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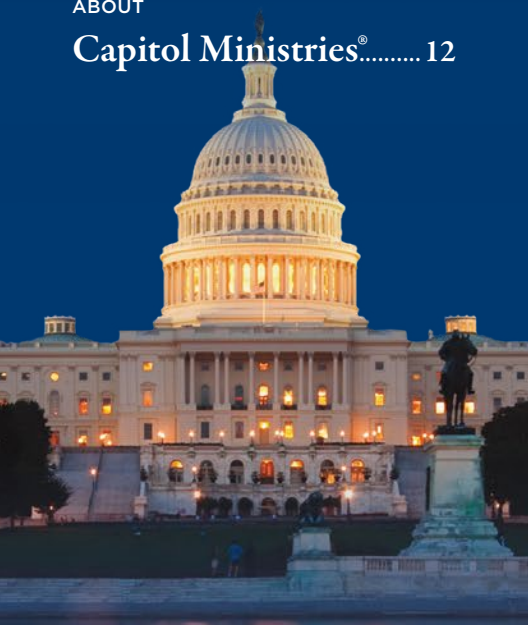
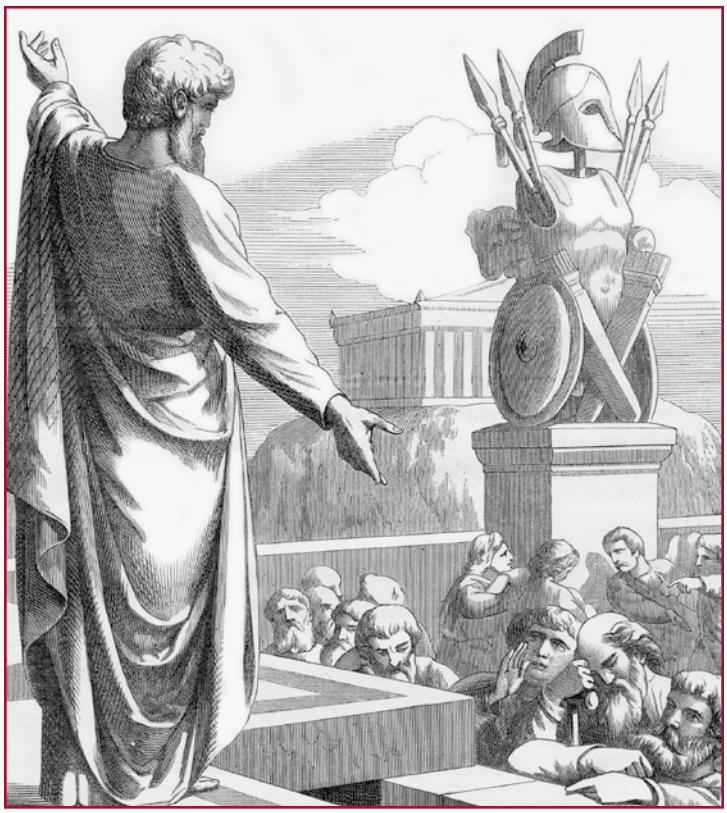


Should You Argue from the Bible in a Secular Capitol?



The apostle Paul preaching in Athens

Over the years, I have spent a considerable amount of time studying apologetical systems and evangelistic approaches in relation to political leaders. Should a Christian leader avoid using the Scriptures as his or her authority if others do not view it as authoritative? In a broader scope, above and beyond evangelism, should the believer argue from the Bible relative to policy matters in an increasingly secular Capitol?

What follows is a study on Paul's approach to persuasion when speaking to a secular audience, as recorded in the book of Acts. Studying this passage will allow us to focus

Continued next page

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"Without a doubt, the Members Bible Study is one of the most important hours of my week. Hearing the Word and spending time with other believers is a wonderful way to center my day and professional walk on Christ."

— SONNY PERDUE

intently on this subject—and I should add up front, what we will learn there is consistent with other passages and what they teach about this subject throughout the whole of Scripture.

Keep in mind too that Paul's practice pertaining to this question led to at least one political leader's coming to Christ (Acts 17:34).

Read on, my friend!

