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Resurrection, Proof, and Presuppositionalism

Acts 17:30–31

LANE G. TIPTON

The basic contention of this essay is that Paul's conception of the resurrection as proof¹ of final judgment in Acts 17:31b depends on revealed categories derived from redemptive history. This distinctive approach to proof places the evidential function of the resurrection in a redemptive-historical setting and supplies an exegetical line of support for presuppositional apologetics in the tradition of Cornelius Van Til. Five basic propositions summarize the argument developed in this section:

1. Paul the theologian of redemptive history is Paul the apologist for the resurrection of Christ.
2. Paul provides a covenant-historical conception of proof in 17:31, which rests on (a) Christ's resurrection as an eschatological

1. Greek: *pistin*/πίστιν.

- event, and (b) Christ's resurrection as a covenantal (or solidaric) event.
3. Paul refuses to separate the denotation (fact) of the resurrection from the connotation (meaning) of the resurrection, because the fact and meaning of the resurrection are covenantally and eschatologically qualified.
 4. As such, Paul's notion of proof cannot be reduced to an ordinary, standard, philosophical conception of proof (e.g., based on rational reflection, empirical observation, or pragmatic utility), since it rests on revealed categories derived from redemptive history.
 5. Paul's argument requires us to rethink or at least reorient the discipline of apologetics in light of redemptive-historical categories.

Opening Observations

Paul's address to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill, recorded in Acts 17:16–34, presents us with the *locus classicus* for understanding the Pauline apologetic. The serious student of biblical theology and apologetics must come to terms with the programmatic theological message of the address, as well as its bearing on the assumptions that inform the use of reason, argument, and evidence in apologetical disputation. This essay will focus on the influence of the Pauline theology on the nature of the proof he presents in verse 31b, particularly the redemptive-historical orientation of his argument, which construes the resurrection as proof of the certainty and inescapability of final judgment.

In restricting the investigation to a small section of the passage (vv. 30–31), I obviously am not attempting an exegesis of the passage as a whole, nor do I intend to answer all of the questions relevant to the function of verses 30–31 within the broader context of the passage. I will limit the investigation to the covenantal and eschatological components in Paul's argument and will not focus on the important but implicit Trinitarian contours of the argument.²

2. The Trinitarian character of the address appears implicitly in the fact that God has appointed (*hōrisen/ᾠρισεν*) a man to dispense judgment in righteousness, and the prerogative to judge belongs *exclusively* to God. When we conjoin this insight with the fact that in Pauline theology God's effective declaration (*horisthentos/ᾠρισθέντος*, Rom. 1:4) constitutes Christ the

The argument is designed to demonstrate that Paul presupposed *the entire redemptive-historical framework* in the presentation of the fact of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. And this means that Paul did not reason from the fact of the resurrection to the God who raised Jesus; rather, Paul's reasoning about the fact of the resurrection already presupposes the God who raised him, that is, the meaning of the resurrection.³

Recent evangelical scholarship on the book of Acts is beginning to recognize the distinctively theological underpinnings of Paul's Areopagus address, along with the fact that he argues on the level of basic presuppositions or worldviews. For instance, Ben Witherington observes that in Paul's address on Mars Hill, "Conversion to a new *worldview*, not merely additional knowledge, is required."⁴ In addition, D. A. Carson notes that in Paul's Mars Hill address "there is a massive *clash of worldviews*."⁵ However, while there is a basic, and I believe, correct, recognition of the distinctively Christian presuppositions in Paul's address in general, and his conception of proof in particular,⁶ the specific categories that contribute to the redemptive-historical conception of proof Paul offers have not been developed adequately. Nor have scholars such as Witherington and Carson tied Paul's argument to the development of presuppositional apologetics. Therefore, in this section I will attempt to point out more precisely the theological

eschatological Spirit (functionally, not ontologically) by his resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:18), Christ's appointment as resurrected judge displays clearly an implicit Trinitarianism.

3. The reason I put it this way becomes clear in light of recent comments on the meaning and implications of Acts 17:31 for apologetics. Gary Habermas argues that in Acts 17:30–31 Paul presents an argument that moves "from history to the God who raised Jesus," *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 2. My contention is that Paul's argument *presupposes* the God who raised Jesus because Paul already understands the fact of the resurrection as a covenantal and eschatological event. Paul approaches the fact of the resurrection in terms of the entire redemptive-historical framework presented in Scripture. Hence, it is not adequate merely to say that Paul moved from history (i.e., the resurrection of Christ) to the God who raised Jesus.

4. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 531, emphasis mine.

5. D. A. Carson, "Athens Revisited," in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 390, emphasis mine.

6. "Paul says that resurrection *proves* that his audience themselves will one day face judgment." Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 530, emphasis mine. However, Witherington does not develop precisely the theological framework that accounts for such a uniquely redemptive-historical concept of proof.

constructs that underlie Paul's notion of the resurrection as proof of final judgment, and spell out the implications for the development of presuppositional apologetics.

The argument proceeds in terms of the five propositions already noted. The first two of the five propositions deal with Paul's argument in Acts 17:30–31. Propositions 3 and 4 demonstrate the correlation between Paul's argument and the presuppositional approach to apologetics advocated by Van Til. The fifth proposition suggests some ways that redemptive-historically regulated exegesis bears on the development of presuppositional apologetics. Let us examine each proposition in turn.

Proposition 1

Paul the theologian of redemptive history is Paul the apologist for the resurrection of Christ.

It becomes clear in the development of Paul's argument that Paul the theologian of redemptive history is Paul the apologist for the resurrection of Christ. This means that Paul does not argue with one set of presuppositions as a *theologian* and another set of presuppositions as an *apologist*.⁷ He is not methodologically schizophrenic. Paul does not alter his fundamental theological approach to covenant history in his address to the Athenian philosophers; rather, he presents in a compressed, terse manner the central core of covenant history as it has reached its climax in the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. No abstract, formal, philosophical reasoning appears in Paul; rather, he argues as a covenant theologian, or a theologian of redemptive history.

Regarding Paul's preaching in general, Herman Ridderbos notes, "The whole content of Paul's preaching can be summarized as the proclamation and explication of the eschatological time of salvation

7. Witherington observes that Paul's argument is "thoroughly biblical *from the start*, and is not unlike other early Jewish examples of apologetics for monotheism. The conclusion follows naturally from the argument." *Acts*, 531 (emphasis mine). Witherington's observation is basically sound but underdeveloped, as the following exegetical and theological considerations will suggest.

inaugurated with Christ's advent, death, and resurrection."⁸ This means that it is "from this principal point of view and under this denominator that all the separate themes of Paul's preaching can be understood and penetrated in their unity and relation to one another."⁹ What we will see in Acts 17:30–31, then, is that what holds true of Paul the theologian of redemptive history holds true of Paul the apologist for the resurrection of Christ.¹⁰

In order to grasp this assertion more clearly, let us move on to the second proposition.

Proposition 2

Paul provides a covenant-historical conception of proof in Acts 17:31, which rests on (a) Christ's resurrection as an eschatological event, and (b) Christ's resurrection as a covenantal (or solidaric) event.

(a) Christ Resurrection as an Eschatological Event

As an eschatological event, Christ's resurrection is an epoch-changing occurrence that guarantees the certainty of a universal, future, and final act of God's righteous judgment against sin.

The resurrection of Christ as an epoch-changing event. The eschatological character of Paul's thought emerges clearly throughout the address, but is accentuated in verse 30, where Paul elaborates on the epoch-changing significance of the resurrection of Christ. The text reads, "Therefore, although God overlooked¹¹ the times of ignorance, he now¹² commands all men everywhere to repent." The specific call to repentance is grounded in a decisive intervention by God in redemptive history (v. 31), an intervention that, contrary to the

8. Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard DeWitt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 44.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Witherington argues that "the conclusion of the speech in vv. 30–31 should not be seen as anomalous, or a mere tacking on of a Christian addendum to an otherwise Hellenistic piece of rhetoric." *Acts*, 531.

11. Scripture quotations in this chapter are my translations. The rendering "although" reflects my judgment that the aorist participle, *hyperidōn/ὑπεριδὼν*, is concessive.

