



EFFECTIVE CAPITOL EVANGELISM: AN IDEOLOGICAL BASIS

TO: LEGISLATORS

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Last week in our study of the Holy Spirit we emphasized the role He plays in evangelism: How God the Holy Spirit moves on the hearts of individuals and brings them to repentance and faith in Christ. This is a sobering realization because men and women who are “dead in their trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) who reject the Author of Scripture, cannot be expected to obey the precepts of His Book. This is basic stuff: For folks in the Capitol to live and legislate biblically they first need to be “made alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5).

Simultaneous to Scripture teaching us that the Holy Spirit leads people to salvation (Titus 3:5), believers are called to be His ambassadors for this purpose: We are called to reconcile people to God in the Capitol (2Corinthians 5:20). This is our highest calling; no believing legislator or staff member can take it lightly. The question then quickly follows, “What’s a biblical/ideological basis for effective evangelism in the Capitol?” Given the status of our nation isn’t that the most important task we need achieve?

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**WEEKLY MEMBERS BIBLE STUDY**

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE CONCLUSION OF FIRST-VOTES-BACK (MONDAY OR TUESDAY NIGHT)  
Capitol Room H324 • Dinner served, Spouses Welcome

**WEEKLY SENIOR STAFF BIBLE STUDY**

10:00 AM ON DAY OF FIRST-VOTES-BACK (MONDAY OR TUESDAY)  
Longworth Office Building Room 1539 • Coffee and pastry served

**WEEKLY STAFF AND INTERN BIBLE STUDY**

11:30 AM ON DAY OF FIRST-VOTES-BACK (MONDAY OR TUESDAY)  
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**EFFECTIVE CAPITOL EVANGELISM: AN IDEOLOGICAL BASIS****I. INTRODUCTION**

In Acts chapter 17 Dr. Luke records the Apostle Paul's sermon designed to communicate the biblical composite of kerygmatic (*Kerygma*: The original Christian gospel preached by the apostles) truth to the Athenians and ostensibly the Greek philosophers of the past and present. This sermon is profoundly important because it provides an exemplar and thesis for building one's foundational understanding as to how to properly in a biblical sense, defend (1 Pet 3:15) and proclaim (Col 1:28) the Christian faith to the non-believer.

**VIA AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF ITS  
CONTENTS, THIS SERMON YIELDS  
DEFINITIVE GUIDELINES RELATIVE TO  
HOW ONE OUGHT TO COMMUNICATE THE  
GOSPEL TO THE UNREGENERATE TODAY**

It is my conviction that the sermon utilizes a presuppositional apologetical (*Apologia*: To give a defense) approach to evangelizing those who are "dead in their trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). That is to say this: It presupposes the authority of the Scriptures relative to its epistemology (Epistemology: The study of the method and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity) for *all* argumentation versus an evidentialist approach. The Evidential approach to biblical apologetics attempts to reason with the audience based on the listener's preconceived notions of truth and beliefs which they may hold to at the time.

If the former is the technique utilized by Paul, then it follows that believers today should use the Scriptures only in a like manner—as their starting point and final authority in all reasoning/apologetical/evangelistic endeavors. The case for Paul's sermon in Acts chapter 17 presupposing preeminent biblical authority in his evangelistic presentation is supported by the following six headings of this exposition of the passage. Stay with me my beloved friends ☺!

**II. THE ANALOGY OF SCRIPTURE**

The basic principle of the analogy of Scripture—one of the fundamental precepts of the grammatical, historical, normative approach to properly interpreting Scripture (see earlier studies on Hermeneutics)—necessitates that the Bible not contradict itself. In other words if God is veracious and immutable in character, and if "All Scripture is God-breathed (*theopneustos*)" (2 Tim 3:16) then it follows that God's Book would not and does not internally oppose itself. All sixty-six books of the Bible, if inspired by God contain an independent and interdependent integrity; such is the underlying basis of this inviolate hermeneutical principle. More specifically in relation to this study, Paul states in Romans chapter one that men "know" of God, and that God is "evident within them." Nonetheless they "suppress" this knowledge in their rebellion against Him due to their sin nature (Rom. 1:18-20; John 3:19 resp.).

Given the aforementioned hermeneutical principle, it follows that Paul's sermons in historical, chronological sections of the Bible (such as here in the Book of Acts) would and do not in any way contradict that which Paul penned through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in theological sections of the Bible such as the book of Romans. Rather, narrative portions of Scripture serve to illustrate theological portions. In fact, it is difficult to think of Paul possessing integrity or believability if what he states in one place is not utilized principally and specifically in his recorded sermons elsewhere.

