Globethics Repository



salvation History, Chronology, and Crisis

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Sparks, Adam
Publisher	The Gospel Coalition
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-05 19:23:21
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/156948

Themelios 33.3 (2008): 48-62

Salvation History, Chronology, and Crisis: A Problem with Inclusivist Theology of Religions

PART 2 OF 2[1]

— Adam Sparks —

Adam Sparks completed his PhD (Theology of Religions) at Bristol University in 2007, under the supervision of Professor Gavin D'Costa. He has been a part-time tutor at Bristol University and is currently a part-time sessional lecturer at the University of London (Birkbeck College).
This article is an updated section of his thesis.

Abstract

A fundamental requirement in an inclusivist understanding of the relationship between Christianity and other religions is evidence of God's salvific activity outside of any knowledge of Christ. Evidence for such redemptive activity is commonly identified (rightly) in the people of Old Testament Israel. On this basis an analogy (the 'Israel analogy') is drawn between these Old Testament believers and contemporary followers of other religions. The Israel analogy relies on a correspondence between what is chronologically pre-messianic (Israel) and epistemologically pre-messianic (other religions), and in so doing considers the 'B.C. condition' to continue today. This two-part essay maintains that the analogy undermines the significance of the Christ-event in the unfolding plan of redemption by failing to appreciate the decisive effect of this event on history. The Christ-event is the midpoint of salvation history and is of universal significance for all space and time and for all people living both before and after the Christ-event itself.

2. Being Pre-Messianic Is Impossible in Post-Messianic Times

The preceding discussion has asserted the decisive cosmic impact of the Christ-event. The implications of this assertion on the Israel analogy and fulfilment model will now be considered. I will argue here that the concept of 'pre-messianic' is invalid this side of the cross, and therefore the Israel analogy and fulfilment model are rendered implausible. I will focus my initial analysis on Acts 14:16–17 and 17:30–31, for these two texts are widely cited by those who consider the pre-messianic condition to be an ongoing condition.[2] Two issues need examining: (1) What is *the nature* of the times of ignorance? (2) What is *the duration and extent* of these times, i.e., do they continue today, and if so, for whom?

[1] Part 1 of this article is published in *Themelios* 33:2 (2008): 7–18.

[2] See the references in the following discussion, particularly those in Section 2.2.

2.1. The Nature of the Times of Ignorance

The reference in Acts 14:16, 'In past generations he [God] allowed the nations to walk in their own ways', parallels the statement in 17:30, 'The times of ignorance God overlooked'. With regard to the nature of these times, it is commonly argued, for example by Clark Pinnock, that God did not consider culpable, those who failed to trust him and come to terms with him out of ignorance.[3] I dispute this interpretation, however, and maintain that the Scriptures suggest all people everywhere (including the 'ignorant') are considered culpable.[4] As A. C. McGiffert explains:

> The 'overlooking' of ignorance which is here referred to does not imply that in pre-Christian days God regarded the idolatry of the heathen with indifference or saved them from the consequences of their sins, denounced so vigorously in Rom. i., but simply that the time for the final judgement had not come until now, and that they were, therefore, summoned now to prepare for it as they had not before.[5]

Rather than indicating non-culpability these two addresses suggest that even in these former times, God held accountable all who rejected him, for he did not leave himself without witness (14:17). This witness is evident in the works of creation and providence which testify to the existence and nature of the true God.[6] Therefore, any ignorance that did exist should not have been as great as it was.

What Paul is arguing in these passages is that until the full revelation of God came to the Gentiles, God 'overlooked' the errors which arose through ignorance of his will. However, this overlooking 'betokened not indifference but patience'.[7] Therefore, although God did allow the nations to 'go their own way', this should *not* be taken as an indication that he condoned their guilt, but rather an acknowledgement that his redemptive plan was targeted in the former times, at Israel.[8] During these former times, there is a strong distinction between Israel as the covenant people of God and Gentiles outside God's covenant.[9] C. K. Barrett explains that God was unknown to the Gentiles because with the exception of his own people, Israel, he had withdrawn from human affairs to the extent of leaving the Gentiles to managetheir

[3] Pinnock, *Wideness*, 101. Many Acts commentators also suggest this. For example, I. Howard Marshall writes, 'In time past he had let the Gentiles live in their own ways, the implication being that he did not regard their ignorance of himself as culpable' (*Acts* [Leicester: IVP, 1980], 239). Cf. David Williams, *Acts* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 250: 'The implication seems to be that their ignorance of God in the past was not culpable . . . though this would no longer be so now that the Good News had been announced'.

[4] For example, all are subject to the wrath of God (John 3:19; Eph 2:3) and are already under condemnation (Rom 3:19).

[5] A. C. McGiffert, *History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1897), 260, quoted in Christopher Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000), 27.

[6] F.F. Bruce, *The Book of The Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 277. Cf. Dennis Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997), 193, 198.

[7] Bruce, *Acts*, 277.

[8] Reymond writes 'In Old Testament times God had "let the nations go their own way" (Acts 14:16) as he prepared Israel to be the repository of special revelation and the racial originator of the Messiah, and he had "overlooked the nations' ignorance" (Acts 17:23) in the sense that he had taken no direct steps to reach them savingly. But now that Christ has come God commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30) and to put their faith in Christ' (*Systematic Theology*, 1091n40). Cf. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 427.