12. Greek: *ta nyn/τὰ νῦν*.

past, now, in the sense of realized eschatology in Christ, heightens the responsibility of his hearers. This implies that Paul grounds the gospel imperative to repent in the redemptive-historical indicative of God's decisive activity in history—the resurrection of Christ as judge. In particular, Paul argues that the exaltation of Christ inaugurates a new redemptive-historical era, so that after the resurrection of Christ, covenant history has in principle reached its climax.¹³

In light of these observations, we can begin to understand the inference¹⁴ Paul makes in verse 30, that “although God has overlooked” (*hyperidōn ho theos/ὑπεριδὼν ὁ θεὸς*) such “times of ignorance” (*chronous tēs agnoias/χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας*), “he now commands all men everywhere to repent.” Paul focuses on the radical change that coincides with the new redemptive-historical era established by the resurrection of Christ (v. 31).¹⁵ Ridderbos notes, “In it [the resurrection] the time of salvation promised in him [Christ], the new creation, dawns in an overwhelming manner, as a *decisive transition from the old to the new world*.”¹⁶ The former epochs of overlooking sin have given way to a new aeon in which God requires repentance of all men everywhere in light of Christ's resurrection from the dead (*ek nekrōn/ἐκ νεκρῶν*).

This is clear in that Paul characterizes the former epochs as “times of ignorance” (v. 30a), which stand in sharp contrast with now (*ta nyn/tὰ νῦν*), the present epoch (v. 30b). Notice that Paul does not state in verse 30 that only the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers were ignorant, although verses 23 and 29 prove that they in fact were ignorant in a significant sense; rather, he predicates ignorance of entire historical epochs prior to the eschatological era inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ. The times of ignorance refer best to a previous and indeterminate period of time. The reason Paul alludes to an indefinite time

13. We must remember that Christ's resurrection marks the inauguration of his eschatological kingdom, and his *parousia* will mark its consummation. This already/not-yet structure of Paul's eschatology is critical in understanding his theology in general, and the Areopagus address in particular; cf. Geerhardus Vos, “The Eschatology of the New Testament,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. R. B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 25–58.

14. *Oun/οὖν* is an inference indicator, suggesting that v. 30 is a conclusion reached from v. 29.

15. Witherington observes that “as a result of what has happened through Christ's death and resurrection, such ignorance will no longer be endured.” *Acts*, 531.

16. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 56, emphasis mine.

period, which extends backward without clearly prescribed boundaries, rests in the fact that his concern is not the duration of the former epochs of ignorance, but their present termination, which coincides with “now” in verse 30.

The resurrection of Christ as judge therefore marks a pivotal change in the way that God deals with all men everywhere. Rather than indicating an existential moment of present decisional crisis, “now” marks the beginning of the new era in redemptive history.¹⁷ As such, the phrase does not have an existential nuance, but has an *eschatological* nuance that derives its significance from the resurrection of Christ.¹⁸

The resurrection as guarantee of future judgment. In the Greek text, Paul uses a concessive participle, which means that God now commands repentance although he overlooked the times of ignorance. Prior to the call for repentance in the new era inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ, the text states that God overlooked in some sense the sins associated with idolatry. Paul means that before the inauguration of this semi-eschatological age, God had not brought a final or ultimate display of judgment against idolatry. To be sure, many provisional expressions of judgment appear in the old covenant, but nothing of truly eschatological significance appeared until “now.”

What accounts for the transition from God’s former overlooking the times of ignorance to his now commanding repentance from all men everywhere? The precise sense in which God overlooked previous sins of idolatry and consequently now commands repentance becomes clear in verse 31. God has set a day to judge the world in righteousness. The call to repentance finds its rationale in the emergence of a future act of universal judgment on the day God has appointed. In other words, the appointed day of judgment, which brings a definitive verdict

17. This notion of a distinctively redemptive history undermines the Stoic and Epicurean understanding of history at the most basic level conceivable. As Joseph Fitzmyer astutely remarks, Paul “views world history only from one perspective, vis., from that of the risen Christ.” *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 612.

18. Ridderbos notes, “It is to be maintained no less vigorously that in Paul’s proclamation the resurrection of Christ in fact means the breakthrough of the new aeon in the real, redemptive historical sense of the word, and therefore cannot be understood *only* in forensic, ethical, or existential categories.” *Aan de Romeinen*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 55.

against those who worship idols in ignorance, looms imminent on the horizon of redemptive history. The times of ignorance in which God overlooked the sin of idolatry have given way to a period of impending, eschatological judgment.

