the exegesis of text, a survey of the immediate context, Paul's view on God's revelation, and the biblical view on non-Christian religion. It is suggested that the inscription was a dedication to idolatrous worship that although, Paul knew, he decided to take it as his text, or point of contact to facilitate his dialogue to suggest the true God.

## Key Words

Paul, altar, unknown god, idolatry, revelation

## INTRODUCTION

This research aims to exegete Acts 17:22–23; the passage commonly used in the dialogue between the gospel and non-Christian religions. The key interpretative issue in this passage is whether the inscription "to the unknown god" is a dedication to an idol or to God. Few people have suggested that it was a dedication to God, such as Lenski, Richardson, Prior, and Clarke.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles 15–28* (LCNT; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1934), 723; Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts* (3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005), 20; Randall Prior, *Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 1: The Founding Missionary and a Missionary for Today* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 1998), 20; and

However, this article aims to defend the inscription “to the unknown god” as a dedication to idolatrous worship so that it will redirect and correct us on how we use that passage in the dialogue between the gospel and non-Christian religions because whatever hermeneutical position one takes from this passage would have a critical implication on his or her contextual theology approach, faith, and missionary endeavour.

The research will cover these four areas. The first is an exegetical observation on Acts 17:22–31. The second is a survey of the immediate context. The third, is a brief synthesis, which includes an interaction with the opposite views, Paul’s view on God’s revelation, and the biblical view on non-Christian religion. It ends with a highlight of the assumed implication of the opposite view and a conclusion.

## **AN EXEGETICAL OBSERVATION ON ACTS 17:22–23**

### **Acts 17:22–23**

<sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

In this section, we will set a brief background of the book of Acts and move on to the detail analysis of the passage.

### **Introductory Background**

Luke is the author of Acts of the Apostles.<sup>2</sup> The book has what we may term individual, ecclesiastical, and theological purposes. In terms of its individual purpose, Luke wrote an accurate account building upon his previous work

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Matthew Henry, David Brown, and Adam Clarke, *The Bethany Parallel Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1983), 58.

<sup>2</sup> There is no dispute against the authorship of Acts since there is strong evidence for that. First, as with the third gospel (Luke 1:3–4), Luke introduces himself as the author of Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:1). Second, the “we” passages are indisputable, since he was Paul’s companion (Col 4:14; Phlm 24; and 2 Tim 4:11). Third, Marcion (c. A.D. 135) accepted him as the author. See Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts* (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 239; and Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 183–233. Fourth, the uses of medical vocabularies confirm him to be the author because he was a physician (Col 4:14).

on the ministry of Jesus to encourage Theophilus and others to be certain of their faith (Acts 1:1). In terms of its ecclesiastical purpose, Luke was writing “to provide the church with a record of its beginnings”.<sup>3</sup> What he records is how the church started from its Jewish root, its evangelistic and missionary endeavours in different parts of the empire, and its apologetic value where we see repeated offensive and defensive cases run through the book.<sup>4</sup> In terms of its theological purpose, Luke wrote about the work of the Holy Spirit and clarified “the identity of the people of God”.<sup>5</sup> He addressed questions about Judaism and the mission to the Gentiles and the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Looking at our passage (Acts 17:22–23) in the larger literary context, it is part of the unit that runs from 15:36 – 18:22, which is all about Paul’s second missionary journey. After settling the boiling controversy between the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians over the issue of keeping circumcision and the law in addition to believing in Christ, Paul set out for his second visit to his new churches with the council decision that faith alone in Christ was necessary for salvation and Gentile believers were not to be bound with Jewish laws (Acts 15).<sup>6</sup> When Paul had finished strengthening the churches planted from his first visit, he received a vision in Troas to go over to Macedonia. For the first time his tiny group reached Europe with the gospel (Acts 16). They visited different cities, such as Philippi (Acts 16:11), Thessalonica (Acts 17: 1–9), Berea (Acts 17:10–15), Athens (Acts 17:16–34), and Corinth (Acts 18:22) before returning to Jerusalem and Antioch.

In the more specific context, Acts 17:22–23 is part of Paul’s witness in Athens. He witnessed in the synagogue and marketplace where he encountered the Athenians philosopher (v.16–21) who then brought him to the Areopagus to make a presentation on his new teaching (v. 22–31). Verses 32–34 give different responses to the presentation. Paul left Athens and went to Corinth (Acts 18). He stayed here probably eighteen months establishing the church and people in their faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts* (Guides to New Testament Exegesis 4; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Wright, *User’s Guide to the Bible* (Lion Manual; rev. ed.; Oxford: Lion, 1993), 108.



## Detailed Analysis

In this pericope, Luke provides Paul's presentation of his gospel in the speech to the Areopagus, within a context dominated by idol worship.

For the sake of our discussion, this pericope can be divided into three separate parts. The first part looks at Paul's poisonous praise of the Athenians' wrong-headed religiosity. The second part discusses Paul's objective to contrast the true God with the object of idolatrous worship. The last part is about Paul's disclosure of the Athenians' ignorant worship.

### Paul's Poisonous Praise of the Athenians' Wrong-headed Religiosity

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus to explain more on the teaching that he was propagating (v. 19). Areopagus means "hill of Ares, the god of war, lying between the Acropolis and the Pnyx, the place where assemblies of the people were held".<sup>7</sup> It was named after the judicial body that tried homicide and sacrilege cases, which met on that hill. Their responsibilities were to supervise "religious worship, the sanctuaries, education and other matters".<sup>8</sup> It was appropriate for them to inquire about Paul's new teaching because it was part of their responsibility.

