

Philosophy: The Bane of Christianity

By

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“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8).

The Apostle Paul was fully aware of the influence of philosophy on believers and unbelievers alike. As a Pharisee, having been taught under the tutelage of Gamaliel (see Acts 22:3), Paul was trained in the law of the Jews. In this he was well versed in the philosophical teaching handed down by his predecessors. If one were to read the ancient Talmud of the Jews, one can see the influence philosophy had on the Laws given the Nation of Israel from God through Moses.

Moses, having been raised from childhood into the culture of Egypt for forty years, could not have escaped the religious aspect of that time. (Some Bible Historians date this about 1500 BC, while others put the time period about 1325 BC). It was about 1600–1500 BC that the Egyptian “Book of the Dead” was being spread among the culture by teachers of religion — Pharaoh’s family was definitely included; and Moses was considered a member of the family, and brought up under its tutelage . Yet, when examining the first five books of the Old Testament that Moses wrote, we do not find any of the religious teachings he was undoubtedly taught while living in Pharaoh’s household. In fact, what Moses wrote stands in direct contradiction to the religion of Egypt. (see Exodus 2:1–10).

The Egyptian religious philosophy taught that man’s body was only a temporary abode of an immortal soul, and when the body died the soul was released. Moses surely knew of this teaching having spent his first 40 years in Egypt as a child growing up in Pharaoh’s household. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find a single statement that would indicate man has a separate entity within the body that is called a soul, much less an immortal soul. In Genesis 2:7 we have a very clear statement that tells us **man is a soul; not that man has a soul**. If man had an immortal soul as a separate entity within the body, Moses would surely have revealed it. However, Moses was moved by the Spirit of God to write about the origin of man as God wanted us to know.

From Genesis to Malachi one finds no trace of Egyptian philosophical ideas. But, shortly after Malachi, and before the proclamation of the New Testament Gospel of Jesus, philosophical opinions and ideas flourished. The philosophers taught that death was the end of life for the body but that the life of the soul continued, for it was immortal. However, there were just as many philosophers during this same time period that taught the death of the body meant the death of the soul also. Edward Fudge, in his internationally acclaimed book, *The Fire That Consumes*, documents the writings of this period and was forced to conclude from his study that these writings show no such a thing as a uniform Jewish view of an immortal soul or an eternal punishment in Hades or hell.

The four Gospels, in pointing out the teachings of the Sadducees and Pharisees, find Jesus himself rejecting the beliefs these two groups held. The Gospel was very much in opposition to the teachings that entered into Judaism between Malachi and Christ's entrance into the world. Jesus spoke of the fate awaiting those who refused to accept who he was. He spoke of unbelievers being cut off, burned up as a branch thrown into a fire, of their whole being suffering death with no second chance. In Revelation 20:11–15 Jesus pictures the final day when unbelievers will be thrown into the Lake of Fire to suffer their second death — not another life that will never die again like the immortality given to those who believe in him.

Before Jesus came to proclaim salvation and a future life that was endless, pagan philosophy had formulated the doctrine of the immortality of a soul in man. Egypt seems to have been the originator of this religious idea, and when Alexander the Great conquered the known world shortly after Malachi, Greek myths were inter-mingled with the Egyptian teachings. Schools of Philosophy were started and enrolled Jewish students. Socrates, and his pupil, Plato, promoted this immortal soul concept throughout the now Greek speaking world. Cicero (106–43 BC), commenting on Plato's writings, says, "*I have perused Plato with the greatest diligence and exactness, over and over again; but know not how it is, while I read him I am convinced; when I lay the book aside and I begin to consider by myself of the soul's immortality, all conviction instantly ceases*" (Cited by Perowne, J.J.S., "Immortality," preface, chapter 7, page 45, on Cicero's "*Tusculan Questions*").

This theory of the ancient Egyptian and Greek philosophers enhanced during the period from 400 BC until the time of Christ slowly permeated Jewish thought, but not in all its particulars; and not to all Jews. It was a mix of beliefs — some rejecting a resurrection of the dead and some looking forward to a resurrection. The pagan teaching, for the majority of the Greek speaking world, denied the belief in a resurrection of the body. It was Jesus that brought life and immortality into the light; he taught that immortality is only connected with the resurrection of the dead, and only to those who believed in him. This was the blessed hope of those who believed and obeyed Jesus' Good News.