[9] This former division between Jew and Gentile and the overcoming of it in the events described in Acts is a fundamental theme in redemptive history and has great significance for how these passages should be understood. It should be noted that although Gentiles were not formerly the target of God's redemptive program and were generally ignorant of God's purposes, they were not excluded from redemption. Examples recorded in the Old Testament such as Ruth make it clear that through faith Gentiles could also become part of the covenant community.

own, and *to this extent* they may be excused.[10] God did not fully reveal himself to the Gentiles, but neither did he completely annihilate them, as their sins deserved.[11]

This interpretation is confirmed by the first three chapters of Romans, which make it clear that even before Christ all were subject to God's wrath.[12] In Rom 1:19–20, Paul explains that if humankind had paid heed to the works of God in creation, they might have found indications of his existence and nature. Therefore, no one has ever been absolutely ignorant. God has made himself known through general revelation, providing sufficient evidence of himself to hold accountable all who reject that revelation.[13] Knowledge of God's eternal power and divine nature is manifest, but is suppressed and the truth exchanged for a lie (Rom 1:21–26).[14] With regard to Acts 17, Barrett writes:

> From nature the Greeks have evolved not natural theology but natural idolatry. That this should have been permitted was a mark of God's forbearance (cf. 14.16; also and especially Rom. 3:26). God did not will or approve this ignorant idolatrous worship, but he did not suppress it; he overlooked it.[15]

The guilt of humanity, therefore, is not due to absence of the truth, but to its suppression. 'If guilt were due to ignorance it would be an intellectual problem, but in reality it is a problem of the will which is sin.'[16] Although all are culpable, God's judgement is impartial and proportionate. Those with the Mosaic law (the Jews) and those without it (Gentiles) will both be judged impartially (Rom 2:12–16). 'The Mosaic legislation will play no part in the judgement of those who have not heard.'[17] However, those without the Mosaic law, still have 'law' (in the sense of a moral conscience) written on their hearts (2:14–15), and they will be judged according to this. Neither the Jews nor Gentiles keep their respective

[10] C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 1:681. Cf. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 1:306.

[11] Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 22. Cf. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1960), 489; Everett Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 223.

[12] See particularly Rom 1:18 ('the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men') and 2:12 ('those who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law'). Douglas J. Moo writes, 'Rom. 1:18–2:20 has sketched the spiritual state of those who belong to the old era: justly condemned, helpless in the power of sin, powerless to escape God's wrath' (*The Epistle To The Romans*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 221).

[13] Robert Mounce, *Romans*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 77. Cf. James R. Edwards, *Romans*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrikson, 1992), 50–52.: 'Verses 19–21 . . . assert that the problem of human guilt is not God's hiddenness and therefore humanity's ignorance, but rather God's self-disclosure and humanity's rejection of it'. Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 32–33: 'The result of God's self-manifestation in His creation is not a natural knowledge of God on men's part independent of God's self-revelation in His Word, a valid though limited knowledge, but simply the rendering excuseless of their ignorance' (32). Cf. Grant Osborne, *Romans*, *IVPNT* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 46–48.

[14] See, for example, Greg Bahnsen, 'The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens' (1980), available at http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pa045.htm (accessed 12 August 2006), 11. Paul identifies the 'basic schizophrenia in unbelieving thought when he described in the Athenians *both* an awareness of God (v. 22) and ignorance of God (v. 23). . . . Knowing God, the unregenerate nevertheless suppresses the truth and follows a lie instead'.

[15] Barrett, *Acts*, vol 2: 851.

[16] Edwards, *Romans*, 51. Cf. Rom 1:18–23 indicates that the natural human relation to God is more than a simple straightforward *agnoia.* Cf. Francis Watson, *Text And Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 248; Bahnsen, 'The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens', 13. The unbeliever is 'responsible because he possesses the truth, but he is guilty for what he does with the truth'.

[17] Mounce, *Romans*, 93

laws, and therefore this universal sinfulness demands judgement (1:18–3:20).[18] Terrance Tiessen rightly argues that judgement is in accordance with the revelation an individual receives. With regard to Acts 14:16–17, Tiessen explains:

> It is highly implausible that Paul is suggesting that God accepted all the various forms of worship and conduct that the nations chose in their ignorance of God through lack of revelation. His point is twofold: First, God had given them some revelation in the form of his providential care for them. As indicated in Rom 1:21, this left them culpable if they did not respond by honouring God as God and giving him thanks. And second, in Paul's generation, they were receiving a clearer revelation of God's truth and of his will, so their obligation was increasing accordingly.[19]

Pinnock adopts a different position on this, suggesting Paul was positive about the religious practices of the Lystrans and Athenians and by extension is similarly positive about the potential of contemporary non-Christian religious practices. He suggests Paul's Lystran sermon

> represents a gracious and understanding appreciation of their past and their culture. In a later vignette, Paul is described in Athens as acknowledging the good intentions of the Greeks in worshipping the unknown God. . . . Evidently Paul thought of these people as believers in a certain sense, in a way that could be and should be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.[20]

In the same way, Karl Rahner also suggests Paul's speech shows he held a positive view of pagan religion.[21] Similarly, Jacques Dupuis interprets this passage as evidence that

> Paul praises the religious spirit of the Greeks and announces to them the 'unknown God' whom they worship without knowing. . . . [T]he message surely seems to be that the religions of the nations are not bereft of value but find in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of their aspirations.[22]

Pinnock, Rahner and Dupuis, however, are mistaken here. Paul argues that God was worshipped in ignorance precisely because he was *unknown*, not that God was known but was somehow worshipped in ignorance. There are clear indications in the text that this is what Paul meant. William Larkin asserts that the use of neuter instead of masculine pronouns here shows that Paul is not simply going to proclaim to them the identity of the one whom they worship ignorantly. 'Here is no basis for contending that non-Christian religionists, who are seeking him but don't know his name, are in a saving relation with God'.[23] Similarly, Simon Kistemaker maintains,

> They worship without knowledge, which in Athens, the bastion of learning, was a contradiction in terms. They concede that this unknown god exists, but they have no

[18] Edwards, *Romans*, 70.