Ralph Drollinger

I. INTRODUCTION

In the book of Acts, chapter 17:22–31, Doctor Luke records one of the Apostle Paul's sermons. Studying this sermon is quite fascinating because it reveals how Paul went about the task of persuading nonbelievers with biblical truth. More specifically, herein we will witness the heralding of *kerygmatic* ("the act of publicly proclaiming the gospel") truths to Athenian secular philosophers or, better stated, ancient Greek ideologues. This passage of Scripture is quite informative and therefore profoundly important because it provides an exemplar and thesis for developing our own personal, foundational understanding of the biblically proper way to defend (cf. 1 Peter 3:15) and proclaim (cf. Colossians 1:28) eternal truths to nonbelievers. Observe the following:

An in-depth study of Acts 17 yields guidelines for communicating truth to the unregenerate.

This sermon reveals that the Apostle Paul's apologetical ("to give a defense") approach was *presuppositional* in nature. In other words, the sermon's content and results presuppose the absolute and final authority of Scripture as it relates to his epistemological ("the philosophical inquiry into the nature, sources, limits and methods of gaining knowledge")[1] basis for argumentation. If Paul used Scripture as his basis in the first-century world to a secular audience, does it not follow that believers today should use the Scriptures as their starting point and final authority for all reasoning, apologetical, and evangelistic endeavors? I think so!

Why do I say Paul's sermon in Acts chapter 17 is presuppositional? Why do I say we should presuppose the authority of God's Word when we speak? Please peruse the following six-point outline to hopefully form similar convictions in your own heart.

II. THE ANALOGY OF SCRIPTURE

The time-honored principle of *The Analogy of Scripture* in the grammatical-historical-normative approach to

interpreting Scripture (hermeneutics) necessitates that the Bible (or any ancient book) is not internally contradictory until it is proven to be internally contradictory. Another way of saying this is that every book, along with its author, is innocent until proven guilty of contradicting itself. Still another way of saying this is: if God is characteristically veracious ("accurate and precise") and immutable ("not experiencing change or development") and if ***all Scripture is God-breathed*** (*theopnuestos*) (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16), then it follows that because of the characteristic nature of God Himself, the Book He authored would not be internally contradictory! All 66 books of the Bible that are ***inspired*** (or better, "***breathed***") by God, per His own testimony, contain an independent and inter-dependent integrity until proven otherwise. That is the underlying maxim of this hermeneutical ("the discipline of interpreting sacred texts") principle, known as *The Analogy of Scripture*.

At this point you are probably asking yourself how this principle applies to this study? I will tie the two together in a moment. But first, notice what Paul states in Romans 1:18–20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

The Apostle is declaring that men know of God and that He is ***evident to them***! However, even though He is ***evident to them***, they ***suppress the truth*** instead of acknowledging Him. This typical reaction is due to the Fall of man and man's rebellion against God due to man's inherent sin nature. Notice what John 3:19b states in this regard: ***"the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil."***

It follows that Paul's recorded sermons in narrative, historical, chronological sections of the Bible (as in Acts 17) would in no way contradict that which he—through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—penned in theological sections, such as the book of Romans, chapter 1:18–20. Important and related to the hermeneutical principle of *The Analogy of Scripture,* narrative sections of the Bible (the book of Acts) should and do illustrate (in action) theological sections of God's Word. In fact, it would be difficult to think of Paul's having any kind of personal integrity or serious believability if what he wrote in Romans chapter 1 was not utilized principally and specifically in his preaching, such as in his sermon in Acts 17.

All that to say, the literary critic or the person attempting to understand what is meant by what is said in Acts 17 must import the hermeneutical principle of *The Analogy of Scripture*. What Paul means by his use of words in Acts 17 should be analogous ("resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike")[2] to his writings elsewhere, such as Romans 1:18–20. The author should be deemed innocent of self-contradiction unless demonstrable evidence exists to the contrary.