Then came the Apostle Paul, a man who was a Pharisee just like his father before him (see Acts 23:6). Paul, while not an Apostle like the other Apostles, was given that position "**by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him (Jesus) from the dead**" (Gal. 1:1). The Good News he preached was **not** something he was taught by other men, rather, he received it by revelation from Jesus Christ himself. He did not "check in" with the Apostles in Jerusalem, but instead went to Arabia. It was three years before he visited Jerusalem to see Peter, and the only other Apostle he saw at that time was James, the brother of Jesus (see Gal. 1:11–19).

Paul, in his missionary journeys, had to confront pagan philosophy concerning the resurrection of the dead. While in Athens (modern day Greece), his spirit was provoked as he saw the multitude of idols displayed in the city. Paul tried to reason with the Jews and Greeks, even confronting them in the marketplace. He found himself face to face with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. It would benefit you reading this article if you were to open your Bible to Acts 17:16–34 and read it. As you read this passage of scripture you will notice the mention of the words 1) Epicurean, 2) Stoic, and 3) Areopagus. Let's look at these closer to see what they are.

1) Verse 18 — Epicurean: This philosophy was started about 300 BC by a man named Epicurus. He denied that there was a creator God, and also denied the immortality of a soul; man didn't have a soul according to this philosophy. Epicureans believed that man was to pursue and experience pleasure. This pleasure was to be a reasonable pleasure of both mind and body. It was a pleasure you experienced sensually with one's body; and intellectually with one's mind. However, they had itching ears and like to hear about new philosophies so that they could argue against them (see Vs. 19).

2) Verse 18 — Stoic: This word simply means a "porch" on a house or other place. This philosophy was founded by a man named Zeno and named "Stoic" because he taught from a porch in Athens. This philosophy also came into being around 300 BC. Zeno died around 260–250 BC. He taught that everything was fixed by a god and could not be changed in any way. Fate was a big part of this philosophy: whatever happens, happens. The belief was that matter was eternal and would eventually be absorbed in their god's essence. Resurrection of the body or soul was not a part of this philosophy. Like the Epicureans, they took enjoyment in hearing of new ideas in which they could argue from their beliefs.

3) Verse 19 — Areopagus: This word is the name of a hill in Athens named in English as "Mars Hill." On the top of this hill was the building housing their Supreme Court. It was not a center for worshipping their many gods as most think, but was for the purpose of judging according to their law. This was where disputes were settled among the people of the City.

Paul was taken to his Supreme Court on Mars Hill. The *assembly*¹ was called and Paul was urged to explain this new idea he was preaching in the Marketplace. During his defense, as he was well versed in their philosophies, he quoted the Greek poet Epemenides, "For in him (God) we live and move and have our being." He also mentions their present poets saying that "we are his children" (see Vs. 28). So far, so good, but as soon as he mentioned the resurrection of the dead some mocked and ridiculed him. But there were some who wanted to hear him later (that's to their credit). He was then dismissed. However, Paul did convert a few, even Dionysis, who was a member of the Court (Vs. 34).

Paul had an excellent opportunity to preach the Good News of Jesus the Christ in a center of ancient philosophical wisdom. The response was mixed, but encouraging, and reveals to us today what is to be expected from those whose minds are full of pride and self-importance. These types of people are not very teachable. That didn't stop Paul, nor should it stop us today in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus at every opportunity available. We must be bold and unafraid as was Paul in spreading the truth, trusting God to give results for our efforts.

It is no wonder that Paul in writing to the Colossians told them to **beware of philosophical teachings** (2:8). Many philosophers of Paul's day and later accepted, to a certain extent, the Good News of Jesus, and not content or comfortable with the simple and straight-forward teaching given them, brought in their own philosophical teachings and mixed them into their preaching of the Gospel. These men became false teachers the New Testament writers warned us about, and they are present in today's churches.

The Apostle John, like Paul, warned those whom he converted to Christianity in his first letter to be aware and test those who were perverting the Gospel message (see I John 4:1–6 and 5:18–21). In his second letter he warns against deceivers (see Vss. 7–11), and in his third letter shows us that even leaders of the church are not immune to the sin of pride, and in so doing, destroy the truth of the Gospel (see Vss. 9–11). Then in the Book of Revelation John writes to seven churches pointing out their failings with warnings of their judgment if they do not return to the truth of the Gospel (see chapters two and three).

I would be remiss in not calling attention to the letter written by Jude, the brother of James. His whole letter is a warning to Christians of any age about those who undermine the Gospel. And those who undermine the Gospel are looked upon as members in good standing in the church; and even in the leadership roles. Then there was Peter: read all of chapter two in his second letter. Yes, even today Christians have to be watchful — false teachers, even during the time of the Apostles, infiltrated the church. Over the centuries false teachers have introduced doctrines, and yes, even pagan philosophical teachings that undermine and destroy the truth Christ died to bring to light — future life and immortality conditioned on our Christian way of life we live in the present.