[19] Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 128–29. Tiessen is referring to general revelation in his use of the expression 'some revelation'.

[20] Pinnock, *Wideness*, 32.

[21] Rahner, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', 122, 125.

[22] Dupuis, *Toward*, 49.

[23] William Larkin, 'The Contribution of the Gospels and Acts to a Biblical Theology of Religions', in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions* (ed. Edward Rommen and Harold Netland; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1995), 82–83. Cf. Chrys Caragounis, 'Divine Revelation', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 12 (1988): 229–230.

> knowledge of him. And they must acknowledge that their approach to proper worship is deficient because of their ignorance. Paul, however, does not equate the unknown god of the Athenians with the true God. Notice that he says 'what you worship', not 'whom you worship'. Paul calls attention only to their lack of knowledge and thus takes the opportunity to introduce God as Creator and Judge of the universe. Paul intimates that the Athenians' ignorance of God is blameworthy and this ignorance demands swift emendation.[24]

This interpretation may be supported by the word 'ignorance' (ἀγνοοῦντες), which occurs here in the present participle active form thus suggesting the Athenians were continually worshipping without knowledge, that is, in ignorance. Bultmann explains that the verb is

> used with all the nuances of knowledge [and] denote[s] 'being mistaken' or 'in error' as the character of action (cf. 1 Tim. 1:13). Ignorance of self is meant in Heb. 5:2. 'Not recognizing' in 1 Cor. 14:38 means rejection ('not being recognized' by God). Not knowing God is meant in Rom. 10:3, and Christ in 1 Tim. 1:13. This ignorance entails disobedience (Rom. 10:3); hence it is not just pardonable lack of information but a failure to understand that needs forgiveness.[25]

The statement 'if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him' (17:27 NIV) should not be understood as suggesting individuals are able to reach a true knowledge of God unaided by special revelation, for the words 'grope' and 'find' are in the optative mood, that is the mood of strong contingency or possibility.[26] 'It contains no definite anticipation of realization, but merely presents the action as conceivable. Hence it is one step further removed from reality than the subjunctive'.[27] So this statement does not suggest a divine pattern for successfully finding God and salvation apart from special revelation. Rather, it points to the effect of sin causing all to become as those who are blind in their search for God.[28]

According to Paul however, non-Christian religious worship is rebellious. It is evidence of each culture going its own way, autonomously developing its religion without reference to the one true God. [29] If this were not so, the times of ignorance would not have to be overlooked, and Paul's message would

---

[24] Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 632. Cf. G. E. Ladd, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1157; Witherington, *Acts*, 524.

[25] Rudolf Bultmann, 'Ignorance', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged in One Volume* (ed. Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 18. Cf. John Calvin: 'God cannot be worshipped rightly unless he be first known' (*Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, n.d.], 2:157, quoted in Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized,* 26 Cf. Darrell Bock, 'Athenians Who Have Never Heard', in *Through No Fault of Their Own?* (ed. William Crockett and James Sigountos; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 124. Bock writes, 'Ignorance and "God-fearing devotion" in themselves provide no hope that one can enter God's presence outside of Jesus, as the New Testament shows. Devotion to God must be according to knowledge'.

[26] The Greek reads εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὕροιεν.

[27] H. E. Dana and Julius Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 172, quoted in Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 26–27. Cf. Bahnsen, 'The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens', 13. Cf. Marshall, *Acts*, 288.

[28] Larkin suggests the fact that God is 'not very far away' (v. 27) shows that the human lack of success is not a function of how God has set up the search but of an intervening factor: sin. Larkin, 'The Contribution of the Gospels and Acts', 82. Cf. Caragounis, 'Divine Revelation', 227–229; Bahnsen, 'The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens', 13. Bahnsen argues that this groping is not an innocent matter but unrepentant ignorance.

[29] Larkin, 'The Contribution of the Gospels and Acts', 83. Paul's negative attitude toward pagan worship is also shown

not have climaxed in a call to repentance.[30] Further confirmation of Paul's negative assessment of non-Christian religious practices is seen in the description that 'his spirit was provoked within him' (17:16) which 'at the least . . . means that Paul was very irritated by what he saw'.[31]

In conclusion, the texts examined here indicate that the 'times of ignorance' are not to be interpreted as a period during which sin was not punished or as a period when non-biblical religions functioned as instruments of salvation. Rather, all people at all times are culpable for their sin, and worshippers of non-biblical religions are worshipping in ignorance and rebellion.

2.2. Duration of the Times of Ignorance

Having established the *nature* of the times of ignorance, the next matter for consideration is the *duration* of these times, namely, have they ended with the objective act of the Christ-event, or is their end associated with an individual's existential encounter with the gospel? Proponents of the Israel analogy and fulfilment model believe the latter to be the case. For example, Rahner asserts that non-Christian religions are 'overtaken and rendered obsolete by the coming of Christ and by his death and resurrection'. This moment in time, however, 'is arrived at the point at which Christianity in its explicit and ecclesiastical form' becomes 'an effective reality, making its impact and asserting its claims in history in the relevant cultural sphere to which the non-Christian religions concerned belonged'.[32]

> Normally [in Catholic theology] the beginning of the objective obligation of the Christian message for all men—in other words, the abolition of the validity of the Mosaic religion *and* of all other religions—is thought to occur in the apostolic age. Normally, therefore, one regards the time between this beginning and the actual acceptance or the personally guilty refusal of Christianity in a non-Jewish world and history as the span between the already given promulgation of the law and the moment when the one to whom the law refers takes cognizance of it.[33]

Rahner wants to 'leave it . . . an open question (at least in principle) at what exact point in time the absolute obligation of the Christian religion has in fact come into effect for every man and culture'.[34] I shall argue in this section that the times of ignorance have ended objectively, coinciding with the Christ-event.