**ALL THAT SAID, ONE NEED UTILIZE THE  
ANALOGY OF SCRIPTURE WHEN  
DECIPHERING THE AUTHORIAL INTENT  
OF PAUL'S ACTS 17 SERMON**

What Paul means by his use of words in Acts 17 should be analogous to his similar use of words elsewhere. All authors should be deemed innocent of self-contradiction unless empirical demonstrable evidence exists to the contrary. This principle should be utilized to understand Acts 17:22-23

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where Paul states that the Athenians are both “religious” as well as “ignorant.” The language and parallelism is similar both in content and meaning to Romans 1:18-19 where (as previously mentioned) he states: Men “know” of God (that is they are religious) but that they “suppress” this knowledge (that is they are culpably ignorant). In passages of parallel meaning interpretive rules necessitate that the easier-to-understand passage help aid the clarification of the harder-to-understand passage, so as to synthesize, not contradict.

**WE SHOULD ALWAYS GIVE PEOPLE AND AUTHORS THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT**

Therefore Paul’s sermon in Acts 17 *must* be interpreted in the context of his teachings in Romans 1:16-22 (as well as 1 Corinthians 1:17-25). The author should be given any benefit of doubt—versus the alternative of effacing his literary and nuclear integrity. All that to say Acts 17 should be prejudged by other Pauline writings. One need assume his integrity of thought and belief from one book to another.

Acts 17 therefore needs to be interpreted with the predisposition of presuppositionalism as taught by Paul in Romans. One commentator on this sermon has aptly summarized, “its doctrine is a reworking of thought in Romans transformed into missionary impulse.” (Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 238).

**III. THE IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE**

In the earlier geographic settings of the Acts of the Apostles, specifically Paul in chapter 17, one finds him in Thessalonica and Berea respectively. It is noteworthy that in each of these two locations immediately prior to his arrival in Athens, that Paul singularly utilized the Scriptures to present the gospel (as he did throughout Scripture). Notice Acts 17:2, relative to his proclamation in Thessalonica, “And according to Paul’s *custom*, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with

them *from the Scriptures*” (emphasis mine). This passage indicates that “reasoning...from the Scriptures” was not something Paul just happened to decide to do in this one instance. Rather, it was “according to Paul’s *custom*.” The word Luke uses here for **custom** *etho* meant “to be accustomed to, or to be a part of.” The Greek word is used elsewhere to describe Jesus’ habit of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath to read (Luke 4:16), or elsewhere it is used relative to his habit of teaching His followers (Mark 10:1). What are your spiritual customs? To the point here, Paul’s habit, wrought from conviction, was to always reason from the Scriptures.

Later in Acts 17 Paul is brought to Berea where it is said of the Jews that from Paul, “*they received the word* with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (verse 11). This passage implicitly indicates that Paul once again spoke from the Scriptures as the basis for his declarations. It was not said of the Bereans that “they received Paul’s philosophy” or “they received his thoughts.” No.

Upon arrival in Athens from Berea, Paul was on somewhat of a missionary furlough as he waited for Silas and Timothy to catch up and to come and join him (v.15, 16). During this time he was provoked by all of the idolatry in the city. His response was to “preach Jesus and the resurrection” (v. 18). Likened to Peter’s sermon on the same subject in Acts 2, Paul undoubtedly spoke not about Christianity’s relation to Greek philosophy but about Christ’s victory over death and sin (cf. Acts 15:36; 16:17, 31, 32). This is an important insight.

Nowhere in these passages prior to the Athenian sermon is there even a trace of evidence to indicate or support the idea that Paul sought a relationship and/or a quasi-acceptance to or of the presuppositions of his listeners in order to relate with them and reason from that point forward, toward the way of Christ. One must be quick to add that his forthright, heralding demeanor was nonetheless loving in its tone, not akin to a “noisy



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gong or a clanging cymbal” (cf. 1Cor. 13:1) as is often the case with immature believers seeking to defend the faith. It is important to surface these contextual distinctions prior to interpreting the sermon—which at first reading may seem unclear given the English translation of his words.

#### IV. PAUL’S INTRODUCTORY WORDS

Athens was the cultural center of the Greek world. It was home to the historical purveyors of Greek philosophy including Socrates, Aristotle and Plato.