Paul addressed them as "men of Athens" and said: "I see that in every way you are very religious" (v. 22). "Very religious" comes from the Greek *deisidaimonesterous* (δεισιδαιμονεστέρους), which also means "God-fearing," "religious," or "superstitious".<sup>9</sup> Thus, the word has both a positive and negative sense. When used in a positive sense, it would be translated as "religious" and as "superstitious" in the negative sense. Those who give it a positive interpretation here recommend Paul's approach as a good missionary tactic. However, from the context and his Jewish background, I would argue that Paul used this word here in negative sense. He never endorsed the Athenian idolatrous worship but attacked it. So, he used "very religious" as a means to capture the attention of his hearers and establish a way for him to communicate. Moreover, from Luke's perspective as the author and driven by the context of v. 16 (cf. 25:19), he used this word in a derogatory sense. It is like Luke winking at his readers about the unnoticed

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<sup>7</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. Brian McNeil; Eng. ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 79.

<sup>8</sup> Klauck, *Magic and Paganism*, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Cleon L. Rogers Jr and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 275.

poisonous praise by Paul of the intelligent Athenians about this problematic aspect of their religiosity.<sup>10</sup> The later sense (negative) would be the suitable interpretation since it fits well the Jewish context because Luke and Paul are using this statement to talk about Greek spirituality; calling “the Athenians the most pious of Greeks, using this term”.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it also fits well with the context dominated by idols and Paul’s revealed hidden opinion during the discussion. He showed them later that their religiosity was wrong-headed.

### Paul’s Point of Contact: The Athenians’ Object of Idolatrous Worship

In v. 23, Paul continues to give the reason for the previous statement that he had made in v. 22 marked by the conjunction *gar* (γάρ). He admired the religiosity of the Athenians as he was passing through *dierchomenos* (διερχόμενος) the city.

He “looked carefully”—*anatheoron* (ἀναθεωρῶν)—is a strong word meaning “to look at” or “to observe”.<sup>12</sup> Paul looked at and observed carefully the *sebasmata* (σεβάσματα), the objects of worship or religious reverence,<sup>13</sup> such as associated with temples, altars, statues, etc.<sup>14</sup> The idols must have struck the eyes of Paul such that he looked at and observed them carefully. Barrett explains that *sebasmata* is “used of object of idolatrous worship, and so it is here, through one such object will be found to point to, or rather to suggest the true God”.<sup>15</sup> Paul declared that among the objects he saw, he found one that was an altar—*bomon* (βωμὸν), a *hapax legomenon*. On that altar there was an inscription, which read *Agnosto theo* (ΓΝΣΤΩ ΘΕΩ), meaning “to the unknown god”.

There is no archaeological proof of such an inscription. Jerome, Pausanias, and Philostratus attest to the plural forms of dedication (“unknown gods”). Jerome wrote that there were inscriptions to gods of Asia,

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<sup>10</sup> Klauck, *Magic and Paganism*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 564.

<sup>12</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key*, 275.

<sup>13</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key*, 275.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 572.

<sup>15</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2: *Acts 15–28* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 837.

Europe, and Africa.<sup>16</sup> Pausanias, the second-century geographer, and Philostratus, the third-century philosopher, also spoke of altars to unknown gods at Athens.<sup>17</sup> Tertullian knew of altars dedicated to unknown gods<sup>18</sup> and rendered the Lukan passage in the plural.<sup>19</sup> However, this does not rule out that such an inscription in the singular ever existed. There are questions into which we may need to inquire. Why did Luke write that Paul said he saw the singular form of dedication? Does this inscription refer to the true God? There are number of responses to these questions. Barrett suggests the following responses. First, Tertullian knew Acts yet used the plural. Second, the singular form of dedication could possibly refer to a hero cult since it was also very common in Athens.<sup>20</sup> Third, Barrett argues that “[t]his, even in the singular, implies polytheism; the speaker makes it monotheist.”<sup>21</sup> This argument fits well with Jerome’s assumption. He assumed that since there is no such inscription but only inscriptions to gods of different places as Asia, Europe, and Africa, Paul decided to choose one he needed for his purpose.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Macgregor and Ferris agree that “probably Luke simply given the polytheistic inscription a monotheistic turn to serve the purpose of his argument”. Next, Macgregor and Ferris, and Larkin refer back to Diogenes Laertius’ story of Epimenides the Cretan who instructed the Athenians to sacrifice the black and white sheep wherever they lay down as a remedy for the plague.<sup>23</sup> Macgregor and Ferris commented “to sacrifice to ‘the appropriate god’ i.e., the unknown god who was concerned in the matter”. And they add “It is just possible that it was such altar Paul observed, and that ‘to an unknown god’ is Luke’s not quite accurate paraphrase”.<sup>24</sup> Larkin however say that according to Diogenes Laertius the sacrifice was offered to “the god of that place” and memorial altars were built with no god’s name

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<sup>16</sup> Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 1.12 (PL 26.572): “Paulus asseruit, *ignoto Deo*, sed ita: *Diis Asiae et Europae, et Africae: diis ignotis et peregrinis.*”

<sup>17</sup> Pausanias, *Hell. per.* 1.1.4; and Philostratus, *V. Apoll.* 6.3.

<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *Adu. Marc.* 1.9.2 (CCL 1.449).

<sup>19</sup> Tertullian, *Ad nat.* 2.9.4 (CCL 1.55).

<sup>20</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 2.837.