The place of the events of Acts in the unfolding history of redemption provides the necessary framework for a proper understanding of these times.[35] Luke, in his second volume, recounts the historical origins of the Christian movement, the founding of the Church, and the spread of the gospel. He addresses the universal claims of the gospel and the nature of the Church—a Church for both Jew and

by the meaning of the word 'provoke' in v. 16. Little asserts that its meaning is 'to rouse to wrath' (*The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized*, 25).

[30] Larkin, 'The Contribution of the Gospels and Acts', 83.

[31] Witherington, *Acts*, 512. Cf. Bahnsen, 'The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens', 6.

[32] Karl Rahner, 'Church, Churches and Religions', in *Theological Investigations* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973), 10:47.

[33] Rahner, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', 119. Rahner uses the expression 'law' here to refer to Christianity.

[34] Ibid., 120.

[35] Cf. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 13. Gaffin rightly states that dealing with the biblical writers in terms of their respective places in redemptive history is necessary.

Gentile. He writes concerning the climax of God's redemptive acts in history[36] and has been described as *par excellence* the 'theologian of redemptive history'.[37] Redemptive history is fundamental in Paul, too. While Reformed Pauline studies have rightly placed much emphasis on the doctrine of justification by faith, this emphasis has at times overshadowed the centrality of redemptive-history in Paul. Ridderbos maintains that a redemptive-historical or eschatological orientation governs Paul's theology.[38]

> It is this great redemptive-historical framework within which the whole of Paul's preaching must be understood and all of its subordinate parts receive their place and organically cohere. . . . It is from this principle 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 each other.[39]

Whatever treatment Paul gives to the application of salvation to the individual (the *ordo salutis*) is controlled by his redemptive-historical outlook, that is, how salvation was accomplished (the *historia salutis*).[40]

> The center of Paul's teaching is not found in the doctrine of justification by faith or any other aspect of the *ordo salutis*. Rather, his primary interest is seen to be in the *historia salutis* as that history has reached its eschatological realization in the death and especially the resurrection of Christ.[41]

Michael Horton cautions that separating the *ordo salutis* from the *historia salutis* results in a 'failure to recognize the revolutionary logic of biblical (especially Pauline) eschatology, in which the future is semirealized in the present and the individual is included in a wider eschatological activity'.[42]

---

[36] See, for example, Johnson, *Message of Acts*, "Luke invites us again and again to walk back and forth across the bridge linking Old Covenant promise with New Covenant fulfilment in Christ—to see, compare and discover afresh the manifold wisdom of God in his plan of redemption, glimpsed in many parts and ways in the words of the prophets, but now blazing from the glorious face of the Son' (122).

[37] Bruce, 'Salvation History in the New Testament', 78. Bruce is quoting Lohse, 'Lucas als Theologe der Heilsgeschichte', *EvT* 14 (1954–55): 254. Cf. Helmut Flender, *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (trans. Reginald Fuller and Ilse Fuller; London: SPCK, 1967).

[38] Ridderbos uses the designations redemptive-historical and eschatological interchangeably. Ridderbos states, 'The central motive of justification by faith can be understood in its real pregnant significance only from this redemptive-historical viewpoint' (*Time Fully Come*, 50). Cf. Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus* (trans. David H. Freeman; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1958), 64–65: 'Before everything else, he [Paul] was the proclaimer of a new time, the great turning point in the history of redemption'. Cf. Robert Yarbrough, 'Paul and Salvation History', in *The Paradoxes of Paul*, vol. 2 of *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 297–342.

[39] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 39. Cf. 44, 49, 65, 162, 208, 429–30, 516.

[40] Gaffin (*By Faith*, 18n2) notes that this distinction (*historia salutis—ordo salutis*) appears to originate with Herman Ridderbos, being found first in his *Time Fully Come* (48–49).

[41] Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 13. Gaffin notes the term '*ordo salutis* can have two distinct senses, one more general, the other more elaborated. The latter sense, more detailed and technical, is its usual, more common usage. It has in view the logical and/or causal, or even chronological "order" or sequence of various discrete saving acts and benefits, as these are unfolded in the life of the individual sinner. However, the expression *ordo salutis* may also be used . . . more generally, to the ongoing application of salvation, in distinction from its once-for-all accomplishment'. It is this latter sense that is being used here. Cf. Gaffin, *By Faith*, 18; Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 6. Horton rightly observes that often (even in Reformed theology) the various loci of the *ordo salutis* (calling, regeneration, repentance and faith, justification, sanctification, and glorification) have been separated from the *historia salutis*.

[42] Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 6–7.

However, when the *ordo salutis* is seen in relationship to the *historia salutis*, then 'that which God is doing in the experience of believers will be treated as derivative of that which God is doing in the world, in history'.[43] Paul's redemptive-historical outlook is clear in the Paul of Acts and is more fully expounded in Romans.[44] There are clear parallels between Paul's speeches in Acts 14 and 17 and Rom 3:21–26, and these three texts will be considered in unison in the following discussion.[45]

Paul's speeches in Acts 14 and 17 embrace the ideas of the creation (the past), of God's dominion over the world (the present) and of the judgement (the future).[46] Paul presents the Christ-event as an event of acute temporal decisiveness. Referring to Acts 17, F.F. Bruce rightly observes: 'The claim that the fact of Jesus marks the end of the time of ignorance and the irrevocable declaration of God's will, with the accompanying summons to repentance, is underlined by the framework of universal history in which it is set'.[47] Paul's reference to the 'times of ignorance' was, as Francis Watson states, motivated by the need to assert the radical newness of the present moment.[48] The former times correspond to the ages in which the mystery of Christ has been kept secret, the period before the fullness of time was revealed.[49] But now, the Lordship of Christ is a present reality, extending over the whole world, as Cullmann explains:

> The result of Christ's death and resurrection is that the Lordship over all things is committed to him. The entire creation is affected by this redemptive event. Ever since the ascension Christ sits at the right hand of God, and everything is put under his feet. With this is connected the fact that since reaching this mid-point the world process is drawn into the redemptive history in a decisive manner.[50]

In the cross an eschatological process is taking place. The Kingdom of God becomes manifest in Christ's resurrection which marks the boundary where the two aeons collide. The Eschaton has come and the world has been opened up for the Kingdom of God.[51]

---

[43] Ibid., 7

[44] Bruce, 'Salvation History in the New Testament', 81, 84. Bruce suggests that this is true for his speeches at Pisidian Antioch and Athens. While it is true that the precise focus on Paul in Acts can be differentiated from the precise focus on Paul in Paul's own writings, it is a methodological mistake to set these foci against each other as if they were mutually incompatible.

[45] My use of Rom 3:21–26 is given further weight by the importance it plays in Romans. Luther notes in his Bible margin that it was 'the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible' (quoted in Moo, *Romans*, 218). Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:199. Cranfield notes it is 'the centre and heart of the whole of Romans'.

[46] Conzelman, *The Theology of Saint Luke*, 168. Cf. Bahnsen, 'The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens', 17.

[47] Bruce, 'Salvation history in the New Testament', 81.

[48] Watson, *Text and Truth*, 248.

[49] See §1.1 of this article in *Themelios* 33:2.

[50] Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, 1962), 185. Cf. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967), 163.

[51] Ridderbos, *Time Fully Come*, 17. Cf. idem, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (ed. Raymond O. Zorn; trans. H. de Jongste; St. Catherines: Paideia, 1978), xxviii: 'The coming of the kingdom of God is most certainly to be looked upon as the realization of the great drama of the history of salvation. . . . This realization is not merely a matter of the future, however, it has started. The great change of the aeons has taken place. The center of history is in Christ's coming, in his victory over the demons, in his death and resurrection'. Ridderbos states that the cosmic and historical meaning of the kingdom of heaven must be fully acknowledged (xxiv). The idea of the kingdom of heaven implies the participation of all created life in the coming of the kingdom. The proportions of the kingdom are universal (46).

There is therefore a dichotomy of 'before' and 'after' the Christ-event, and a radical newness to the present age.[52] The 'but now' (τὰ νῦν) of Acts 17:30b balances 'the times' (τοὺς χρόνους) in the first part of the sentence. It is the 'now' that is the subject of the last part of the sentence. All has changed *now* that Christ has come with the full knowledge of God. Through Christ, God has dealt definitively with the problem of sin, but for that very reason, he has laid humanity under a new accountability. The day of the gospel begins with the resurrection, and the time of the old covenant ends here. Now that Christ has come, God calls the unbelieving world into judgment through the One whom he raised from the dead.[53] God 'overlooked' sin during the former times, but this overlooking was possible only because these times were for a period only, a period allocated by God from eternity, to be followed by a course of action which would deal with sin finally and fully through the cross.[54] As Bruce argues,

> God's overlooking people's earlier ignorance of himself is seen to have had in view the full revelation now given in the advent and work of Christ. 'But now' in the present context is parallel to 'but now' in Rom. 3:21. If ignorance of the divine nature was culpable before, it is inexcusable now. [55]

Rom 3:21–26 also testifies to the radical newness of the current age, an age inaugurated when 'this righteousness from God' was made known in Christ. The 'but now' of verse 21 indicates a change of tone from the preceding section (1:18–3:20).[56] This change is both logical and temporal, marking a decisive shift, not just in Paul's argument, but in God's economy. It is logical because of its place in the strategy of Paul's argument, concluding the teaching of the previous section. It is temporal, shifting the emphasis from the old situation of Jews and Gentiles under sin to the new age of salvation inaugurated by Christ. Osborne considers the temporal sense to be most important:

> Paul tells us here that as a result of Christ's sacrificial act a new era, one of salvation, has dawned. As Schreiner says, this indicates 'a salvation-historical shift between the old covenant and the new'. God's 'saving righteousness' has been 'actualized in history'.[57]

The temporal sense is reinforced by the expression 'has been made known' (πεφανέρωται).[58] The perfect tense used here specifies something which began in the past but which is still valid now—that which was made manifest in Christ's redemptive work has ever since remained manifest and

---

[52] Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (2d ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 43.

[53] Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 2:87.

[54] Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, 74. John Calvin points out that Paul gives no explanation for why God allowed the times of ignorance to last so long, but that even during this time ignorance cannot be excused because of the reality of general revelation (*The Acts of the Apostles* [trans. John Fraser; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966], 2:12, 124).

[55] Bruce, *Acts*, 340. Cf. Witherington, *Acts*, 535. 'Both the Paul of his letters . . . and the Paul of this speech (17:31) see the resurrection as a decisive divine demonstration or proof of God's intentions in regard to humankind, and the decisive shift in the ages which turns times of ignorance or sin into the age of accountability'.

[56] Osborne, *Romans*, 92.

[57] Ibid., 92. The reference is to T. R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 180. Cf. Mounce, *Romans*, 114n2. Mounce notes, 'Most contemporary writers take Νυνὶ δὲ as temporal rather than logical and emphasize that it marks the transition to a new stage in salvation history'. Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 221: 'This contrast between two eras in salvation history is one of Paul's most basic conceptions, providing the framework for many of his key ideas'. Cf. D. A. Carson, 'Atonement in Romans 3:21–26', in *The Glory of the Atonement* (ed. Charles Hill and Frank James; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 121: The 'but now' is 'salvation-historical'.