A brief illustration of this principle is the alignment of Romans 1:18–19 and

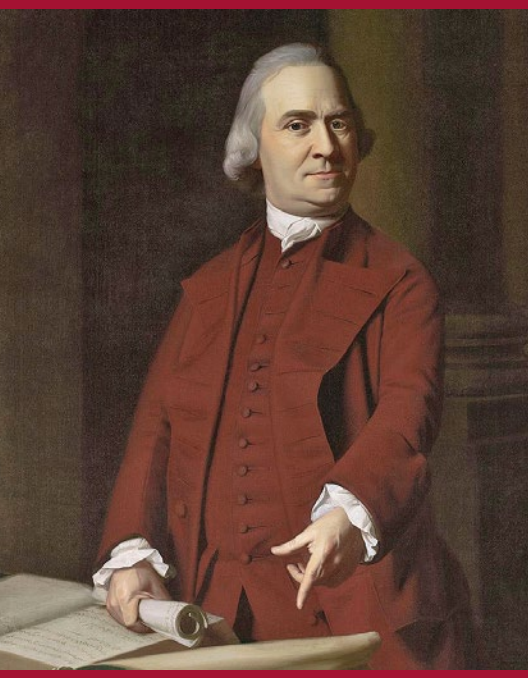
♥ VERSE OF THE WEEK

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The use of the Scriptures, and one's ability to reason based on scriptural truth, need be one's final and complete authority.

Samuel Adams



"I conceive we cannot better express ourselves than by humbly supplicating the Supreme Ruler of the world ... that the confusions that are and have been among the nations may be overruled by the promoting and speedily bringing in the holy and happy period when the kingdoms of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be everywhere established, and the people willingly bow to the scepter of Him who is the Prince of Peace."

— Samuel Adams, signer of the Declaration of Independence, "Father of the American Revolution," ratifier of the U.S. Constitution, governor of Massachusetts.

From a Fast Day Proclamation issued by Governor Samuel Adams, Massachusetts, March 20, 1797; see also Samuel Adams, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, Harry Alonzo Cushing, editor (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), Vol. IV, 407, from his proclamation of March 20, 1797.

Acts 17:22–23. In this Acts passage, Paul states that the Athenians were both ***religious*** as well as ***ignorant***. This assertion is similar to the context and meaning of Romans 1:18–19, where he states that men ***know of God*** (i.e., they are ***religious***) but that they ***suppress*** this knowledge (that is, they are culpably ***ignorant***).

Further, in passages of parallel meaning, interpretive rules such as *The Analogy of Scripture* necessitate that the easier-to-understand passages help to aid in the clarification of the harder-to-understand passages, so as not to contradict one another.

Therefore, Paul's sermon in Acts 17 *must* be interpreted in the context of his teachings elsewhere, which would include not only the Romans chapter 1 passage already cited, but other passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:17–25. Short of supporting empirical evidence, the author should be given any benefit of the doubt versus the alternative of effacing his literary and nuclear integrity. Summarily, note the following:

Acts 17 must be prejudged and interpreted by other Pauline passages.

We must assume his integrity of thought and belief from one book to another until proven otherwise. Said another way and in direct support of the argument I am about to make, Paul doesn't herald one principle in one place and then another contradictory point somewhere else in his later writings.

Now please allow me to tie this all together: in light of *The Analogy of Scripture*, Paul's sermon of Acts 17 must carry with it the predisposition to presuppositionalism as he taught in Romans, chapter 1. This understanding is critically important to the argument forthcoming in this Bible study (otherwise, I wouldn't have used so much space making the point). One particular commentator of Paul's Acts 17 sermon, Bahnsen, has aptly and wonderfully summarized all I have said regarding this sermon in a much tighter fashion: "Its doctrine is a reworking of thought in Romans transformed into missionary impulse."[3]

III. THE IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

In the earlier geographic settings of the Acts of the Apostles, specifically chapter 17, Paul was in Thessalonica and Berea respectively. Noteworthy is the following: in each of these two locations immediately prior to his arrival in Athens, Paul singularly utilized the Scriptures to present the gospel. 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.

This passage indicates that ***reasoning... from the Scriptures*** was not something Paul just happened to decide to do in this one instance recorded in our home passage of Acts 17:22–31. Therefore, it stands to reason that what Paul did when he spoke in Athens was also ***according to Paul's custom***. The word Luke uses here for ***custom*** (*etho*) means "to be accustomed to, or to be a part of." *Etho* is also used elsewhere to describe Jesus' habit of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath to read (Luke 4:16) and His habit of teaching His followers (Mark

10:1). Paul's habit wrought from conviction was always to ***reason from the Scriptures***.

A bit later in Acts 17:11b, 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.