<sup>21</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 2.839.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Addison Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Geneva Series Commentary; London: Banner of Truth, 1963), 153.

<sup>23</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *V. Philos.* 10.110.

<sup>24</sup> G. H. C. Macgregor and T. P. Ferris, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Epistle to the Romans* (George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Interpreter’s Bible 9; Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1954), 234–35.

inscribed on them. He continues that “Wycherley proposes, with some archaeological justification, that such altars may also have been raised to appease the dead wherever ancient burial sites were disturbed by building projects of later generation (1968:621)”.<sup>25</sup>

Having said that, the important thing that needs to be noted from Paul’s approach to the Athenians’ religion was that he identified a point of contact to proclaim his gospel. Although Paul recognised that the object was dedicated to idoltrous worship, he used it as an open door for discussing the one true God of creation. Furthermore, Paul was not equating the Athenians’ god with the God whom he intended to proclaim. Paul took this inscription he came across as his text, or point of contact and contrast, the starting point for his dialogue.

#### Paul’s Disclosure of the Athenians’ Ignorant Worship

This sentence “So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, this is what I am going to proclaim to you”— *ho oun agnoountes eusebeite, touto ego kataggello humin* (ὁ οὖν ἀγνοοῦντες εὐσεβεῖτε, τοῦτο ἐγὼ καταγγέλλω ὑμῖ)— is made up of two statements. There are two different subjects, the Athenians and Paul and there are two different verbs, the Athenians who “worship” *eusebeite* (εὐσεβεῖτε), while Paul “proclaims” *kataggello* (καταγγέλλω). However, the object of the verbs is the same. The Athenians revere it as well as Paul is going to proclaim it. It is obvious to see that translations differ in their description of the object of the Athenians’ worship and Paul’s proclamation. Some versions of the text used the neuter “what ... that” *ho ... touto* (ὃ ... τοῦτο); others used the masculine “whom ... him” *hon ... touton* (ὃν ... τοῦτον). The neuter was the correct text because it refers to the idol object of worship and not the true God. With that understanding, Williams adds that Paul “was not suggesting for one moment that they were unconscious worshipers of the true God but was simply looking for a way of raising with them the basic question of all theology: Who is God?”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Bruce says that “Paul starts with his hearers’ belief in an

<sup>25</sup> William J. Larkin Jr, *Acts* (IVPNTC 5; Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity Press, 1995), 255.

<sup>26</sup> David J. Williams, *Acts* (New International Biblical Commentary 5; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 305.

impersonal divine essence, pantheistically conceived, and leads them to the Living God revealed as Creator and Judge”.<sup>27</sup>

Paul statement denotes the appropriate attitude such as reverence or respect towards divine beings, the practice of religion.<sup>28</sup> Their respect or practice of religion was wrong-headed. There is a play on the word “ignorance”. When Paul says to the Athenians “you are ignorant”, he picks up also the concept of “unknown” mentioned on the inscription. That means the Athenians were ignorant because they were worshipping something unknown to them to which they themselves testified through the inscription on the altar. As Polhill describes it, “To worship an unknown god is to admit one’s ignorance. If he is unknown to you, you are then in total ignorance of his true nature” (1992, p. 372).<sup>29</sup>

Truth is the greatest virtue to the Greeks and the Stoics and it is discovered through “divine reason within oneself”.<sup>30</sup> So, if people live without that reason, they will be regarded as ignorant. From a Stoic perspective such ignorance was considered a cardinal sin and Paul’s accusation was that the Athenians were sinful because of their ignorance. Therefore, in v. 30 he returns to the same topic of ignorance, which God once had overlooked and concluded with an urgent call to repentance because people are now without excuse. Their ignorance is manifested in their worship. Their worship was wrong-headed, because of “what” not “whom” they were worshipping. They were worshipping an object or impersonal thing and not the personal God.<sup>31</sup> Such ignorance of worship is also manifested by the altar erected to the unknown object of worship that they themselves acknowledged.<sup>32</sup> Instead of Paul affirming their worship, he discloses their ignorance of worship. Stott states that Paul “using the ego of apostolic authority, and insisting thereby that special revelation must control and correct whatever general revelation

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<sup>27</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (2nd ed.; London: The Tyndale Press, 1970), 336.

<sup>28</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 2.838.

<sup>29</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts* (The New American Commentary 26; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 372.

<sup>30</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 372.

<sup>31</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 372.

<sup>32</sup> C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Black’s New Testament Commentary; London: A & C Black, 1975), 203.

seems to disclose. He went on to proclaim the living and true God in five ways, and so to expose the errors, even horrors, of idolatry”<sup>33</sup>

Although Paul was not equating the Athenians god with God and knowing full well that they were worshipping an impersonal thing, he still went on to proclaim to them. Even though, from our perspective, “what ... that” in this clause refer to the impersonal thing or idol that the Athenians were worshipping, Paul however, saw it as his point of contact, common but different, to initiate the dialogue between the two religions, Christianity and the Athenian religion. He used the inscription “to the unknown god” from the Athenian religion as his point of contact to initiate the dialogue and explain the theology of God.

Paul’s approach to the Athenians’ religion was a good missionary strategy when entering into dialogue with other religions. Our Melanesian religion, as well as other religions, holds religiosity and reverence in common with Christianity but they differ in term of the deities revered. For example, instead of worshipping God, the Melanesian people are worshipping the ancestors and other benevolent spirits. So, in order to facilitate a good dialogue between the gospel and Melanesian religion, I suggest Paul’s strategy. Firstly, we need to appreciate that fact that they were religious although wrong-headed. This is in order to establish a relationship and open the door for communication. Secondly, find a point of contact from the Melanesian religion as text and starting point for the dialogue. For example, the ancestor, whom they trust for providence and protection or other benevolent spirits for healing and others, can be used as the starting point for the dialogue. Lastly, from what they are familiar with, their object of worship, we can lead them to the living God revealed as creator, provider, protector, healer, and judge.