##### LIKENED TO WASHINGTON DC TODAY, ATHENS WAS THE DOMINANT IDEOLOGICAL CENTER OF THE WORLD

The Acts passage represents a confrontation between Christian doctrine and Greek philosophy, as argued by the formers’ greatest spokesmen ever. In essence the setting is similar to a presidential party debate, or two arch-rivals in the sports world going at it in the final game. Herein the stage is set for a clash of titans.

It is therefore important to identify if or not Paul utilized Greek thought as a launching point of common knowledge or some other devices to segue into presenting the gospel? *In particular and by way of application, how the believer is to approach philosophical paradigm clashes today will be modeled for all future ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).*

Acts 17:22 is the start of the sermon. After being hauled before the Council of the Areopagus (those who “controlled” Greek Philosophy) Paul begins:

***Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.***

At first glance Paul’s opening remarks could be understood as his attempt to reach for common ground with his audience, as in making bridge-building statements and acknowledging the worthiness of some of their beliefs. But on closer investigation this is not the case at all. Why? The Greek word for **very religious** *deisidaimonia* can also be interpreted as “somewhat superstitious.” Rather than this being an attempt to achieve camaraderie, it was the beginning of a mild indictment of their suppression of what they already knew. This understanding of *deisidaimonia* seems the most likely intent of Paul because of the adjoining tone later in the passage; he goes on to say that they worship an **“unknown god...in ignorance.”** Practically speaking, these last two words when taken together are hardly endearing when used at any time in any conversation at any point in history. Calling someone superstitious is not exactly amiable.

To further add to the argument, Paul is immediately emphasizing that the Greeks attested to some sort of theism as evidenced by their inscriptions on an altar, **“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”** Yet that which they sense a presence of, Paul says they choose to **ignore**. In light of Romans 1:18-20 is not the meaning here one of blameworthiness, a culpability? Notice how Paul uses the same word in Ephesians 4:18:

***Being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.***

In both passages **ignorance** *agnoia* does not refer to an intellectual deficiency, but rather one of culpability as Paul summarizes the Gentile mindset. To illustrate this important distinction, it is akin to a highway patrolman stopping someone on the highway and asking, “Did you know you were speeding?” To honestly not know you were speeding (i.e. if your speedometer was broken) would indicate ignorance based on intellectual deficiency. But to actually know deep down in your heart that you were speeding and then



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communicate supposed **ignorance** is a totally different matter. Therein is culpable (Culpable: “To merit condemnation or censure”) **ignorance**. To say to the patrolman, “The fact that I was speeding was **unknown** to me” is the kind of **ignorance** that Paul is stating the Athenians possessed: A blameworthy ignorance; they were covering up what their hearts attested to being true in their suppression of truth. If this is the meaning of what is being said, then from the very outset of his herald Paul’s word choice reveals that....

**THE APOSTLE HAD WON THE COIN TOSS,  
HAD ELECTED TO RECEIVE  
AND WAS GOING ON THE OFFENSE**

Ernest Best, who has conducted intensive word studies on most every Greek word used by Paul in Ephesians, states in his *International Critical Commentary, Ephesians*, “**Ignorance** seems to have a unique place over against knowledge of God...**ignorance**, sin and unbelief are closely linked [by the author of Ephesians].” Best goes on to say, “[the interpretation of **ignorance**] expresses the same thought in another way as hardening of the heart.” (p. 420). Again if this is the meaning of **ignorance** then his order of delivery is hardly an appealing style if Paul’s goal was to achieve audience receptivity. Herein is boldness on steroids!

When Paul quoted back to them their inscription, **“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD”** he had already diagnosed the condition of their heart per his related teachings in Romans chapter one. At the risk of belaboring the point, Paul’s keen spiritual maturity afforded him the discernment to ascertain that what they had posted amounted to nothing more than a lie. Herein illustrated is the heart condition of man throughout the ages: A suppressor of inherent truth about God. Such placard statements to wise ambassadors serve to illustrate hardened hearts.

Acts 17:22-23 therefore parallels Romans 1:19-20:

***Because that which is known about God is evident within them, for God made it evident to them...so that they are without excuse.***

The beginning of this sermon is crucial and revelatory for evangelism today in our United States Capitol. It displays no evidentiary apologetical attempts devoid of Scripture, nor does it emulate human reasoning. Paul’s sermon sorely lacks secular empirical arguments intended to provide a basis for belief in Christ. Stated metaphorically:

**ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL IN THIS SERMON  
IS THE FACT THAT  
ATHENS HAS NOTHING TO OFFER  
JERUSALEM**

Accordingly, immediately modeled and illustrated by Paul is a quick “pulling out of the rug” on Greek philosophy and epistemology—all within the introduction of the sermon! Stunningly and in contrast to most evangelistic presentations of today, within moments of beginning his address, Paul has stated to his audience, (my amplification):

**Therefore what you worship in culpable ignorance and from a hardened heart, this I authoritatively proclaim to you...**

Rather than build up slowly from some supposed common foundations between Greek philosophy and Christianity, Paul launches with pointed words that uncover the listener’s philosophical and theological impotence. Here then is an immediate argument for the gospel ending with a call to repentance supported singularly by and reasoned from Scripture.