And what event grounds Paul's confidence in a future, final, universal judgment? Verse 31 makes it clear: the resurrection of Christ as judge. Christ's resurrection guarantees that all impenitent idolaters will find no escape from God's righteous judgment.

To summarize, then, Paul presents the resurrection of Christ to his hearers as an eschatological event that inaugurates a new stage in redemptive history and guarantees the certainty of a future act of universal judgment.

(b) The Resurrection of Christ as a Covenantal Event

Now let us consider the resurrection of Christ as a covenantal event. In this connection, I want to assess briefly the solidaric character of the resurrection in the context of Pentecost and discuss the resurrection as the event that inaugurates an eschatological covenant lawsuit against covenant-breakers who continue in sin and idolatry.

The solidaric character of the resurrection in the context of Pentecost. The covenantal character of Christ's resurrection appears clearly in the fact that it has implications for *all men everywhere* (*tois anthrōpois pantas pantachou metanoein*/τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντας πανταχοῦ μετανοεῖν, v. 30), whether covenant-breakers or covenant-keepers. It is precisely the solidaric aspect of Christ's resurrection for "all men everywhere" that *requires* us to see the resurrection as a covenantal event. This is so because the resurrection of Christ from the dead simultaneously guarantees salvation for the covenant-keeper and condemnation for the covenant-breaker. Jesus' resurrection is a concrete event in history with universal significance and implications.

It is precisely the universal implications of the resurrection that ground it as a covenantal event. Reformed theology traditionally has explained solidarity with the first Adam in covenantal terms, parallel to the explanation of the church's solidarity with the second Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12–20; 1 Cor. 15:22–58). From Paul's redemptive-historical

perspective, it is precisely Christ's status and function as the second Adam that ensures his resurrection has implications for "all men everywhere." As second Adam, Christ stands in a solidaric relationship to all men, either as Redeemer or as judge. This becomes particularly clear when we consider the eschatological and solidaric dimensions of his humiliation and exaltation.

Richard B. Gaffin Jr. makes this very point when describing Christ's messianic baptism of death on the cross, in terms of both promise and fulfillment. From the perspective of promise (Luke 3:16–17), symbolized by John's water baptism, Christ's messianic baptism of death on the cross involves "*eschatological judgment . . . [which is] of a piece with God's great discriminating activity of cleansing the world-threshing floor* or, to vary the metaphor slightly, harvesting the world-field, at the end of history."¹⁹ In terms of fulfillment, "Pentecost is . . . component with the fiery baptism of final judgment set by the New Testament to be executed by Christ at his return (e.g., Matt. 16:27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; II Thess. 1:7f.; II Tim. 4:1)."²⁰ In other words, whether viewed from the standpoint of promise or of fulfillment, Christ's messianic baptism of death on the cross involves the same judgment ordeal awaiting the world at the end of the age.

Therefore, Gaffin's formulation helps us grasp how the baptism ordeal that Christ endured in his messianic death is the *same ordeal* that awaits the "world-threshing floor" at the end of the age. This sort of theological formulation informs Paul's argument in Acts 17:31 at the nuclear level. This insight also helps explain why Luke would include Paul's speech in Acts 17. Paul's resurrection theology perfectly complements Luke's theology of Pentecost. In fact, Paul's address in Acts 17 brings Luke's theology of Pentecost into sharp focus and clear application. God's righteous judgment is bound up with the resurrection of Christ as judge as a solidaric, covenantal event, which is full of eschatological significance.

The resurrection and the covenant lawsuit. The necessity of a righteous judgment seems unavoidable when we consider that Paul

19. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 15, emphasis mine.

20. *Ibid.*, 17.

announces an eschatological covenant lawsuit against the Athenian idolaters.²¹ Following the general pattern of a covenant lawsuit,²² Paul identifies the Athenian idolaters as creaturely vassals of the Creator King, *ho theos*/ὁ θεός and *kyrios*/κύριος identifying the King by name (v. 24). Verses 24–26 provide the reasons why the Athenians ought to worship and serve the living God, rather than idols. The living God not only created all things, but sustains all he has created. Verse 28 identifies the culpable ignorance of the idol worshipers, since the living God is clearly present among them (Rom. 1:19–20). Then, in Acts 17:29, Paul brings the formal indictment of the lawsuit. This is the first phase of the process, which appears in the call to repent in verse 30. The second phase of the process will occur on the appointed day of judgment at the end of the age (v. 31), so that the two phases of the eschatological covenant lawsuit correspond to the two epoch making events of the New Testament: the first and second comings of Christ.