### **SURVEY OF THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT**

The above exegesis of Acts 17:22–23 proves that the inscription “to the unknown god” was a dedication to idolatrous worship and not to God. In order to strengthen this position, we shall survey briefly the immediate context of that passage. These following points will be discussed in this

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<sup>33</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 285.

section, Paul's provocation by idols, contrast between God and idol, and Paul's call to repentance.

### **Paul's Provocation by Idols (vv. 16–21)**

If we argue that the Athenians were worshipping God, we are denying the fact that Paul was provoked by idols. The Athenians' idolatry had caused him to take action, which was to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While Paul was waiting in Athens for his friends Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (v. 16). Athens was known as intellectual centre of the ancient world.<sup>34</sup> Bruce affirms, "the sculpture, literature and oratory of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. have never been surpassed; in philosophy, too, she took the leading place, being the native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno."<sup>35</sup> Paul remarked that the city was full of idols. "Idols" comes from *eidolon* (εἶδωλον), which means lifeless souls, shadowy and deceptive images.<sup>36</sup> The city was "full of idols", which conveys the ideas as the city was under the idols, smothered with idols, swamped by idols and veritable forest of idols.<sup>37</sup> This context is shown clearly in Paul's opening discourse to the Areopagus: "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship ..." (v. 23). Klauck assumed that Paul could have seen "the temples of Aphrodite, of Hephaistos, of Apollo and of Ares [, which] are grouped around the Agora as well as a shrine of Zeus, an altar consecrated to twelve gods and a shrine of herms".<sup>38</sup> Stott adds that all the beautiful gods of Olympus were also there: "They were made not only of stone and brass, but of gold, silver, ivory and marble, and they had been elegantly fashioned by the finest Greek sculptors".<sup>39</sup> All these attested that the Athenians were pious (v. 22). Paul was greatly distressed—*paroxuneto* (παρωξύνετο) is a strong word meaning "irritate," "provoke," and "rouse to anger." This word is widely used in the Old Testament to describe God's reaction to idolatry; many times the Israelites had "provoked"

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<sup>34</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 5; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 283.

<sup>35</sup> Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 331.

<sup>36</sup> Klauck, *Magic and Paganism*, 76.

<sup>37</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 277.

<sup>38</sup> Klauck, *Magic and Paganism*, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 277.

the Lord God to anger by their idolatry. A similar understanding applies to Paul here. He was provoked by idolatry to anger, grief, and indignation for the name of God. Stott comments on Paul's feeling saying:

Paul felt in Athens was due neither to bad temper, not to pity for the Athenians' ignorance, nor even to fear for their eternal salvation. It was due rather to his abhorrence of idolatry, which aroused within him deep stirrings of jealousy for the Name of God, as he saw human beings so depraved as to be giving to idols the honour and glory which were due to the one, living and true God alone. His whole soul was revolted at the sight of a city given over to idolatry.<sup>40</sup>

Because of the significant influence of idolatry, which had caused him great distress, Paul was moved to share the good news of Jesus with the Athenians (v. 17). His aim in proclaiming the gospel was to help the Athenians to turn from their idol worship to the living God. Luke records that Paul had made an attempt to reach three groups in city with his gospel. First were the Jews and God-fearers (v. 17a). As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue probably on the Sabbath and reasoned with them. Second, in the marketplace, a public centre, Paul argued day by day with those who happened to be there (v. 17b). Since he was in the native city of Socrates, Paul adopted Socratic dialogue involving questions and answers to discuss his gospel or moral questions.<sup>41</sup> Third were the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who began to dispute with Paul (v. 18). For them, gods were far removed from the world and had no contact or influence on human affairs.<sup>42</sup> They taught rudimentary atomic theory about the existence of the world and their ethics were based on pleasure and tranquillity.<sup>43</sup> The Stoics, on the other hand, had a conception of God but in a pantheistic way as a world soul.<sup>44</sup> Stott said the Stoics believed that "The world was determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their duty, resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own self-sufficiency."<sup>45</sup> We can hear the echo of these theories that Paul challenged in his speech at the Areopagus when he presented God

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<sup>40</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 279.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 332.

<sup>42</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 280.

<sup>43</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 284.

<sup>44</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 284.

<sup>45</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 280.



as creator, the source of human life, and the reality of judgement that led to a call for repentance.

### **Contrast between God and Idols (vv. 24–29)**

If the Athenians were worshipping God, why did Paul have to explain who God is? Paul’s explanation about God was to give a clear contrast with the idols they were worshipping and to challenge related religious theories.

Paul developed different doctrines related to God like “God’s creation of the world, God’s transcendence, God as the source of human life, God’s sovereignty over human history and geography, God’s immanence and God’s noncorporeality” (vv. 24–29).<sup>46</sup> These doctrines echo the religious theories of the philosophers of the day that Paul wanted to refute.

First, let us consider God’s creation of the world. Paul begins “the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth” (v. 24a). This proposition comes from Gen 1:1. Here, Paul was objecting to the idea that the world existed by chance, asserting instead that it was God who created it. Furthermore, he was revealing to the Epicurean that God was not removed from the world as they believed. In fact, God was greater than creation. Paul also wanted to show the contrast between God as the creator and the lifeless idols, which were made out of God’s creations.

