Ancient Perspectives on Happiness

After examining several pagan view of happiness from the ancient world, Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues for the view of Christian philosopher Augustine.

The Declaration of Independence says that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," including "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."{1} Although we could say a lot about this statement, I want to focus on that very last phrase: the pursuit of happiness. What exactly is happiness? And how should we pursue it in order to have the best chance of attaining it? These questions not only interest us, they also interested some of the greatest thinkers from the far-flung past.

So what *is* happiness? An online dictionary says that happiness "results from the possession . . . of what one considers good."{2} A good start, but it raises another question, namely, what should we consider *good*? Many things can be described as *good*: a cat, a job, a lover, and a book may all qualify. And each of these things might even make us *happy* . . . at least, for a while. But is there a *good* that offers us genuine and lasting happiness? If so, what is it? Now we're getting closer to what the ancients were interested in knowing about happiness.

Of course, as you can probably guess, many different answers were proposed. A few thought that happiness could be found in the pleasures of the flesh. But most believed you needed something a bit more . . . *lofty*, shall we say, in order to experience *real* happiness, things like friendship, peace of mind, virtue, and even God. One thing they virtually all agreed on was that a truly good and happy life ought to be

lived with a sense of mission or purpose. Hence, the ancients did not think about happiness primarily in terms of just "having a good time." Instead, they thought there was an important *moral* component to happiness. As Christian theologian Ellen Charry notes, for the ancients, happiness "comes from using oneself consistently, intentionally, and effectively, and hence it is a moral undertaking."{3}

The link between morality and happiness has, I fear, become rather under-appreciated in our own day. But important as it is, many (including myself) don't believe that this can be the *final* word on happiness. So in an effort to find out what is, we'll spend the rest of this article looking first at some of the most important pagan perspectives on happiness from the ancient world before concluding with a Christian proposal by possibly the greatest theologian in the early church, a man named Augustine.{4}

Epicureanism

Let's begin with Epicureanism. Epicurus lived from 341–270 B.C. and is often viewed as the poster boy for a hedonistic lifestyle. A popular gourmet cooking site, epicurious.com, creatively plays off this reputation to celebrate the pleasures of a great meal.{5} But as we'll see, Epicurus was not the total "party animal" that people often think.{6}

Although he rightly regarded physical pleasure as a good thing, and believed that it was natural for us to want it, he personally thought that friendship and mental tranquility were even better. It was these latter sources of happiness, and not merely the pleasures of the flesh, which Epicurus thought of as the greatest goods. In order to attain them, he even commended a life of virtue. After all, it's the virtuous person, living at peace with his neighbors, who generally has far less cause for fear and worry than someone who's been up to no good. Such a person is thus more likely to experience the true joys of friendship and mental tranquility than his

non-virtuous counterpart.{7}

As you can probably see, there are aspects of Epicureanism that even a Christian can appreciate. But there are problems with this view as well. For example, while Epicurus did not deny either God or the gods, he did teach that they were rather unconcerned about human affairs, and he denied that there would be a final judgment. For him, death was simply the end of existence and you didn't need to worry that God would judge you for your deeds in an afterlife. But these ideas made many people uncomfortable.

For instance, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) reacted strongly against Epicureanism in his book *The Nature of the Gods.* And Lactantius, an early Christian writer (A.D. 250-325), believed that only the fear of God "guards the mutual society of men."{8} In his view, if people think they aren't accountable to God, society will likely be in trouble. Hence, many thinkers worried that Epicureanism might lead to an amoral—or even *immoral*—pursuit of pleasure as the highest good of life. And unfortunately, this "can just as easily lead to debauchery and . . . selfishness as it can to the simple, honest life style of Epicurus."{9}

So while the Epicurean view of happiness has some things in its favor, there are several reasons for rejecting it.

Stoicism

Stoicism was another important school of thought that addressed the issue of human happiness. In the ancient world, it "was the single most successful and longest-lasting movement in Greco-Roman philosophy."{10} The Stoics' manly, morally tough philosophy of life had broad appeal in the ancient world. It attracted slaves like Epictetus (ca. A.D. 55-ca. 135) as well as the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180). Even many of the early church fathers admired the Stoic emphasis on moral virtue and integrity.{11}

So what did the Stoics think about human happiness? According to Ellen Charry, the Stoics viewed "the goal of life" as human flourishing. This was understood, however, not in terms of having a long life or being financially successful. Rather, it was viewed "as maintaining one's dignity and grace whatever may happen."{12} The Stoics understood that things don't always work out as we want. Life throws us many curve balls and, if we're not prepared, we're bound to be disappointed.

Their solution? In a statement reminiscent of the Buddha's teaching, the Stoic Epictetus declared, "Demand not that events happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will get on well."{13} We often don't have any control over what goes on around us. But we can control how we react to it. By knowing the good and morally virtuous thing to do, and by consistently choosing to do this, one attains the highest happiness of which human beings are capable; namely, "the enjoyment of self that comes from the conviction that one is living a principled life of the highest integrity."{14} This, in a nutshell, is the Stoic conception of human happiness.

But there are some problems with this view. Although Christians will readily cheer the Stoic commitment to a life of moral virtue, they'll nonetheless deny that such a life is ever really possible apart from the grace of God. As the Christian theologian Augustine observed, Stoicism fails to adequately address the problem of human sinfulness. Moreover, he thought, it holds out the false hope that one can achieve happiness through self-effort. But as Augustine wisely saw, only God can make us truly happy. Hence, while there's much to admire about Stoicism, as a philosophy of human happiness it must ultimately disappoint.{15}

Neo-Platonism

Having now surveyed Epicureanism and Stoicism, and found each of them wanting, we must next turn to Neo-Platonism to see if

it fares any better.