To state the matter differently, Paul announces an eschatological covenant lawsuit adjusted in terms of the already/not-yet categories of realized and future eschatology. Christ's resurrection and ascension provide the basis for the first phase of announced judgment, which culminates in the commandment to repent (v. 30). Christ's second coming (*parousia*) marks the second and final stage of the threatened judgment, which reaches its climax on the last day (v. 31). In this sense, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, charges the Athenians with

21. As Van Til says regarding Paul's intention for the Athenians, "he wanted them to become *covenant-keepers* instead of *covenant-breakers*." *Paul at Athens* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 10, emphasis mine.

22. For a more extensive summary treatment of the covenant lawsuit pattern, see M. G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 51–54. Notice also Paul's consistent allusions to Isaiah's language of covenant lawsuit (Acts 17:24–25, cf. Isa. 42:5; Acts 17:29, cf. Isa. 40:18–20). Regarding the lawsuit pattern, Kline observes that "when a vassal [subject] failed to satisfy the obligations of a sworn treaty, the suzerain [king] instituted a covenant lawsuit against him. The legal process was conducted by messengers. In the first of its two distinct phases, messengers delivered one or more warnings. . . . The vassal was reminded of the suzerain's benefits and of the treaty stipulations, explanation of his offenses was demanded, and he was admonished to mend his ways. He was also confronted anew with the curses of the covenant, now in the form of an ultimatum and warned of the vanity of all hope of escape through recourse to any alien quarter. If the messenger of the great king was rejected, imprisoned, and especially if he was killed, the legal process moved into its next phase. This was a declaration of war as an execution of the sacred sanctions of the treaty, and so as a visitation of the oath deities against the offender, a trial by ordeal" (pp. 51–52).

idolatry and announces an impending covenant lawsuit in terms that derive significance from the already and not-yet aspects of Christ's resurrection as judge. Failure to repent (v. 30) constitutes a rebellious attitude toward the lawgiver and judge, thereby ensuring final judgment (v. 31).

In this context, Paul introduces the ultimate agent who will enforce this judgment, in verse 31: "in righteousness through a man whom he has appointed" (*en dikaiosynē en andri hō hōrisen/ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ἐν ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὤρισεν*). Therefore, verse 31 provides the reason for the transition from God's overlooking the ignorance of idolatry in verse 30a to the command for all men to repent in verse 30b. God has fixed a day to judge the world in righteousness by an appointed man who will end definitively the practice of idolatry.

It is helpful to note that Paul answers an anticipated question: How do we know that a radical transition has occurred in redemptive history that *guarantees* the righteous judgment of God against all idolaters? Verse 31 gives the answer: "God offered [*paraschōn/παρασχῶν*] proof [*pistin/πίστιν*]²³ to all men by raising [*anastēsas/ἀναστήσας*]²⁴ him from the dead." In other words, the event that guarantees the certainty of eschatological judgment is *the resurrection of Christ*—the event that constitutes him judge of the world.

However, it appears that we can find no immediate rationale for the transition between verse 31a and 31b. Specifically what accounts for the connection between them? To put the question differently, what precisely about Christ's resurrection "from the dead" guarantees the universal judgment and therefore grounds the requirement of universal repentance?

In order to see the answer, we need to understand first and foremost that we have an implicit premise that provides the connection between 31a and 31b, and establishes the force of the commandment to repent. That premise can be summarized as follows: the judgment that will befall all covenant breakers at the end of the age has already

23. *Pistin* is alternately translated as assurance, but the basic point remains the same: God has produced evidence which guarantees the judgment of all men. Witherington comments that "within a rhetorical argument such as this one, *πίστιν* here refers to a proof; cf. Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 1173A; Josephus, *Ant.* 15.69." *The Acts of the Apostles*, 532.