Second, we may turn attention to God’s transcendence. Having given a little challenge in v. 24a, Paul comes back to the common ground to maintain the attention of his hearers. He stated that God needs nothing from people and cannot be served by them. This fits well with the Epicurean belief that God was far removed from the world. Paul gave the reason why God needs nothing: God is the source of all life. This truth is also in agreement with the Stoics belief later alluded to in v. 28.<sup>47</sup>

Third, there is the idea of God as the source of human life and sovereign over human history and geography. Paul indicates, “From one man, he made every human nation” (v. 26a). Paul wanted to show the Athenians the unity of the human race. The human race was descended from one man, Adam, although his name was not mentioned. The reason why Paul mentioned that was because the Athenians prided themselves that “they had sprung from the soil, i.e., that they were indigenous and therefore different- superior- to

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<sup>46</sup> Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts*, 69.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 336.

others.”<sup>48</sup> Paul continued that God “determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live” (v. 26b).

Fourth, we may note God’s immanence. Paul mentioned that God is the source of human aspiration. God made them in a way that “they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him” (v. 27a). Paul asserted that God “is not far from each one of us” (v. 27b). The Stoics believe in a world soul, which is imminent to all things and not far from us. It is almost similar to the concept of God’s imminence. However, it is different in the sense that although God is close, God is not identical with creation, nor impersonal. In contrast to the Stoic philosophy, God is a living and personal God.<sup>49</sup>

Lastly, God’s non-corporeality features in v. 28 where Paul used the pagan Greek poems and applied them to God saying: “For in him we live and move and have our being.” Since people are God’s offspring, meaning that they are like God, possessed by the Holy Spirit, they must recognise that God is Spirit and no image or material representation can portrait God. “We should not think that the divine being is like gold and silver or stone- an image made by human design and skill” (v. 29). Here, Paul is concluding that idolatry is forbidden.

### **Call to Repentance (v.30-31)**

If the Athenians were worshipping God, why did Paul give such an urgent call to repentance instead of commending them from their religious practices? The Athenians were wrong-headed and that is why Paul has to call them to repent, to turn around and comeback to God through his appointed mediator and judge, Jesus Christ.

Before the inauguration of the new age by Christ, people lived in ignorance of him. But now that they had heard the proclamation of that gospel there was no longer any excuse for their ignorance. Paul affirmed that “God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (v. 30). Williams comments:

Through him (Christ) God had dealt definitively with problem of sin. But for that very reason, he had now laid humanity under a new accountability. The offer of salvation in Christ carried with it the threat of judgment if that offer

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<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Acts*, 306.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, *Acts*, 306.

was refused. Judgment and salvation go hand in hand; both are vested in Christ; both give expression to the righteousness of God.<sup>50</sup>

The urgency of Paul's appeal to the Athenians to repent is because God "has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed" (v. 31a). God has already appointed the judge and his resurrection is a further proof of his judgeship. This judge is known as Jesus.

The inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to idolatrous worship but not to God. The survey of the immediate context proves that. The city was flooded with idols, which provoked Paul and caused him to proclaim the good news to different groups of people in the city. The inscription serves as his point of contact to proclaim the different doctrines about God to challenge idolatry and religious theories of the day, which led him to make an urgent call to repentance.

## SYNTHESIS

### Opposite Views

The findings from our exegesis and the immediate context prove that the inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to idolatrous worship and not to God. However, to avoid bias it is fair to synthesis with those who held the opposite views. There are some people who take the opposite view and argue that the inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to God. Lenski, Clarke, Richardson, and Prior are examples. In this section, we are going to explore and interact with their views in brief.

#### Interpretation without Historical Context

Lenski supports the argument that the inscription to the unknown god refers to God. He argued that although Paul knew the Athenians were worshipping something immaterial and might have polytheistic conceptions about this god, "He (Paul) intended to regard this altar and its inscription only as a confession on the part of the Athenians that, despite their multitude of divinities, one God existed of whom they themselves said that, while they knew of him, they did not in any way know him."<sup>51</sup> This claim is partly true when we think of general revelation. However, to neglect the context of the

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<sup>50</sup> Williams, *Acts*, 309.

<sup>51</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 723.

passage and the historical facts is a problem. That is what Lenski did. He put aside the context that he developed about the Athenians cultus of the divinities instead of understanding the altar and the inscription in line with that context. In relation to the historical facts, Lenski argued “we pass all this late material by as being of little interpretative value.”<sup>52</sup> It means he ignored the historical sources and the immediate context on his interpretation.

#### Interpretation Based on Paul’s Fear

Clarke in his commentary claims to avoid capital offence of introducing a new god into the state and charge as in v.18; Paul “showed that he was bringing neither new god or new worship among them, but only explaining the worship of one already acknowledge by the state, though not as yet known.”<sup>53</sup> Clarke’s argument is like that of Lenski. In contrast, his interpretation is based on Paul’s fear. As a result, it deviated from Paul’s actual concern for the city according to the context. Since, idolatry was Paul’s main concern, Williams opposes this, stating that Paul “was not suggesting for one moment that they were unconscious worshipers of the true God but was simply looking for a way raising with them the basic question of all theology: Who is God?”<sup>54</sup> He expanded that in the following verses. Still on that concern, Bruce adds that “Paul starts with his hearers’ belief in an impersonal divine essence, pantheistically conceived, and leads them to the Living God revealed as Creator and Judge.”<sup>55</sup> Both Williams and Bruce agree that, according to the context, the Athenians were not worshipers of the true God.