As we examine the writings of those called “Apostolic Fathers” it becomes quite clear that there cannot be found any reference that the unsaved will be given immortality. These Fathers give us no idea that God will somehow impart an immortality to keep the wicked “alive” in the Lake of Fire for the same length of time that the saved enjoy in Heaven with their immortal and glorified bodies. Rather, these Fathers affirm that the wicked will “perish,” “be destroyed” and “die.” The “Fathers” just referred to are the letter ascribed to Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, the Pastor of Hermas, Polycarp, Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus. All of these men wrote during the second century. (Note: It is unsure exactly what Theophilus and Irenaeus taught on this.)

However, there are three other writers of importance who also wrote during this time. They were Justin Martyr, Tatian and Athenagoras. Let’s take a short look at them.

Justin Martyr was a philosopher before he took on the mantle of a Christian. When he preached his version of Christianity he put on his philosophers robe, a sign of his ego and pride of scholarship. His writings, being philosophical in nature and mixed with Scriptural sentences and words can be taken two ways: 1) that the wicked will be raised, judged, and suffer for their sins before they die in the Lake of Fire; 2) that the wicked will be raised, judged, and suffer eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire. But his problem with number 2 is that the word “punishment” is never defined as to what it consists of, just that it is “age lasting.”

Tatian was a pupil of Justin Martyr, and also a philosopher. Although it is in dispute, Tatian seems to have taught that the wicked are also given immortality at their resurrection on the last day. He may have been the first Father to have taught the immortality of the wicked. If this is the case, he didn’t quite follow the argument of his teacher.

Athenagoras was schooled at Athens in Plato's philosophical ideas of an immortal soul being an entity within man. He was converted to Christianity and moved to Alexandria, Egypt. It is obvious that he rejected the Plato's philosophy that there is no resurrection of dead bodies. Knowing his background in Platonic philosophy it is not hard to understand why he denied the extinction of the wicked because the soul was immortal to his way of thinking. His argument was strictly philosophical, no Scriptures being cited. Towards the end of the second century he wrote his paper on "*The Resurrection of the Dead.*" This paper or treatise is based on philosophy, not what the Bible has to say about resurrection.

From the third century onward we find the Fathers expanding their philosophies into many other teaching of the Scriptures. Tertullian, Origen and then Augustine sought to systemize the teachings of the Scriptures. Philosophy was the method used to explain their beliefs. Tertullian and Augustine wrote in Latin, while Origen wrote in the Greek language. Their writings give us a good insight as to what their philosophical beliefs were. It also shows us how rhetorical they were when using the Scriptures because of their philosophy. Let's look at a short example of Tertullian's philosophy and rhetoric in action. He is commenting on Luke 19:10, which says, "*for the Son of man came to seek and to save the thing having been lost*" (Literal Greek translation).

"How indeed shall a man be considered saved when it will also be possible to say he has perished? Perished in the flesh, I mean, though saved in soul: except that now even the soul has to be classed with that which has perished, to make it possible for it to be saved: for that which is to be saved must needs be the same thing as has perished. But once more, either we accept the soul's immortality, so that its perdition may be believed to issue not in destruction but in chastisement, which means hell — ***and if that is so, then salvation will have in view not the soul, it being of its own nature safe through immortality***, but rather the flesh, which all agree is destructible — or else, if the soul also is destructible (that is, not immortal) as the flesh is, that standing rule that the Lord is to save that which is perishing will in equity have to apply to the flesh which is certainly mortal and destructible. I have no mind at present to play tug-of-war as to whether perdition lays claim to man on this side or on that, so long as on both sides salvation points his way, equally balanced towards both his substances. For in respect of whichever substance you suppose man to have perished, in respect of the other he does not perish: and it must follow that he is saved already in that in respect of which he does not perish, while none the less he is to be brought to salvation that in respect of which he does perish. There you have the restitution of the whole man, in that whatsoever of him perishes the Lord will bring to salvation, while whatsoever does not perish he is of course not going to destroy. ***How can you still suspect that either substance has anything to fear, when one of them is to attain to salvation, while the other is not going to lose it?***" (Tertullian's "*On The Resurrection,*" chapter 34.)

Does Tertullian's rhetorical philosophy make sense to you? He was a lawyer and a philosopher before he converted to Christianity. When he preached and taught he put on his philosophers robe. He was caught up with the idea of a soul being immortal and of a different substance than the body. In this he agreed with Plato, even quoting Plato in some of his writings. Notice in the above quote from his Treatise that the soul is not what

Christ came to save! It needed no saving because it was already immortal. However, what should be clear to you is that Tertullian, being caught up in the philosophy of an immortal soul theory, takes the scripture verse he cites out of context. Christ was not talking about a soul, but of “the thing having been lost.”

