

2022 European Apologetics Network: Foundational Track

Paul in Athens (Acts 17)

Despite its prominence historically, apologetics is seen as controversial in many Christian circles. Where and when it is practiced, contemporary apologetics is often characterized by a neglect of biblical foundations and models. Through discussion of an article written by the speaker, this session seeks to identify, explore, and apply such key biblical material. The focus will be on Acts 17:16-34 as a relevant case study.

Lars Dahle is a theologian, educator, preacher, and apologist. Having a long previous experience in various academic leadership roles, he now works as Associate Professor in Systematic Theology and Christian Apologetics at Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication (NLA Kristiansand), where he has lectured in worldviews, ethics, and apologetics since 1991. Lars wrote his PhD on Acts 17:16-34. It is entitled *An Apologetic Model Then and Now?* (Open University, UK). Since 2013, he is also the Lausanne Catalyst for Media Engagement. Lars has written several academic and popular articles on apologetics, media engagement and missiology and was a co-editor of *The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives* (Oxford: Regnum, 2014). He is also the Founding Editor of the peer-reviewed Nordic apologetic journal *Theofilos*. In addition, Lars co-leads the European Leadership Forum Media Communicators Network with his wife, Margunn. Follow Lars on his blog *Media Messages Matter* or on his Twitter account [@LarsDahle](#).

I. PART I: *Approaching Paul in Athens – as a key passage about apologetics*

A. Introduction

1. The most popular Bible passage in popular apologetics

B. Popular *misunderstandings* of Acts 17

1. Paul on “Mars Hill”?
2. A formal legal defense?
3. A missionary primer?
4. A failure?
5. An isolated passage?

C. Pathways into Acts 17: Paul as an *authentic* and *relevant* apologist in Athens

1. fits Luke's overall purpose of Luke-Acts
2. fits the overall pattern in Acts
3. fits Luke's picture of Paul in the *agora* as *a herald of foreign gods*
4. fits Paul's own statements in his letters (1 Cor. 9:19-23; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; Rom. 1:18-23; 1 Cor. 2:1-2)

II. Part II: *Analyzing Paul in Athens - as an apologist in the marketplace*

A. Luke's narrative introduction (vv. 16-21)

1. The *agora* as the context and focus
2. Highlighting Athenian questions, objections, misunderstandings, and worldview alternatives

B. Paul's Areopagus Speech (vv. 22-31)

1. Points of contact:
 - a. Bridge building
 - b. The altar and the poets
2. The argument

- a. Natural theology
- b. Ultimate authority
- c. Jesus and the Resurrection

3. Points of tension:

- a. Challenging belief and behavior

C. Luke's narrative conclusion (vv. 32-34)

- 1. Dual reactions follow the normal pattern in Acts
- 2. Scorn, interest, and conversions in a challenging context in Athens

III. PART III: *Applying lessons from Paul in Athens – in our apologetics ministries today*

A. Communicating into a secular and pluralistic marketplace-

- 1. Sacred', 'naked', or 'civil' public square?
- 2. Identifying points of contact and points of tension

B. Using Paul's overall argument / each argument

1. Natural theology
2. Ultimate authority
3. Jesus and the Resurrection

C. Generating interest where people are critical but curious

1. «*The open hand*»: exploring
 - a. wonder
 - b. authority
 - c. death
2. «*The closed fist* »: arguing for a Creator with ultimate authority revealed in Jesus and the Resurrection

Discussion questions:

Q 1: Have you come across any of these misunderstandings of Acts 17?

Q 2: Why do you think Acts 17:16-34 is so popular among Christian / evangelical apologists?

Q 3: Were there any new discoveries or any surprises for you in this brief exposition of Acts 17?

Q 4: How would you personally apply Acts 17 as an apologetic model?

Recommended Resources:

<https://larsdahle.no/acts-17/>

Lars Dahle (2014): “Truth, Christian Mission and Apologetics: A Response and a Proposal”

<https://journals.mf.no/ntm/article/view/4285/3602>

Lars Dahle and Bjørn Hinderaker (2020): “Exploring Genesis 1-3 as a True Worldview Story: Reading alongside C. S. Lewis, Francis A. Schaeffer, and C. John Collins”
<https://theofilos.no/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Theofilos-vol-12-nr-1-2020-Supplement-forum-4.pdf>