#### Taking the Historical Context too Far

Don Richardson in *Eternity in their Hearts* acknowledged that Paul was not proclaiming a foreign God to the Athenians: “Not at all! By Paul’s reasoning, Yahweh, the Judeo-Christian God, was anticipated by Epimenides’s altar. He was therefore a God who had already intervened in the history of Athens.”<sup>56</sup> This statement is partly true in the sense that God is sovereign and omnipresent. We should not question and limit God’s intervention in

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<sup>52</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 723.

<sup>53</sup> Clarke, *The Bethany Parallel Commentary*, 812.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *Acts*, 305.

<sup>55</sup> Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 336.

<sup>56</sup> Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*, 20.

history. Nevertheless, this statement is not true for there is no clear evidence from the context of this passage itself. Richardson made this statement based on his assumption that Epimenides was God's prophet and concluded that the inscription to the unknown god refers to God. Larkin comments: "Don Richardson, missionary author misreads the Diogenes Laertes account of Epimenides' animistic polytheism as evidence that Epimenides was a prophet of the one true God and taught vicarious atonement."<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Larkin adds that according to Diogenes Laertes the sacrifice was offered to "the god of that place" as a remedy for the plague and memorial altars were built with no god's name inscribed on them.<sup>58</sup> Macgregor and Ferris also support that the sacrifice was offered to "the appropriate god" i.e., the unknown god who was concerned in the matter." And they added: "It is just possible that it was such altar Paul observed."<sup>59</sup> According to Larkin, and Macgregor and Ferris, Epimenides was not a prophet of the one true God because he came from an animistic polytheism background. Therefore, the inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to idolatrous worship and not to God.

#### Ignorance of Immediate Context

Prior in his book *The Founding Missionary and a Missionary for Today*, part of a series of volumes on the relationship between religion and culture in Vanuatu, highlighted some of the theological limitations under which John Geddie (d. 1872), the Presbyterian missionary among the Aneityumese in Vanuatu, operated. He stated that, instead of making links between the traditional culture of the Aneityumese and the gospel, Geddie was too negative about the hosting culture. He emphasised that Geddie should have learned from Paul's approach. So, based on Paul's experience in Athens, he argued that "Paul identifies the presence and activity of the 'unknown God' whom he has come to make known. There is no hint here that these peoples are in complete bondage to Satan." He continued that "to speak of God as creator and sustainer of creation, as Paul does here, is to acknowledge that God has revealed himself to the people before the arrival of the missionary."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Larkin, *Acts*, 255.

<sup>58</sup> Larkin, *Acts*, 255.

<sup>59</sup> Macgregor and Ferris, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 234–35.

<sup>60</sup> Prior, *The Founding Missionary*, 58.

One of Prior's point that needs consideration is the question of how to be ready to link the traditional culture and the gospel. In order to achieve that, a point of contact needs to be identified in the culture to facilitate the dialogue. However, there are two points in his argument that are doubtful. First, he argued that "there is no hint here that these peoples are in complete bondage to Satan" based on his assumption of the presence and activity of God before the arrival of Paul. If this was the situation of these people, why did Paul have to present the theology of God and gave them an urgent call for repentance instead of commending them of their worship? It means they are going in the wrong direction; their worship was wrong-headed so they had to turn around and come back to Christ. Lastly, it seems that Prior is trying to base his argument on general revelation. In doing so, he neglected the context of the passage. For the passage itself reveals that the context was dominated by idolatrous worship. The reason why Paul explained God as creator and sustainer of the universe was to show the difference between God and the idols, which are only human-made objects. They need to worship the creator instead of worshipping the creatures or created things.

Having commented on the different starting points of interpretation of those who have taken the opposite view on the inscription to the unknown god in Acts 17:22–23, it is fair to say that most of them seem to take that inscription as a general revelation. They assume that it was a confession on the part of the Athenians that one God existed and had already revealed the divine self and intervened in their lives. They knew of God but they did not in any way know him. That leads us to briefly explore Paul's view on God's revelation.

### **Paul's View on God's Revelation**

From this passage (Acts 17:22–23), we see Paul did not compromise the gospel with the Athenian religion. This fits well with his theology on the gospel and God's revelation explained in Romans 1.

Paul's gospel was all about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom 1:5). Faith in Jesus Christ is the only requirement to become righteous and have the assurance of the eternal salvation according to Paul's gospel. In order for that to happen in a person's life, Rom 10:14–15 explains the process; someone has to be sent and preach so that others could hear, believe,

and call on the name of the Lord to be saved. Apart from that (God's specific revelation), hope is not guaranteed.

People may raise questions as to why salvation is guaranteed through special revelation and not general revelation? Some may argue against that and give different responses. The simple answer from Paul in Rom 1:18–25 is that Scripture affirms that people who never heard about God did know God, “his eternal power and divine nature” through creation (Rom 1:20). Furthermore, God had given them spiritual light and planted the seed of spiritual truth in their hearts that is God-awareness or God-consciousness. But because of sin people rejected what God had offered them and followed their sinful desires. “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21). As a result, this light is turned off and they were in total darkness. They were trying to resolve the situation but through unrighteous ways. As Paul says, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (Rom 1:22–23). This is the beginning of a wrong-headed religion.

Those who have taken the opposite view discussed above, such as Lenski, Clarke, Richardson, and Prior might have seen the inscription to the unknown god in Acts 17:22–23 along those verses in Rom 1:22–23. They assumed the inscription to the unknown god was a confession on the part of the Athenians that one God existed who had revealed the divine self already and intervened in their lives.