Once again, implicitly illustrated, Paul spoke from the ***Word***; it was the basis for making his declarations. The Bible does not say of the Bereans that "they received Paul's philosophy" or "they received his thoughts"; rather, ***they received the Word***....

Upon arrival in Athens from Berea, Paul was on somewhat of a missionary furlough as he waited for Silas and Timothy to come, catch up, and join him (vv. 15–16). During this time, he was provoked by all the idolatry in the city. His response? He ***preached 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).

Nowhere in these passages prior to the Athenian sermon is there a trace of evidence suggesting that Paul played to the present positions of his listeners to relate to them philosophically and then subsequently reasoned apart from the Scriptures from that point forward. This contextual distinction is an important one to make prior to interpreting his meaning at the front end of the Athenian sermon, which at a first reading may seem to contradict the point of this paragraph.

IV. PAUL'S APPEAL TO CONSCIENCE (ACTS 17:22–23)

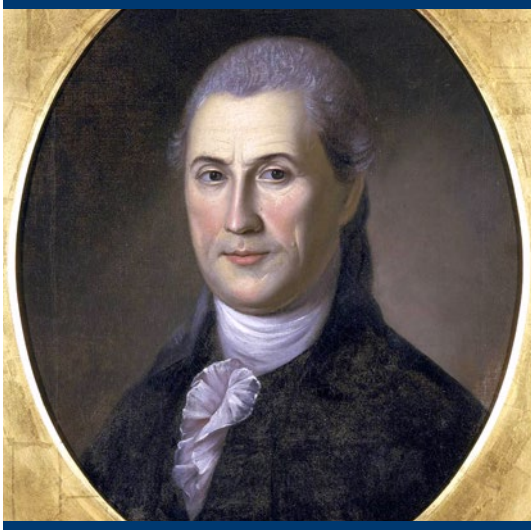
Athens, the cultural center of the Greek world, was home to the historical purveyors of Greek philosophy, including Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato. Accordingly, this sermon contains and is a confrontation between Christian doctrine and Greek philosophy by one of Christianity's greatest spokesmen. Therefore, note the spiritual sense:

The setting is similar to a presidential debate or a championship in the sports world. This is a clash of philosophical titans in and of the ancient world.

Paul's sermon should be viewed as nothing less! Relative to this study, it is important to identify whether Paul utilized Greek thought as a launching point of common knowledge or utilized some other bridging devices to segue into a presentation of truth based solely on scriptural revelation. In particular and by way of application, how the believer is to approach philosophical paradigm clashes will be modeled for all would-be truth proclaimers throughout the coming centuries—and for you and me in the capitol community.

Acts 17:22b–23 marks the beginning of the sermon. After being hauled before the Areopagus (those who "controlled" Greek philosophy), Paul launches in. Relative to his earlier observations in the marketplaces, he states:

Samuel Huntington

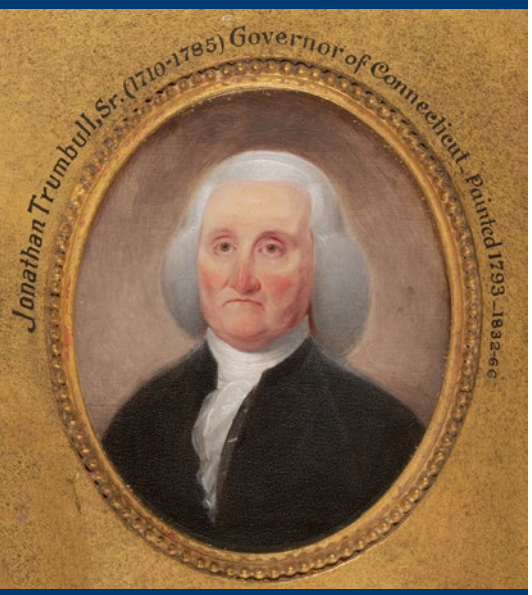


"It becomes a people publicly to acknowledge the over-ruling hand of Divine Providence and their dependence upon the Supreme Being as their Creator and Merciful Preserver ... and with becoming humility and sincere repentance to supplicate the pardon that we may obtain forgiveness through the merits and mediation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

— Samuel Huntington, signer of the Declaration of Independence, president of Congress, judge, governor of Connecticut.

Samuel Huntington, *A Proclamation for a Day of Fasting*, Prayer and Humiliation, March 9, 1791.