24. *Anastēsas* is best understood as an aorist participle of means, indicating precisely how the proof occurs.

befallen Christ at the beginning of the age. This implies that all who do not identify with the resurrected one by faith and repentance will bear personally the eternal judgment to be executed by him as judge at the end of the age, that is, at the end of *ta nyn*.

The hint of an implicit premise arises with the mention not of the resurrection *per se*, but of the resurrection of Christ “*from the dead*.”²⁵ Christ’s resurrection from the dead assumes that he has faced the judgment of God, since, “just as it is appointed for men to die once and then comes judgment. So also Christ . . .” (Heb. 9:27–28). This means that for Christ the resurrection from the dead entails a previous encounter with the consummate judgment of God (v. 27). Immediately before, in Hebrews 9:26, Christ is presented as a sacrifice for sins at the consummation of the ages. That is, the reality of *eternal* judgment befell Christ in his obedience and satisfaction. This point from Hebrews finds a close parallel in Paul’s argument in Acts 17:31: the eschatological judgment threatened there has already been applied to one man, Christ. As Ridderbos notes, “To Paul, the eschatological reality of the divine judgment and the divine acquittal are revealed in the cross and in the resurrection of Christ.”²⁶

In summary, God the Father prosecuted the violated covenant of works against his Son as a substitute in his obedience and satisfaction at the beginning of this age, and it is the same broken covenant of works that God the Son will prosecute against all unbelievers at the end of the age.²⁷

Consequently, when Paul appeals to Christ’s resurrection from the dead as proof of the final judgment, he has in mind covenantal categories that give Christ’s resurrection its unique and distinctive meaning. Paul announces eschatological judgment in covenantal categories and construes the resurrection as a solidaric event with implications for all men everywhere. Christ’s resurrection is an eschatological and covenantal event.

25. Greek: *ek nekron/ek vekron*.

26. Herman Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology* (1957; repr., ON: Paideia, 1982), 50–51.

27. Of course, another implicit premise is that the prerogative of deity belongs to the one constituted judge by means of his resurrection. This observation confirms the earlier observation regarding the implicitly Trinitarian structure of Paul’s argument.

Proposition 3

Paul refuses to separate the denotation (fact) of the resurrection from the connotation (meaning) of the resurrection, because the fact and meaning of the resurrection are covenantally and eschatologically qualified.

Consider the following, more philosophical, implication. Paul refuses to present the denotation of the resurrection (i.e., the fact of the resurrection) apart from the connotation of the resurrection (i.e., the covenant-historical meaning of the resurrection). The Christ whom Paul proclaims is the Christ of covenant history, and his resurrection is not presented in isolation from its significance for redemptive history. The deed revelation of the resurrection is never artificially abstracted from the interpretation provided by Word revelation. Accordingly, any apologetical procedure that artificially separates at any point the fact of the resurrection from the meaning of the resurrection is, from a biblical standpoint, defective.²⁸

This implies that Paul is not interested in offering the resurrection as an isolated factual occurrence. Van Til notes the interrelationship between covenantal revelation and the resurrection when he says, “It takes the *fact* of the resurrection to see its proper *framework* and it takes the *framework* to see the *fact* of the resurrection.”²⁹ Paul articulates this sort of relationship in his Areopagus address; he understands the resurrection of Christ in terms of its redemptive-historical framework. At no point does Paul entertain Christ’s resurrection as a brute fact, that is, as a fact that exists independent of God’s eternal decree and revelation in history. To argue for the fact of the resurrection is to presuppose its meaning, and to argue for the meaning of the resurrection is to presuppose its factuality. But the point is that the argument Paul presents regarding the resurrection of Christ from the dead presupposes *both* its fact *and* its meaning as a covenantal and eschatological event.

28. These approaches would include: new Reformed epistemology (e.g., Alvin Plantinga, Kelly James Clark), evidentialism (e.g., Gary Habermas, John Warwick Montgomery), natural theology (e.g., R. C. Sproul, Norman Geisler), and Wittgensteinian fideism (e.g., Norman Malcolm), among others.

29. Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, 16, emphasis mine.

In addition Van Til notes that when it comes to understanding the significance of the resurrection as a revelational event in redemptive history, “the setting is all important . . . [since it is] that which gives meaning to the fact of the resurrection.”³⁰ This revelational “setting” is inherently covenantal, Trinitarian, and eschatological in nature, and, as such, involves a construal of the resurrection as proof of the final judgment.