These claims are true from a theological standpoint when we think of God's sovereignty and omnipresence. However, from a biblical standpoint, they were not faithful to the scriptural context of Acts 17:22–23. Idolatry was the main concern in the context of that passage. We conclude that the inscription to the unknown god was perceived by the Lukan author as a dedication to an idol. With those who insist on seeing the inscription as general revelation, another question may arise: could the object dedicated for idolatrous worship be seen as something of general revelation. This is an important and difficult question to handle. Some people, like those discussed above, probably may be comfortable to see the object dedicated for idol worship as something of general revelation. From an animistic point of view, it would be compromising to call the things of Satan the things of God. There are two reasons for that. First, when we speak of idol worship the first thing

that usually comes into the mind are spirits. We are referring to the worship of a spirit that is represented by idol, whether spirit of death, ancestor, territorial spirits, or other spirits. Second, we cannot equate the altar dedicated to idolatrous worship with nature through which God revealed invisible qualities like the eternal power and divine nature, the subject matter of general revelation. Even so, people are not worshipping nature as it is, which God is using to reveal divine qualities, but the spirit in place of God, which can manipulate nature. So, to avoid the risk of compromising, it is good not to take the object dedicated to idol worship as something of general revelation.

Therefore, I agree with Spencer's conclusion on general revelation:

Nevertheless, special revelation is still indispensable. Because of the testimony of creation, humans are left with the bad news that they are accountable for their impiety to God. They have no defence. Therefore, Gentile (and Jews alike) needs to hear the good news that they may become righteous through faith in Jesus the messiah, proclaimed by the prophets of old, and by believers in face-to-face proclamations.<sup>61</sup>

So, people need that light, the knowledge of God and the gospel revealed from the Scripture; that is, righteousness comes through faith alone in Christ Jesus.

Paul ends his explanation on general revelation with wrong-headed religiosity due to sin (Rom 1:22–23). Those kinds of religion cannot be seen as true religion or as something of God because “they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the creator (Rom 1:25). This leads us to explore the biblical view on religion.

### **Biblical View of non-Christian Religions: The Example of Canaanite Religion**

To equate the gospel or Christianity with non-Christian religion and supported with Acts 17: 22–23 would be an abuse of this text. For the context of this passage does not allow it. This section will briefly discuss the question, how does the Bible view non-Christian religion?

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<sup>61</sup> A. B. Spencer, “Roman 1: Finding God in Creation,” in *Through No Fault of Their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 125–35, at 135.



It is very important to consult the Bible rather to be too simplistic about our non-Christian religions. The Scriptures warn us that “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness” (2 Cor 11:14–15).

Let us look at the Canaanite religion in the Old Testament as an example. The religion includes many practices such as “idolatry, child sacrifice, fertility cults, sacred prostitution, blood-soaked rhetoric, snake worship, demons, necromancy, gods without moral character, magic, divination and the like.”<sup>62</sup> According to some biblical historians, this religion is considered as false and destructive to faith and relationship between Yahweh and the people. God warned the people not to have any relationship with it. It deserved to be wiped out for it did not lead people to God rather blinded them and corrupted their relationship with God. It is better for them to live without it. Furthermore, there were other nations like the Moabite, Hittite, Philistine, and so on who also had their own gods. The familiar ones are Baal, Anat, Moloch, Dagan, Chemosh, and Astarte. These gods had their own ways and practices to relate to them. They were threats to the faith of God’s people. God in the Old Testament repeatedly warned the people not to associate or to have any relationship with them.

We need to be careful not to claim that our Melanesian traditional religion is like the Christian religion brought by the missionaries. For, there are big differences as to their deities of reverence as well as their practices. Many of the practices of our traditional religion are like those of the Canaanites. Therefore, Pinnock’s comment on world religion needs consideration:

The idea that world religion ordinarily function as paths to salvation is dangerous nonsense and wishful thinking...There are so many evil sides to religion that a fulfilment paradigm (the idea that religion point people to Christ) is out of the question. Religions are not ordinarily stepping stones to Christ. More often, they are paths to hell.<sup>63</sup>

The overall biblical context of Acts 17:22–23 challenges those who hold the opposite view that the inscription was a dedication to the true God whom the Athenians were already worshipping. In doing so, they are running the risk of equating Christian religion and the Athenian religion. Likewise, we

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<sup>62</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 87.

<sup>63</sup> Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 90–91.

must not equate Christian religion with our Melanesian traditional religion. We must not to domestic God in our traditional religion.

If we take the opposite view, there would be implication of that on our contextualisation approach and faith and mission. We now move on to explore few assumed implications of the opposite view.

### **Assumed Implication of the Opposite View**

If we take the opposite view that the inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to God, certain implications of such a claim would follow. Some of them we have already experiencing in the churches today. This section will briefly highlight few examples in the area of contextualisation, and faith and mission.

#### **Contextual Theology**

With the assumption that the inscription to the unknown god refers to God whom the Athenians were already worshiping before Paul the missionary arrived and evangelised them, some people went on to apply it directly into their traditional religion. One such example is Sione ‘Amanaki Havea. In the first evangelical consultation on Pacific theology in Papua New Guinea Havea claimed that “the Good news was already present before the missionaries came to the Pacific.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, God was already in the Pacific and worshiped by our ancestors before the arrival of the missionaries. Instead of identifying points of contact in traditional religion to link or initiate dialogue with the gospel as Paul did with the Athenian religion, he went on to apply it directly into his context. This claim is beginning to take root in the Melanesian context in the field of contextualisation.