Jonathan Trumbull



"The examples of holy men teach us that we should seek Him with fasting and prayer, with penitent confession of our sins, and hope in His mercy through Jesus Christ the Great Redeemer."

— Jonathan Trumbull, judge, legislator, governor of Connecticut, confidant of George Washington, who called him "Brother Jonathan."

Jonathan Trumbull, *Proclamation for a Day of Fasting and Prayer*, March 9, 1774.

"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."

Paul's opening remarks seemingly indicate his attempt to reach for common ground with his audience, as in making bridge-building statements and acknowledging the worthiness of some of their customs. But on closer investigation, such is not the case at all! First, the Greek word for ***very religious*** (*deisidaimonia*) can also be interpreted as "somewhat superstitious." Thus, rather than these remarks being an attempt to achieve camaraderie, they were more likely the beginning of a mild indictment of their ***suppression*** of that which they inherently knew. This meaning of *deisidaimonia* seems to be the most likely intent of Paul, given the fact that he goes on to say that they worship an ***unknown god...in ignorance!*** Used early on in any conversation, these last two word groupings, when taken together, are hardly endearing. Paul's earlier use then of *deisidaimonia* was not intended to be a befriending statement of endearment lest he come across as schizophrenic from one earlier statement to another.

Secondly, to add further to this understanding of the passage, 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***. Evidencing every man's internal theistic predilections throughout history is the fact that Paul says they ***worshipped***. Yet Paul says that they sensed a presence they chose to ***ignore***. This understanding of what Paul meant by his choice and use of the word ***ignorance*** would be in keeping with the same way he uses the 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.

The word choice of ***ignorance*** (*agnoia*, the same word used by Paul in Acts 17:23) does not imply an intellectual deficiency, but rather one of *culpability* as Paul summarizes the Gentile mindset. To illustrate, this difference is like a patrolman's pulling over a person 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 *information deficiency*. But to know deep down in your conscience that you were indeed speeding and then communicate supposed ***ignorance*** is a totally different matter. Definitively the latter is culpable ***ignorance***—a ***suppression*** of truth. The person is lying to himself; it is *blameworthy* ***ignorance***.

This is Paul's meaning here per his word choice. Accordingly, right from the get-go, his Acts 17 vocabulary indicates he was asserting to his audience that they were *guilty of a cover-up*, or to incorporate the synonymous meaning of ***ignorance*** as found in Ephesians 4:18, they possessed a ***hardened heart***. Said in analogy to Paul's teaching in Romans 1, Paul's opening salvo was heralding the fact that the Athenian philosophers were ***suppressing*** that which was ***evident to them*** (Romans 1:19) in their conscience.

Ernest Best, who has conducted inten-

sive word studies on most every Greek word used by Paul in Ephesians states:

> ***Ignorance*** seems to have a unique place over against knowledge of God...***ignorance***, sin and unbelief are closely linked [by the author of Ephesians].

He continues,

> [the interpretation of ***ignorance***] expresses the same thought in another way as hardening of the heart.[4]

If this is the meaning of ***ignorance***, then in essence, it is hardly an appealing style to begin a speech with, "You have a hard heart!" That method of communication doesn't seem to serve the objective of broad audience receptivity! In fact, his is courageously bold communication that is empowered by none other than the Holy Spirit! Oh, for men like Paul today in the capitol community—both bold and loving! (Cf. Proverbs 3:3.)

Paul's then mention of their ***altar inscription***, given these previous insights, now takes on a whole different flavor, i.e., "You may say publicly that God is ***unknown***, but deep down you know that isn't true."

The statement conveys Paul's conviction that the Athenian secularists were ***suppressing*** the truth about God—*truth that they knew inherently in their conscience!* In a polite manner (in a way not violating 1 Peter 3:15b) Paul was communicating that their ***ignorance*** was *culpable*. To the trained, seasoned evangelist, their placard proved to be prima-facie evidence for the existence of a ***hardened heart***. Accordingly, Paul's delineation of thought in Acts 17 *exactly* parallels that which he expresses in Romans 1:19b–20: ***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, displaying no evidentiary apologetical attempts apart from the primacy of the use of Scripture. Immediately modeled and illustrated by Paul, all within the introduction of the sermon is a quick and aggressive "pulling the rug" on man-invented Greek philosophy and epistemology. Stunningly and in contrast to most presentations of truth today, within moments of beginning his address, Paul states (my paraphrase):

> Therefore, what you have chosen to falsely worship is a result of your suppressing, hardened hearts; in stark contrast, I authoritatively proclaim this to you....