[58] Edwards, *Romans*, 98.

is the means of salvation for all people henceforth.[59] At a given point in history, God intervened to consummate the plan of redemption.[60] The decisive once-for-all redemptive act of God, the revelation both of righteousness and wrath, has taken place. Thus, verse 21 'points to the decisiveness for faith of the gospel events in their objectiveness as events which took place at a particular time in the past and are quite distinct from and independent of the response of men to them'.[61]

This does not mean that God failed to punish sins committed before the Christ-event or that God was unable fully to forgive sins committed by old covenant believers. According to Douglas Moo, 'Paul's meaning is rather that God "postponed" the full penalty due sins in the Old Covenant, allowing sinners to stand before him without their having provided an adequate "satisfaction" of the demands of his holy justice (cf. Heb. 10:4)'.[62]

The reference to passing over former sins (Rom 3:25) refers to sins committed before the Christ-event—not sins committed before a person's individual justification.[63] This is clear from the context, which Paul presents as the *historia salutis* rather than the *ordo salutis.* This is indicated by the reference to the revelation of the *righteousness of God* that is now revealed (v. 26), rather than the righteousness that is given to those who believe. This latter sense cannot be what Paul intends since in Rom 4 he demonstrates that Abraham and all true believers, whether Jew or Gentile, are reckoned righteous by faith. 'If in 3:21 Paul is talking about individual soteriology, there would be no "but now" about it. Justification has always and ever been by faith'.[64] Rather, what is new or 'now' is that God has revealed his righteousness through Christ.

The temporal decisiveness of the Christ-event is given further weight by Paul's assertion that the divine act of righteousness has now been made known 'apart from the law' (v. 21a). In one sense this refers to the fact that righteousness cannot come by keeping the law (3:20 cf. 2:1–3:8), but the primary meaning here is given by the salvation-historical orientation of Paul's argument. That is, it refers to the new era inaugurated by Christ. 'Paul's purpose is to announce the way in which God's righteousness has been manifest rather than to contrast two kinds of righteousness'.[65] This is clear from the developing argument: Paul has already established that the law is powerless to save (Rom 2:12–3:20), and Rom 4 makes clear that justification has always been by faith apart from the law. For the argument to make sense, the reference has to be to the manner in which God's righteousness is manifested, not the manner in which it is received.[66]

---

[59] Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, 70. Cf. Edwards, *Romans*, 98.

[60] Edwards, *Romans*, 98.

[61] Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, 69.

[62] Moo, *Romans*, 240.

[63] A different interpretation is offered by Glenn Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study of Romans 1–4* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 110. Davies suggests it was the sins of the righteous that God formerly passed over, thus enabling the Old Testament saints to enjoy the experience of forgiveness. However, this minority view among commentators seems unlikely given the redemptive-historical framework of Paul's argument here.

[64] Paul J. Leithart, 'Paul on God's Righteousness', available at http://www.leithart.com/archives/print/0000437.php (accessed 19 August 2006).

[65] Moo, *Romans*, 222. Moo notes that this is how most English translations interpret this verse. Cf. Osborne, *Romans*, 93: '*apart from the law* modifies *made known* more than it does *a righteousness from God* and so refers to the process by which it is revealed rather than the way it is received by us'.

[66] Moo, *Romans*, 222f. Cf. Carson, 'Atonement in Romans 3:21–26', 123. Carson states that the reference 'focuses attention not on the *reception* of righteousness . . . but on the disclosure of this righteousness'.

This then indicates that the 'law' (νόμος, v. 21a) is not primarily a set of rules required by God for humans to keep, but a system, that is, a stage in God's unfolding plan. If this is so, then it refers to the Mosaic covenant, a temporary administration established by God for the period leading to its fulfilment in Christ.[67] There is, therefore, a discontinuity between the former times and the present times.[68] However, as Paul proceeds, the emphasis changes from discontinuity to continuity. For while this righteousness comes apart from the law, the 'Law and Prophets bear witness to it' (v. 21b). Paul understands the Old Testament as a whole to anticipate and prepare for this new age of justification and fulfilment.[69]

On the basis of the discussion outlined above, it is clear that the 'times of ignorance' are a period in the *historia salutis* and therefore have ended with the objective, historical, and decisive Christ-event. These times should not therefore be understood in reference to a person's existential encounter with the gospel or to any other time after the Christ-event. If one does not accept the definite turning point of the Christ-event, it leads to speculative and rather arbitrary predictions of when the 'times of ignorance' might have ended. The focus of many commentators on when these times might have ended is due in part, I suggest, to a misunderstanding of the nature of the times of ignorance and the nature of saving faith. Many consider saving faith to have changed between the Old Testament and New Testament eras, and this leads them to speculate how this change affects the existential circumstances of individuals. I maintain that the nature of saving faith has always and everywhere been essentially constant, that is, trust in the covenant-making God made possible by his special revelation. This revelation is Christocentric, and consequently saving faith has always been Christ-focussed and has not changed at any point in terms of its object and essential characteristics.[70]

Scripture gives no grounds for suggesting that saving faith has changed or for suggesting that a believer who lived during the 'times of ignorance' will no longer be saved after the Christ-event for failing to respond to the 'new content' of saving faith. But this is exactly what is discussed by some theologians.[71] For Pinnock, the times of ignorance end only when an individual receives the gospel.[72] Similarly, Tiessen argues that Acts 17:30–31 indicates that there is an ignorance that is not culpable, but that when the gospel is preached and the Spirit illumines the hearers, the ignorance is dispelled and God's overlooking is therefore no longer appropriate.[73] Tiessen concurs with Howard Marshall, who writes,

> Until the coming of the revelation of God's true nature in Christianity, men lived in ignorance of him. But now the proclamation of the Christian message brings this time to an end *so far as those who hear the gospel are concerned;* they no longer have an excuse for their ignorance. God was prepared to overlook their ignorance, but now he will do so no longer.[74]

---

[67] Moo, *Romans*, 223 Cf. Carson, 'Atonement in Romans 3:21–26', 121, 123.