The truth of the matter is that before the arrival of the missionaries, the Melanesian people were heathen in the sense that they did not know the good news. It means they did not know that two thousand years ago God sent Jesus Christ into the world and that he died on the cross to pay the penalty of human sin and satisfy God’s holy demands. Without that knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ, salvation is not guaranteed.

Furthermore, when we say, the good news and God were already in the Pacific and worshipped by our ancestors before the arrival of the

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<sup>64</sup> Sione ‘Amanaki Havea, “Christianity in the Pacific Context,” in *South Pacific Theology*, papers from the Consultation on Pacific Theology, Papua New Guinea 1986 (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1987), 11–15, at 12.

missionaries, it like we are supposing that the gospel and God brought by the missionaries and the god worshiped by ancestors in non-Christian religion are equal or similar. So, the implicit result of that claim is that sinners could be saved through our non-Christian religion. However, the truth is that we cannot deny the fact that there are big differences between the good news/God brought by the missionaries and the so-called good news/god of our ancestors. I agree with the statement made by the Lausanne Covenant when discussing the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions, “therefore, it is false to suppose that sinners can be saved through other systems or that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies.”<sup>65</sup>

So, what can we say? Are we going to acknowledge that the good news and God was already in the Melanesia and rituals are acts of worship to Him or is it idolatry? From what we have covered, we can confidently say that it is idolatry and rituals are not acts of worship to God rather they are religious ceremonies. Mantovani describes “non-Christian religions mainly as a human enterprise, as a human initiative, while Christianity is regarded as the answer to God’s initiative and revelation which are perceived only through faith.”<sup>66</sup> The Melanesian people know nothing about how to relate to God and did not even know the gospel. So, people need that light, the knowledge of God and the gospel revealed from the Scripture, the specific revelation. From there, the Holy Spirit will help them apply the word into their lives, turning from idolatry or non-Christian religion to a gospel-centred Christianity. That is what the missionaries in the nineteenth century were convinced about and committed their lives totally to introduce it to our shores in Melanesia.

### Faith and Mission

If we claim that the good news and God were already in Melanesia and worshipped by our ancestors before the arrival of the missionaries based on the assumption that the inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to God; we are running the risk of watering down our faith and missionary zeal. For, we are not acknowledging any differences between the two religions. We are equating the God brought by the missionaries and the god of our

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<sup>65</sup> Ennio Mantovani (ed.), *An Introduction to Melanesian Religion* (The Point 6; Goroka: Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1984), 12.

<sup>66</sup> Mantovani, *An Introduction to Melanesian Religion*, 13.

ancestors. As a result, our traditional religion may be seen as another way to God. That is the trend of pluralism which “denies the finality of Jesus Christ and maintains that other religions are equally salvific paths to God.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, pluralism holds that all religions lead to God and Jesus is not the only way. If people could be saved through their non-Christian religion then other claims are expected such as, it does not matter whether you are a Christian or not since we shall all be saved. That is the position of the Universalists. These are issues that can water down our faith in Christ. Moreover, if we are not cautious, they will undermine churches’ mission activities and evangelistic zeal. In relation to these concerns, Michael Griffiths states that universalism:

Gained entrance into Christendom and threatens to destroy missionary motive and hinder the effectiveness of Christ’s soldiers and their readiness to continue the battle...perhaps there is no battle! ... If all men are to be saved in the end why bother to urge men to repent now? They will later in any case.<sup>68</sup>

We must be careful when we approach other religions, in this case our traditional religion; we must allow the Scripture to guide us from the beginning to the end. We must not be driven away from the Scriptures because of respect of other religions or our traditional religion, which does not recognise and base on the Scriptures.<sup>69</sup> As Christians we are grounded on the truth of God’s revelation found in the Scriptures and our experience of Jesus Christ. That is what we should continue to proclaim because without faith in Christ salvation is not guaranteed.

## CONCLUSION

The inscription to the unknown god was seen by the author of Acts as a dedication to idolatrous worship and not to God. The reasons which support that argument are as follow:

First, the exegesis of Acts 17:22–23 gave enough evidence that the inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to idolatrous worship and not to God as some have interpreted it. Most commentators like Barrett

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<sup>67</sup> Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 15.

<sup>68</sup> M. Griffith, *The Confession of the Church and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 116 and 129.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Van Engen, “The Effect of Universalism on Mission Effort,” in Crockett and Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own*, 183–94, at 187.

argued that the object used for idolatrous worship was used by Paul as his point of contact to suggest the true God. He further affirmed that “this (inscription to the unknown god), even in the singular, implies polytheism; the speaker makes it monotheist.”<sup>70</sup> Second, the survey of the immediate context supports that the inscription to the unknown god was presented as a dedication to idol worship and not to God. Athens was flooded with idols, which provoked Paul and caused him to proclaim the good news of the risen Lord to different group of people in the city. The inscription serves as his point of contact to proclaim the different doctrines about God to challenge idolatry and the religious theories of the day, which led him to make an urgent call to repentance. He never commended them for their religious practices. Third, this argument fits well with Paul’s view on the gospel and God’s revelation. And lastly, it also goes along with the biblical view on non-Christian religion.

To take the opposite view like that of Lenski, Clarke, Richardson, and Prior, and claim that the inscription to the unknown god was a dedication to God, is running the risk of accommodating our traditional religion in our contextual theology approach and watering down our faith, mission, and evangelistic zeal.

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<sup>70</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 839.