Rather than slowly build up from some supposed common foundations between Greek philosophy and Christianity, Paul lovingly launches words that serve to uncover the listener's philosophical and theological impotence. Here then, in print is an arresting argument (in this case related to the gospel) supported singularly by and reasoned singularly from Scripture.

Lastly, as it relates to the conclusion of his first two verses in his sermon, Paul states, ***this I proclaim to you***. The Greek word he is invoking, *kataggello*, which is translated into the English word ***proclaim***, is the same Greek word used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to the solemn authoritative proclamation of the gospel based on Scripture (e.g., Acts 3:18; 1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 1:11–12).

John Witherspoon

"I shall now conclude my discourse by preaching this Savior to all who hear me, and entreating you in the most earnest manner to believe in Jesus Christ; for "there is no salvation in any other" [Acts 4:12]."

— John Witherspoon, signer of the Declaration of Independence, ratifier of the U.S. Constitution, member of the Continental Congress, president of Princeton, reverend.

John Witherspoon, *The Works of John Witherspoon* (Edinburgh: J. Ogle, 1815), Vol. V, 276, Sermon 15, "The Absolute Necessity of Salvation Through Christ," January 2, 1758.

John Hancock

He called on the state of Massachusetts to pray...

"...that universal happiness may be established in the world [and] that all may bow to the scepter of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the whole earth be filled with His glory."

— John Hancock, signer of the Declaration of Independence, president of Congress, Revolutionary War general, and governor of Massachusetts.

John Hancock, A Proclamation For a Day of Public Thanksgiving 1791, given as Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In summary of the first two stanzas of his sermon, Paul has set forth an epistemological antithesis between the ***ignorant***, autonomous, and independent bases of Greek philosophy and a God-given authority stemming from a God-given revelation of Himself and His incumbent truth.

How Could We Ever Be So Bold?

Who chooses those who 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.

Paul knew what Jesus had said to the disciples, ***"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you..."*** (John 15:16). In other words, Paul knew that ***"the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out"*** (John 10:3). Accordingly, what the 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 in today's day and age, 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 today than was Paul's during his big day in Athens. When the called-out ones hear the Shepherd's voice via the proclamation of the Word through one of His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), they respond in repentance and faith. Since God is the sole determiner of who and how many will come to Him (lest we discount His attribute of sovereignty), Paul did not have to concern himself with winning favor with his Athenian listeners, lest possibly those "receiving Christ" at the end of the sermon be fewer. Nor was Paul motivated by personal popularity and a desire to be liked by everyone, thus toning it down a bit (contr. Galatians 1:10). We must all think through this biblical insight: is popularity my real god? Or am I a bondservant of Christ? Only such biblical understandings as these will lead us to personal boldness and courage.

V. PAUL'S APPEAL TO CREATION (ACTS 17:24–28A)

Continuing in the same order of argumentation parallel to Romans 1:18–20, Paul now compounds the internal testimony of conscience (as mentioned previously by his use of the Greek word for the translated-into-English word *ignorance* in Acts 17:22–23) with the external testimony of general revelation, a.k.a. creation. Acts 17:24–28a states:

"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 further substantiates 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 simply don't know of God's existence; conversely Paul says in line with Romans 1, ***He is not far from each one of us***. Culpable ***ignorance*** is inexcusable in God's eyes; He has made Himself known to everyone through both conscience and creation. If we respond to the general revelation that God has granted through conscience and creation, He will be faithful to increase that revelation of Himself to the point of making salvation in Christ always possible. This is appropriately theologically termed "God's responsive, progressive revelation." Here then is the answer to the often-posed question:

What about the heathen in Africa?