[68] Carson, 'Atonement in Romans 3:21–26', 123: 'There is a dramatic shift in salvation-history'.

[69] Moo, *Romans*, 223. Moo comments that the 'law and prophets' denotes the entire Old Testament. Cf. Osborne, *Romans*, 93.

[70] That is not to say that all believers at all times have known and understood the same details.

[71] See below.

[72] Pinnock, *Wideness*, 101.

[73] Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 129. Cf. 178–79.

[74] Ibid., 133, quoting Marshall, *Acts*, 289–90 (emphasis in original).

For Tiessen, the 'critical question' is this:

> When (if ever) does salvation cease to be possible for Jews with an Old Testament faith and for God-fearing Gentiles who do not know of Jesus? Ronald Nash suggests 'that whole first century community of Believers in Yahweh was a kind of transition generation'. But why must the transition be limited to one generation? Why may it not extend throughout this age to all who remain ignorant of Jesus and of his identity and work? Why might people today who have the faith of an old covenant believer or of a Gentile god-fearer be saved today, just as they were then?[75]

> Ecclesiocentrists face a particularly sticky problem in regard to Jews at the time of Jesus who had the faith of Abraham or in regard to Gentile God-fearers who did not know about Jesus. Did such people *lose* their salvation? And, if so, at what point—at the moment of Christ's resurrection, at the ascension or at Pentecost? . . . Some theologians might cover such people under a 'grandfather clause', but this is problematic within the principles of Ecclesiocentrism.[76]

Likewise, John Sanders claims,

> A major problem for this understanding of faith [that knowledge of Jesus Christ is necessary] is the salvation of those who lived before and just after Jesus. Those who take a restrictive approach generally allow for the salvation of those who lived before Jesus but claim that since the time of Jesus one has to know about him in order to be saved. God-fearing Jews and Gentiles who died ten minutes after Jesus died but who had no knowledge of that fact or no understanding of its atoning value are thus left in a most pitiful position—damned to hell for not living long enough for Christian theology to be developed! But if we concede that such people are exceptions, then why aren't the rest of the unevangelized exceptions as well?[77]

---

[75] Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 178. The reference is to Ronald H. Nash, 'Restrictivism', in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (ed. John Sanders; Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 122.

[76] Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 199. Ecclesiocentrism is characterized by the belief that in the Christian dispensation only those who hear the gospel (at least in the case of competent adults) can be saved. Thus, the possibility of salvation is coextensive with the presence of the Church. See Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 32–33.

[77] John Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 37n18. Sanders highlights here the particular problems that the dispensational system presents for the situation of those living at a time of transition between different dispensations. 'When do the new requirements of the "specific content of salvation" take effect? For instance when did the requirement for belief in Jesus become obligatory? At the resurrection? At the ascension? . . . If a "grace period" is granted to people who are a dispensation behind (in terms of hearing), then why not a grace period for those unevangelized, who may be five or six dispensations behind?' Sanders is right to identify this as a problem.

Clark Pinnock writes favourably regarding dispensationalism with its emphasis on the difference between the nature of saving faith in the different dispensations: 'Charles Ryrie spoke of a dispensation where God accepted pagans like Job on the basis of faith but without knowledge of either Moses or Christ. I felt this was biblical and found it appealing. I remember thinking how helpful it would be if this arrangement were still true for today for people in the same situation. I keep hoping dispensational theology will progress in this direction too and that a dispensational inclusivist will come forward to help people burdened by restrictivism'. Pinnock continues, however, 'It hasn't happened yet, and I'm not holding my breath' ('An Inclusivist View', 108).

The dispensational theologian Ramesh P. Richard has provided a useful critique of inclusivism, showing that even *if* the nature of saving faith in Old Testament and New Testament times differed (with Old Testament believers not confessing Christ), this no longer holds true now that Christ has come (*The Population of Heaven* [Chicago: Moody, 1994]). Dispensational inclusivists attempt to resolve the problem by proposing "transdispensationalizing"—treating people in a particular dispensation as though they live in another dispensation, in terms of the requirement of salvation. Tony Evans uses

These accounts demonstrate the problem that results if it is argued that saving faith is substantially different before and after Christ. Tiessen proposes an analogy between old covenant believers and Jews today who do not know Jesus is their Messiah: they are 'in the same position as were their forebears who lived prior to Messiah's coming'.[78] Tiessen makes this proposal support his thesis that knowledge of Christ is unnecessary for salvation. On the contrary, I suggest that his proposal is broadly right, but should be understood as supporting my position that saving faith has not changed. A believing Jew living at the time of Christ would have faith in the Messiah (anticipated). If such a Jew died before hearing of the advent of the Messiah, then there is no reason to suggest they would be denied saving faith now that greater information (which they have not received) about the Messiah is available. In theory then, it is possible to be saved 'by old covenant anticipation' after the Christ-event, if that anticipation is according to special covenantal revelation. With regard to the Gentile 'God-fearers' that Tiessen and Sanders refer to, I maintain that these too, were only ever saved by contact with and response to special covenantal revelation.[79]

D. A. Carson responds to the suggestion that the times of ignorance end only when an individual hears the gospel by declaring:

> This is an astonishing inference. It would mean that the Athenians were better off before they heard Paul's preaching about Jesus: they were nicely spared any blame because they were ignorant, but now, poor chaps, for the first time they are held accountable.[80]

While Carson is right to highlight the error of the individual-existential interpretation of the ending of the times of ignorance, his response is itself rather misleading.[81] He presents a hypothetical scenario (that people would be better off not hearing the gospel), which given his wider Reformed theological convictions he does not consider valid, for he maintains that all people everywhere are culpable, and he accepts therefore that no one will be saved through their ignorance. Therefore, although the 'times of ignorance' should not be confused with an individual's personal knowledge or ignorance, Scripture does seem to suggest that judgement is according to the revelation one receives (see §2.1). Indeed, Jesus speaks of greater judgement on those to whom more has been revealed (Matt 11:20–24; John 9:39–41; 15:22).