Lastly as it relates to the first two verses when Paul states, **this I proclaim to you** the word **proclaim** *kataggello* is the same used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to the solemn authoritative proclamation of the gospel based on Scripture (e.g. Acts 3:18; 1Cor. 9:14; Gal. 1:11-12). All within these first verses Paul has set forth an epistemological antithesis between ignorant,



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autonomous and independent Greek philosophy and a God-given authoritative revelation of redemption in Scripture.

### How Is It That Paul Or We Could Ever Be So Bold?

Paul knew that it is God who chooses those who would follow Christ. His preaching style and content can only be explained by understanding his resolved convictions relative to the truths of Ephesians 1: 4 & 5:

*Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.*

In other words Paul knew that “the sheep [would] hear His voice and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3). He knew what Jesus had said to the disciples, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you...” (John 15:16). Accordingly what the truly called out-ones in the audience of the Athenians were listening for—as is every man and woman who wants to come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ today—was the proclamation of the Word of God (cf. John 1:1; Acts 17:34). Our approach to and use of the Word of God, biblical apologetics and evangelism should be no different than Paul’s big day in Athens. When the predestined hear the Shepherd’s voice via the proclamation of the Word through one of His ambassadors they will respond in like repentance and faith. And no matter what we may think, God’s Word plainly states that He is the sole determiner of who and how many will come to Him (lest we discount His sovereignty). Therefore Paul did not have to concern himself so much with winning favor with the Athenians as if those “receiving Christ” at the end of his sermon be fewer. Paul was not concerned about being popular. Note his words in this regard in the book of Galatians:

*For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ (1:10).*

We need think this through: Is popularity my real god? Or am I an obedient bond-servant of Christ?

### V. PAUL’S USE OF GENERAL REVELATION

Continuing in the same order of argumentation as revealed in Romans 1:18-20, Paul now connects (Acts 17:24-28a) the internal testimony of the conscience to the external testimony of general revelation:

*The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist,*

Paul is further substantiating to the Athenians that all of mankind if they are living in denial of Christ, are without excuse. Scripturally speaking, it is not as if people just don’t know of God’s existence, to the contrary **He is not far from each one of us**. The Scripture is clear that ignorance is never an option. God has made Himself known to everyone through *conscience* and *creation*. If one responds to the general revelation God has granted them, God will respond by increasing the revelation of Himself.

**HEREIN THEN IS THE ANSWER TO THE OFTEN-POSED QUESTION, “WHAT ABOUT THE HEATHEN IN AFRICA?”**

Both conscience and general revelation attest to the fact of God’s *knowableness*. Paul’s appeal to general revelation in this passage serves his purposes well:



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To further nail down his case for culpability. It's not as if God is **far from each one of us** and hard to know! Conversely to the unbiased heart, general revelation, if not masked, creates a desire to **seek God**. Bahnsen summarizes this issue well, "[Man] is responsible because he possesses the truth, but he is guilty for what he does to the truth." (Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 259). The fact that God has revealed Himself through both internal (the conscience) and external (the creation) mediums, signifies that people can **find Him**. Conversely the Greeks—and people today in the Capitol—suppress that which they know to be true, attempting to divert and dilute the witness of conscience and creation by worshipping idols of their own creation, i.e. things that  **dwell in temples made with hands**. This is not only pithy metaphoric language for today, but geographically sobering when delivered: From the Areopagus one is directly below the Parthenon the home of the mythological Greek goddess Athena; Paul undoubtedly motioned with his hand to illustrate the point he was preaching.

In summary of this section Paul has candidly and in a straightforward indictment refuted the Greeks and their man-made gods. He has mortified and rebuked their ideas about theism.