Both conscience and creation (or general revelation) attest to the fact of God's *knowableness*. Paul's appeal to general revelation here serves his purposes of further nailing down Greek culpability. God is ***not far off*** or impossible to know. This general revelation, if not masked or ***suppressed***, creates a desire to ***seek God***. Bahnsen summarizes this issue when he states the following:

> [Man] is responsible because he possesses the truth, but he is guilty for what he does to the truth.[5]

God has revealed Himself to mankind internally (conscience) and externally (creation); that means He can be easily found—and on the flip side of the same coin, the gospel of salvation is simple to proclaim and understand. Conversely, however, the Greeks ***suppressed*** that which they knew to be true and instead, as a *diversionary tactic* to the witness of their God-attesting internal conscience, worshipped their gods in the Parthenon, whom Paul fleshed out in his sermon as those who ***dwell in temples made with hands***. From the Areopagus, one finds him or herself directly below the Parthenon; Paul could have easily motioned with his hand to illustrate that which he addressed.

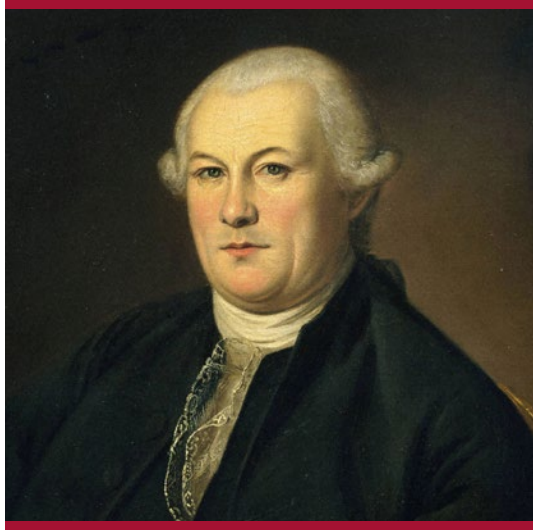
In summary of this section of his sermon, Paul has candidly and in straightforward pronouncement refuted the Greeks' man-made gods. He has not utilized them nor built his sermon from some supposed common denominator; rather, he boldly mortifies and rebukes their man-made ideas about theism.

VI. PAUL'S APPEAL TO CONTRADICTION (ACTS 17:28B–30A)

Further on into the body of Paul's sermon is a summary quotation, not from the Old Testament but rather from secular sources per verse 28b:

"As even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we

Elias Boudinot



"Let us enter on this important business under the idea that we are Christians on whom the eyes of the world are now turned ... [L]et us earnestly call and beseech Him, for Christ's sake, to preside in our councils .... We can only depend on the all powerful influence of the Spirit of God, Whose Divine aid and assistance it becomes us as a Christian people most devoutly to implore. Therefore I move that some minister of the Gospel be requested to attend this Congress every morning ... in order to open the meeting with prayer."

— Elias Boudinot, president of Congress, signed the Peace Treaty to end the American Revolution, first attorney admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court Bar, framer of the Bill of Rights, director of the U.S. Mint.

Elias Boudinot, *The Life, Public Services, Addresses, and Letters of Elias Boudinot*, J.J. Boudinot, editor (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1896), Vol. I, 19, 21, speech in the First Provincial Congress of New Jersey.

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 quote these extra-biblical sources when, in fact, the Scriptures were Paul’s singular basis of authority? Make no mistake what Paul is attempting to accomplish here: his is not an endeavor to establish common ground with Greek philosophy! The reason they are included is that they are Greek secular sources serving to contradict their own Greek beliefs—one being the previous notion that Paul has already cited, that supposedly the Greek gods ***dwell in temples made with human hands***! (v. 24). Paul is in essence arguing, “So which opposing Greek theistic understanding is correct?” These contradictory quotes are from the Cretan poets Epimenides and Aratus (who came from Paul’s hometown). Both serve Paul’s purposes of emblematically illustrating the autonomy of Greek authority or, as stated in Romans, the ineptness of diversionary ***suppression*** of seeking after and finding the true God.

The poets themselves were people who knew about God, but because of a lack of submission to the testimony of conscience and creation, their unrighteousness hindered their quest for Him. Again, John 3:19 states this proclivity of the sinful condition of man’s soul apart from the intervention of the redeeming Holy Spirit: ***men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.*** Stonehouse adroitly comments on what these poets were in essence attesting to: “The pagan poets in the very act of suppressing and perverting the truth presupposed a measure of awareness of it.[6]

Paul’s importation of this secular thinking is meant to once again, in yet another way, 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). (The parenthetical inclusions are mine for contextual emphasis and to aid in understanding.)