John Frame contends, 'There is some indication in Scripture that greater knowledge can be an aggravating circumstance (Luke 12:47–48). From whom much is given, much is required'.[82] This

this concept in *Totally Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 2004). This problem is overcome for covenantal theologians, for saving faith has been constant in its essential nature at all times.

[78] Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 168.

[79] For an insightful critique of the concept of 'Pagan Saints', see Strange, *Salvation Among the Unevangelized*, 163–88.

[80] D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 310. Likewise, Darrell Bock suggests that if the times of ignorance end with the hearing of the gospel then 'at Mars Hill Paul puts nonhearers at risk. In their ignorance they had a chance, but now that he has told them about Jesus they must respond or be destroyed. We are driven to the absurd conclusion that Paul should never have mentioned Jesus, because as "nonhearers" they had a chance!' Bock, 'Athenians Who Have Never Heard', 122.

[81] Carson and Bock possibly intend their statements to be understood rhetorically. Nevertheless, my assertion that they are misleading is warranted.

[82] Email from John Frame, 'Does the BC Condition still exist today?' 22 August 2006.

indicates, suggests Frame, that it would better not to hear of Christ than to hear of him and reject him. Matt 26:24 and 2 Pet 2:21 say this in specific contexts.[83]

Piper defends the assertion that the times of ignorance have ended with the Christ event by stating:

> But 'now'—a key word in the turning of God's historic work of redemption—something new has happened. The Son of God has appeared. He has revealed the Father. He has atoned for sin. He has risen from the dead. His authority as universal Judge is vindicated. And the message of His saving work is to be spread to all peoples. This turn in redemptive history is for the glory of Jesus Christ. Its aim is to put Him at the center of all God's saving work. And therefore it accords with this purpose that henceforth Christ be the sole and necessary focus of saving faith.[84]

William Larkin makes a similar statement:

> Formerly humankind lived in a sinful ignorance that God in his mercy passed over. Now, after sin has been judged in Jesus' death and resurrection, comes the 'day of salvation' in a gospel proclaimed in his name, calling for repentance and promising forgiveness. Today there is no room in God's economy, as Paul preaches it, for so-called B.C. Christians—persons saved without knowledge of Christ and his saving work.[85]

While I concur with both Piper and Larkin that the times of ignorance have ended with the Christ-event, these quotes give the unhelpful impression that saving faith has changed. On the contrary I maintain that Christ has always been the 'sole and necessary focus of saving faith'[86] and there has never 'been room in God's economy for so-called B.C. Christians'. The intervention of God to inaugurate a new era means that all who respond in faith—not only after the cross, but as Rom 4 shows, before it also—will be transferred into the new era from the old era.[87]

3. Summary

Christ is the midpoint of salvation-history. The Christ-event constitutes the centre of salvation-history and is of universal and decisive significance. It marks a radical turn in salvation-history, a crisis point, rendering the B.C. period complete and fulfilled. It ushers in the new eschatological age and forms a dividing line between 'B.C.' and 'A.D.' A new situation has been created objectively in history independent of the circumstances of individuals. The effect of the atonement cannot be limited to one strand of subsequent history, namely, that which is coextensive with the Church or knowledge of the gospel. Therefore it is impossible to exist in a 'B.C. condition' this side of the cross.

---

[83] Ibid.

[84] John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 134–35. While I agree with the general thrust of Piper's statement, it unhelpfully infers that salvation was different before Christ. However, Piper makes it clear elsewhere that this is not what he means to suggest. He notes that there is continuity between God's path to salvation in the OT and NT and that before Christ people were not saved apart from special revelation. General revelation was not effective in producing faith before Christ but ineffective after Christ (164n23).

[85] William Larkin, *Acts*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 259–60.

[86] I do accept however, that New Testament believers have greater knowledge of Christ than Old Testament believers.

[87] Moo, *Romans*, 221.

The 'times of ignorance' are a period in salvation-history and not a period before an individual's existential encounter with the gospel. They are a category in the *historia salutis*—not the *ordo salutis.* The 'times of ignorance' must not be confused with an individual's personal knowledge (or lack of it). To do so conflates ontology and epistemology. Maintaining the existence of a pre-messianic condition fails to recognise the epochal nature of the unfolding redemptive history and represents a form of under-realised eschatology. The first coming of Christ is an eschatological event around which the culmination of history centres. It is a breaking in of the future events of the day of the Lord which has yet to come. It has now been revealed that God's final wrath against sin which is to come at the end of history has been poured out upon Christ in the middle of history. It is therefore an event that allows no practical reality of any pre-cross paradigm continuing or of an alternative track being presently employed. The question of when the times of ignorance end is the question of whether the history of salvation or individual application of salvation is the ultimate governor. *Historia salutis* always underlies *ordo salutis* and never the reverse. The final and once-for-all saving act of Christ is more ultimate with its attendant historical transition than an individual's personal experience and appropriation of the benefits of this.

The Israel analogy relies on a correspondence between the chronologically pre-messianic and the epistemologically pre-messianic and in so doing requires the 'B.C. condition' to continue today. There is no sense in which the 'B.C. condition' can exist after the cross, and therefore, the Israel analogy and fulfilment model with its reliance on a present continuation of a pre-messianic paradigm is substantially weakened.