Notice that Van Til’s formulations are confirmed by a careful treatment of the text in Acts 17:30–31. Although Van Til himself did not provide such exegesis, it seems clear enough that his understanding of how the “setting” or “framework” of redemptive history relates to the fact of the resurrection is thoroughly Pauline. Perhaps Van Til himself failed to offer substantial exegetical support for his apologetic, but his approach is not for that reason unbiblical. Quite to the contrary, Van Til’s language resonates with the theology of the inscripturated text.

Complementing this insight, let us consider the next proposition.

Proposition 4

As such, Paul’s notion of proof cannot be reduced to an ordinary, standard, philosophical conception of proof (e.g., based on rational reflection, empirical observation, or pragmatic utility), since it rests on revealed categories derived from redemptive history.

In Paul’s presentation, the resurrection functions as proof of the final judgment. Christ’s resurrection proves the certainty and inescapability of the judgment to be executed by him at the end of the age. This means that Paul presents the resurrection of Christ in terms of its function and bearing in redemptive history. The evidential function of the resurrection is not artificially isolated from its relationship to redemptive history. That is, the empirical and rational aspects of Paul’s notion of proof are at every point subordinate to his theology of redemptive history, or to speak more philosophically, his revelational epistemology.

Van Til summarizes this point well:

30. *Ibid.*, 13.

He [Paul] was not interested in having them endorse the Resurrection as an *isolated event*. . . . He was, rather, concerned that they accept it as the climax of the work of redemption from sin by Jesus, truly God and truly man. . . . In short, men should not existentially accept the resurrection unless, in doing so, they received it as part of the *entire biblical redemptive framework*.³¹

Consequently, Van Til observes that Paul called those present on Mars Hill to accept a “peculiar thought framework”³² that “required a new, radically different view of history from its beginning to its end.”³³ Basically, then, Paul presented to the Athenians the resurrection of Christ, articulated in consistently covenant-historical categories, never artificially separating the fact of the resurrection from its redemptive-historical meaning.

Paul’s notion of proof therefore turns on what God has objectively effected in Christ’s resurrection. Paul does not offer a proof in the ordinary sense of the term; rather, he appeals to what God has validated in Christ’s resurrection. God has given assurance or proof of final judgment to all men by raising Christ from the dead. Van Til notes,

Paul proclaimed the *fact* of creation, the *fact* of the resurrection of Christ, and the *fact* of the coming judgment of all men by Christ as judge, as together constituting a philosophy of history which at every point challenged the philosophy of history of the natural man in general and of the Greeks in particular.³⁴

As such, Paul offers a covenant-historical proof that stands antithetically over against the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies of history represented on Mars Hill.

Elaborating on the connection between Christ’s resurrection and the judgment it effects, Van Til notes, “In His resurrection from the dead through the power of the Creator there stood before men the

31. Cornelius Van Til, *Who Do You Say I Am?* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 8, emphasis mine.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. Cornelius Van Til, *The Great Debate Today* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 169.

clearest evidence that could be given that they who would still continue to serve and worship the creature would at the last be condemned by the Creator then become their judge” (Acts 17:31).³⁵ In Van Til’s assessment, the resurrection of Christ is the clearest conceivable evidence of universal and final judgment against sin. But it is the “entire biblical redemptive framework” alone that accounts for such crystal clarity, because *in terms of no other framework does the fact of the resurrection bear such a meaning*.

In verse 31, then, *pistin* does not operate in the technical, philosophical sense of rational demonstration. Rather, Paul’s notion of proof indicates that he understands and presents the resurrection in terms of the matrix of Trinitarian and redemptive-historical activity. For this reason, Paul’s notion of proof is *inseparable* from the framework of redemptive-historical revelation—the framework that provides the theological and hermeneutical foundation for his construal of the resurrection as proof of the final judgment.

What makes Paul’s unique conception of proof so relevant to a discussion of apologetics is simple. Paul’s understanding of the meaning of the resurrection of Christ is not the only option for explaining the phenomenon of his bodily resurrection. For instance, the Epicurean philosophers present on Mars Hill (cf. Acts 17:18) would explain the resurrection of Christ as an adjustment in the falling of individual atoms. What would account for an event as unusual as the resurrection of a dead person but an unexpected “swerve” in the falling of atoms, that is, the basic stuff of reality? In other words, the philosophical explanation for understanding the resurrection in Epicurean categories would be the “Epicurean swerve.” From that perspective, the resurrection is simply a curious and random episode in history.