Because of his philosophical belief from Plato that man has an immortal soul inhabiting the body, Tertullian rips out of context the record of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10 to propagate his philosophy. He takes the “thing having been lost” to be the body of Zacchaeus. The “thing having been lost” **was faith!** It is sad that the KJV and NIV translate the Greek “τὸ ἀπολωλός” as “what was lost” in verse 10. The complete context in which verse 10 is spoken starts in Luke 18:35 and ends in 19:10. This took place when Jesus was coming into Jericho and in his talking with Zacchaeus. To not understand the context one can take a verse out of it and apply it to any idea one wants to propagate as Tertullian did.

I urge you to read about Abraham in Genesis 11:26 through 25:10 to see why Jesus said about Zacchaeus that he “is a son of Abraham” — and why. It would also benefit your understanding to look at Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23; then read Hebrews, chapter eleven in full. When read again Luke 18:35 through 19:10. **Faith was the “thing having been lost,”** as you should come to realize.

What Tertullian did is what almost all church writers do in trying to put their ideas into what is revealed in the Scriptures. It happened in his days, and it still happening in our day. The influences of pagan Platonic philosophy on Tertullian, Origen and Augustine were profound! Richard Tarnas, in his book *The Passion of the Western Mind*, comments on this influence: “It was Augustine’s formulation of Christian Platonism that was to permeate virtually all of medieval Christian thought in the West. So enthusiastic was the Christian integration of the Greek spirit that Socrates and Plato were frequently regarded as divinely inspired pre-Christian saints...” (age 103). This pagan idea is foundational in Western church thought, both philosophical and religious. Beliefs on going to Heaven or Hell depends on it. Many centuries later Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 AD) organized the dogma of an immortal soul in his “*Summa Theologica*.” This became totally entrenched in the Latin Church’s teachings that it was looked upon as a heresy for anyone denying it. Later in the Reformation it was generally accepted by Protestants, and even later by the modern Evangelical movement.

Almost all churches of Christianity were formed into organizations by the influence of philosophy. History, itself, shows us that ancient Assyrian and Egyptian pagan religions were among the first to teach that at death there was a separate part of man that left the body and went into another realm. Greek Philosophers like Socrates and Plato, in effect, propagated the lie of Satan in the Garden of Eden. That lie was that Adam and Eve would not die if they ate of the tree of Good and Evil. But, dying, they eventually returned to the dust they were created from. All through the centuries since philosophers brought their ideas into Christianity there were many individuals and movements that protested these philosophical ideas that added, or made of no meaning, to the simple truth of the Gospel. They were hunted down and destroyed at the instigation of “The Church.”

Today, in the 21st Century, many still point out the errors and protest against the influence of pagan philosophical ideas in the churches. Of course, destroying modern protestors is not as was done in the past; it is now done by words that can emotionally

destroy a man by destroying his character. False teachers remain in churches today, just as in the past. Church writers publish book after book wherein they put down other church writers who don't think like them and vice-versa. It's a war of words, and philosophy is a major weapon on all sides. Almost all religious books are filled with the philosophical ideas of their authors. Read through them and see for yourself. So many words are written about the few words taken from the Scriptures that one begins to wonder if there isn't something written between the sentences in the Bible.

Through the philosophical idea of an immortal soul residing in ones body came the philosophical teachings of "Original Sin, Infant Baptism, Baptismal Regenerations, Confirmation, Sacraments, the Clergy System, the Layman System, Predestination, Creeds, the Hierarchical System of Church Organizations, Traditions, etc. None of these things are found in the Bible, yet they are said to reside there in seed form — that must be the teachings one finds between the sentences of each verse in the Bible, right? Negative, there isn't room in the Bible for all that is added to its teachings!

The Scriptures warn us that *"Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add nothing to his words, lest he reprove you and find you a liar"* (Prov. 30:5–6). Search the books written by church authorities: see how much of their philosophy adds to God's word in the Bible. It should open your eyes. The Apostle Paul said that *"Every scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be equipped, furnished for every good work"* (2 Tim. 3:16). It's no wonder that Paul said to be aware of philosophy!

"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8).

Note 1. The word "assembly" is the same as the term that Jesus used to say, "I will build my church — ekklesia! — (see Matthew 18:16). Read the 4-part article, "The Church of Christ", on this Web Site.

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