Sandwiched in the middle of Paul’s singular thesis regarding the existence of culpable ***ignorance*** are these two secular guys, twins in thinking, who serve Paul well; these are convenient utilitarian quotes illustrating—evidenced in and by their own cultural writings—the exact point of Paul’s sermon! Paul skillfully uses their own authoritative source to drive home his point.

Paul is not commending Stoic doctrines or utilizing pagan ideas to round out his sermon with worldly verbosity and “secular digestibility” as those in the Evangelical “seeker-sensitive movement” often postulate. To do so would be internally and theologically contradictory to Pauline clarity as previously cited and found elsewhere in Scripture. It follows that this portion of the sermon cannot be taken as an acquiescence or attempt to identify with a pagan audience.

VII. PAUL’S APPEAL TO CONVERSION (ACTS 17:30B–31)

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

“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.”

This section is anything but an attempt to find common ground with the Greek philosophers. Herein is the apex of antithesis to their secular Greek ideas. Herein is a bold call to abandon their unfounded philosophies and turn to 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.[7]

Acquiescence to ***repentance*** meant to live without culpable ***ignorance*** and noetic conflict. Failure to ***repent*** would mean a prolongation of epistemological autonomy, or better, clinging to an arrogant, self-centered pride where one remains the imperial authority and arbitrator in all things. “That unrepentant person,” says the Apostle, “will undergo the ***judgment*** of God.” Perhaps this describes you?

Do you “create God in your own image?”

Are you “the final arbitrator of all belief?”

Do you “make God with your human hands?”

Such humanistic hubris! “I am the final authority as to what is true! I need no other source because I am my own god!” These who embrace this hubris are those who need to ***repent*** and come to Christ

lest they undergo the ***judgment*** of God! Your ***suppressed*** conscience testifies to what I am saying—that what I am saying is true about your present condition.

VIII. SUMMARY

These six facets of Paul's Acts 17 sermon represent parallel truths to his theology 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
3. Paul's Appeal to Conscience
4. Paul's Appeal to Creation
5. Paul's Appeal to Contradiction
6. Paul's Appeal to Conversion

In his book *The Justification of Knowledge*, Robert Reymond summarizes best the communication philosophy of Paul:

> 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.[8]

IX. APPLICATION

Should you argue from the Bible in a secular Capitol? Paul's Acts 17 sermon illustrates and is the model for the capitol relative to using Scripture as the final authority for truth and/or evangelizing and defending the faith. In every capitol of the world, people already know that Christ is God, that the Bible is true, and that they need to repent of their self-appointed authority and autonomy and fall on their knees in submission to God's authority. They know this in their heart of hearts via the witness of their conscience and the surrounding creation of God. Therefore, the believer's job is not so much to convince and persuade, evidence and support, as it is to aid and lovingly coach the unconverted to quit ***suppressing*** that which they already know to be true! May the Spirit aid us in such a ministry.

Likened to Paul's example, the use of the Scriptures and our ability to reason based on scriptural truth need to be our final and complete authority. I challenge you to begin arguing from scriptural precepts to make your point relative to policy matters (assuming Scripture directly or its principles come to bear directly on a matter). When challenged with "Well, I don't view the Bible as authoritative," answer with, "Oh, yes, you do; it is just that you are suppressing its authority." Another one of my favorite responses when arguing about this subject is the following: "Should I believe what you proclaim about the Bible, or should I believe what the Bible proclaims about you?"

Hebrews 4:12 is an apt capstone: ***For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.***

Unbelievers know Scripture is true, so use it on them even if they say they don't believe it! In reality, they do—even if, like the Athenians on Mars Hill, they try to convince others outwardly that they don't! Lovingly help your modern-day Athenian colleagues to quit ***suppressing*** what they know to be true! Paul operated his ministry under that presuppositional premise—and so should you!

1. Stanley Grentz, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 45.
2. Calvin termed this concept *The Analogy of Faith*, deeming that if the Spirit oversaw the writing of Scripture, then Scripture should interpret Scripture without contradiction.
3. Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 238.
4. Ernest Best, *Ephesians, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 420.
5. Bahnsen, 259.
6. Ned Bernard Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Areopagus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1957), 30.
7. Bahnsen, 268.
8. Robert Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984), 38.

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