However, this is simply impossible in Paul’s approach, since the resurrection of Christ is understood in terms of covenantal and eschatological categories. It is not a brute fact that belongs in “Ripley’s Believe It or Not.” Rather, the resurrection proves that Christ is the righteous judge of the world. This redemptive-historical conception of the fact and meaning of the resurrection (i.e., how it functions as proof) puts Paul’s conception of proof on a collision course with Greek thought

35. Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, 5.

in general and Epicurean philosophy in particular. The apologetical implication is obvious: Paul refuses to present the resurrection of Christ apart from its redemptive-historical context—a point emphasized by Van Til and central to his presuppositional approach to apologetics.

This helps us understand the fifth and final point.

Proposition 5

Paul's argument requires us to rethink or at least reorient the discipline of apologetics in light of redemptive-historical categories.

As we have seen from the previous propositions, Paul the apologist for the resurrection is Paul the theologian of covenant history. His presentation of the resurrection as proof of eschatological judgment, both realized and future, depends for its plausibility on a theology of covenant history that lies at the heart of the Pauline apologetic. An apologetic regulated by covenant-historical categories forms the theological foundation for Paul's address on Mars Hill. It is, therefore, simply impossible to separate in any meaningful way Paul's apologetic from his covenant theology.

This means, at least, that we need to be willing to subject the discipline of apologetics to insights derived from the biblical theology of the inscripturated text. We will do well to heed Paul's argument on Mars Hill and appropriate his programmatic insights into the core of our apologetic. Taking Paul seriously means at least the following.

First, biblical theology requires that we regulate apologetics in light of exegesis, so that the discipline of apologetics depends ultimately on the theology contained in the inscripturated text and not a contemporary philosophical outlook (e.g., deconstructionism, pragmatism, phenomenology, existentialism, ordinary language philosophy). Of course, this does not mean that we fail to take into account contemporary philosophical trends in developing our apologetic, but it does remind us that apologetics, no less than biblical and systematic theology, must be regulated by the same *principium*—the text of Scripture alone.

Second, biblical theology helps us see that it is biblically inappropriate to appeal to the historical fact of the resurrection in isolation

from its redemptive-historical meaning. Paul's presentation of the fact and the meaning of the resurrection as covenantally and eschatologically qualified rules out presenting the resurrection as a brute fact. It also requires that we remember the fundamental role of the entire redemptive-historical framework when defending both the fact and the meaning of the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Third, biblical theology helps us realize the centrality of the resurrection as an eschatological and covenantal event, and, as a result, helps orient our apologetic along the same lines as our theology. So often in apologetics the defense of the faith proceeds in categories foreign to biblical and systematic theology. Apologetics is then construed as theological prolegomena, utilizing autonomous philosophical categories as a preamble to the revealed truths of Scripture and redemptive history. Biblical theology in general, as well as Paul's argument in Acts 17 in particular, reminds us that this is simply not the biblical (or the consistently Reformed) approach to the defense of Christian theism. Our apologetic is regulated by Trinitarian, covenantal, and eschatological categories just as much as our theology. In this sense apologetics is every bit as theological as theology, whether biblical or systematic.

Finally, biblical theology reminds us that in order to be faithful apologists for the resurrected Christ, we must be *first and foremost* faithful theologians of redemptive history. If this is so, then certainly the time has come to incorporate biblical-theological insights from the inscripturated text into the core of our presuppositional approach to apologetics. Paul's address in Acts 17, particularly his redemptive-historical conception of the resurrection as proof of the final judgment, helps us take some significant strides forward in that direction.

Paul's argument on Mars Hill therefore lends strong support to the development of presuppositional apologetics. A careful analysis of his conception of proof gives us an opportunity to enrich apologetics in light of redemptive-historically regulated exegesis. As we seize that opportunity, the disciplines of biblical and systematic theology will stand in a much more organic relationship to our defense of the faith, and will place us in a better position to demonstrate the deep lines of continuity between Reformed theology and Reformed apologetics.