## **VI. PAUL'S USE OF SECULAR PHILOSOPHERS**

Further on into the body of Paul's sermon are quotations from two secular sources in verses 27b-30a:

*...as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 'Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.' Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance...*

Why does Paul use these secular sources? Does this not negate the earlier premises of this study? This is not an incorporation of the common ground of Greek philosophy. The reason they are included is because as secular sources they contradict that the Greek gods  **dwell in temples made with human hands**. These two sources that he quotes are the Cretan poets Epimendes and Aratus. They both serve Paul's purposes of emblematically illustrating the Greek's willful **ignorance** or as stated in Romans, **suppression** of seeking and finding God. The poets themselves are people who know about God, but because of a lack of repentance, in their unrighteousness they are hindered in their quest for Him. Stonehouse makes this point in his book, *Paul Before The Areopagus*, "...the pagan poets in the very act of suppressing and perverting the truth presupposed a measure of awareness of it" (p. 30). And so they serve two purposes for Paul: Illustrating incongruous Greek thinking and the ability to suppress.

Paul's importation of these quotes is meant to illustrate that "that which is known about God is evident within them" (Romans 1:19) and that, "For even though they knew [about] God, [through their conscience and general revelation] they did not honor Him as God" (Romans 1:21).

This understanding of this portion of his sermon is supported by the fact that in verse 30, Paul returns to his earlier thought about blameworthy **ignorance**. In essence then, sandwiched in-between the bookends bespeaking of culpable ignorance are these utilitarian quotes of poets who serve to illustrate the point of Paul's argument.

The contrary idea, that Paul would quote two sources who represent by their lack of conversion "the wisdom of the world" in the middle of his sermon in order to help validate his thesis does not comport with his statements in 1 Corinthians 1:20, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" and 1 Corinthians 3:19, "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God." Be sure of this: Paul is not commending Stoic doctrines or



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utilizing pagan ideas to round out his sermon with worldly verbosity and secular acceptability. To do so would contradict his theology elsewhere. Therefore this portion of the sermon cannot be taken as acquiescence or an attempt to identify with a pagan audience—as many a commentator has interpreted their inclusion to mean.

### VII. PAUL'S CLOSING CALL TO REPENTANCE AND WARNING OF JUDGMENT

The last section of Paul's address is a call to repentance and a warning of coming judgment.

*Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (17:30-31).*

Wow! What a haymaker! Conclusively, this section is anything but an attempt to find common ground with the Greek philosophers. Herein is the apex of antithesis to secular thinking—both then and now! Herein is a bold call for sinners to abandon their false ideologies which have not basis and are contradictory, and immediately **repent** and turn to the risen Christ! “Paul wanted the philosophers to not simply refine their thinking a bit further and add some missing information to it; but rather to abandon their presuppositions and have a complete change of mind, submitting to the clear and authoritative revelation of God” (Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 268). The proclamation of this sermon meant both then and now that one need live responsibly without the covering of supposed ignorance. A failure to **repent** equates to a prolongation of epistemological autonomy and an arrogant clinging on to self-centered pride wherein one is the final arbitrator in the pursuit of all things. It is this kind of person who will undergo the

**judgment** of God. How many people do you know—or perhaps this describes you—who “create God in their own image,” who believe they are “the final arbitrator of all faith and practice” who make “god with their human hands?” These are those who need to repent and come to Christ lest they face the **judge of the world**.

### VIII. SUMMARY

These six facets of Paul's Acts 17 sermon represent parallel thoughts to his theological thesis of Romans 1:18-20. The fact that this is a vivid portrayal and presentation of presuppositional apologetics is evidenced by (1) The Analogy of Scripture, (2) The Immediately Preceding Context of the Passage, (3) Paul's Introductory Words, (4) Paul's Use of General Revelation, (5) Paul's Quotation of Secular Philosophers, and (6) Paul's Closing Call to Repentance and Warning of Judgment.

In his book, *The Justification of Knowledge* Robert Reymond summarizes best the ministry philosophy of Paul depicted by this sermon:

**Only** a cursory reading of Acts will disclose that Peter, Stephen, Philip and Paul, in their missionary sermons to the nations, never urge lost men to do anything other than to repent of sin and bow in faith before God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ for men's salvation. They never imply in their argumentation that their hearers may legitimately question the existence of the Christian God, the truth of Scripture, or the historicity of the death and resurrection of Christ prior to personal commitment. Never do they by their appeal to “evidence”...imply that such “evidence” vindicates their message...Repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ can be the sinner's only proper response to the whole apostolic witness. (p 38).

Conclusive of this study of the Acts 17 sermon is the formula for defending the faith and evangelizing the lost: The use of the Scriptures, and one's ability to reason based on Scriptural truth, need be one's final and only authority.