Probably the most important Neo-Platonist philosopher was a man named Plotinus, who lived in the third century A.D. Plotinus believed that in the beginning was the One, "the supreme transcendent principle" and the "ground of all being."{16} Everything which now exists ultimately originated from the One through a series of emanations. Since everything proceeds from the One *not* by a process of creation, but rather by a process of emanation, "Creator and creation . . . are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus's account."{17}

Although this is certainly different from the biblical view, in which there *is* a clear distinction between Creator and creation, it would probably not be fair to simply call Plotinus a pantheist—that is, someone who believes that "all" of reality is "Divine." According to one scholar, Plotinus tried "to steer a middle course" between pure pantheism (on the one hand) and creation by God (on the other).{18} But since everything that exists emanates or proceeds from the One, Plotinus's view is certainly *close* to pantheism. And it is thus quite different from the biblical doctrine of creation.

But how is this relevant to Plotinus's perspective on the nature of human happiness? According to Plotinus, since everything (including mankind) emanates out of the One, human beings can only truly find happiness by realizing their "oneness" with the One. In Plotinus's view, "Happiness resides in a person's realization that she is one with divinity."{19} According to Plotinus, then, realizing one's "oneness" with the One is the key to human happiness.

Are there any problems with this view? Although there's much to admire about Neo-Platonism, and while it was quite influential in the early church, it was never entirely accepted, and that for several reasons. From a Christian perspective, Neo-Platonism ultimately has a defective view of

God, creation, human nature, the meaning of salvation, and what happens to a person after death. In other words, while the system is very religious, it's *not* Christianity. And thus, while we can agree with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, we must nonetheless reject his system on the grounds that he's not pointing us to the one *true* God.

Augustinianism

Having previously surveyed some of the most important perspectives on happiness from the ancient world, we'll now bring our discussion to a close by briefly considering the thought of Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the early church. Augustine lived from A.D. 354 to 430 and was familiar with the various perspectives on happiness which we've already examined.

Like the Epicureans, he believed that our happiness is at least tangentially related to our physical well-being. Like the Stoics, he believed that a life of integrity and moral virtue was important for human happiness. And like the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, Augustine thought that true human happiness could only be found in God.

Nevertheless, Augustine views each of these perspectives as ultimately inadequate for all who long to experience *lasting* human happiness (and Augustine thinks that's pretty much all of us). After all, neither physical well-being nor a virtuous life can grant us lasting happiness if our existence ends at death. And while he agrees with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, Augustine (like all Christians) is convinced that Plotinus ultimately has a defective view of God.{20}

So where is true and lasting happiness to be found? Ellen Charry sums up Augustine's view quite nicely when she writes, "Happiness is knowing, loving, and enjoying God securely."{21} In Augustine's view, happiness is a condition in which one's

desires are realized. Happy is he who has what" he wants," he writes in his little book on happiness.{22} But he also believed that what we all really want is the *everlasting* possession of the *greatest* good that can be had. That is, we want the best that there is—and we want it forever!

But since the greatest good can only be God, the source and foundation of every other good there is (or ever will be), it seems that what we ultimately want, whether we realize it or not, is God! And if we not only want the best that there is, but want it forever, it seems that we must ultimately want the very thing God freely offers us in Christ, namely, everlasting life in the presence of God. The psalmist urges us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). And those who do are promised joy in His presence and "eternal pleasures" at His right hand (Psalm 16:11).

This, then, is Augustine's view on human happiness. In my opinion, it's far and away the best perspective that we've examined in this article, and I hope you'll think so, too.

Notes

1. Cited from the text of the Declaration of Independence at www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (accessed August 26, 2011).

2. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, inc., s.v. "happiness," dictionary.reference.com/browse/happiness (accessed August 26, 2011).

3. Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3-4.

4. Ellen Charry surveys the views of each of these persons and perspectives in the first two chapters of her book *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.

5. For more, check out www.epicurious.com

6. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 70.

7. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion of Epicurus in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 70-71.

8. Lactantius, "A Treatise on the Anger of God," in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 269; cited in Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 8.

9. Stanley R. Obitts, "Epicureanism," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 358.

10. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.

11. Gary T. Burke, "Stoics, Stoicism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1056.

12. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 9.

13. The Enchiridion, VIII; cited in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.

14. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 10.

15. This paragraph is indebted to Ellen Charry's discussion of Augustine's critique of Stoicism in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 14-15.

16. Everett Ferguson, "Neoplatonism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 756.

17. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 122.

18. Frederick Copleston, Greece and Rome, vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City: Image Books, 1985), 467.

19. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 19.

20. This paragraph and the one that precedes it are generally indebted to Charry's discussion in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.

21. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 29.

22. De beata vita 10; cited in John Bussanich, "Happiness, Eudaimonism," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 413.

A Trial in Athens – Apologetics in the New Testament

Acts 17 provides one of the best examples of Paul engaging in apologetics in the New Testament. Rick Wade shows how Paul finds a point of contact with people to get a hearing.

The Apologist Paul

When we think of a biblical basis for apologetics, we typically think of Peter's brief comments about defending the faith in 1 Pet. 3:15. We don't typically think of *Paul* as an apologist. But in his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul said that they were "partakers with [him] in the defense and confirmation of the faith" (1:7; see also v.16). Apologetics was a significant aspect of Paul's ministry.

An event that has received a great amount of attention in the study of Paul's ministry is his address to the Areopagus in Athens, recorded in Acts 17: 16-34. That address will be my

topic in this article. Maybe we can be encouraged by Paul's example to speak out for Christ the way he did.

Athens was a still a significant city in Paul's day. Although not so much a major political power, it retained its prestige for its cultural and intellectual achievements.{1} What we see today as the art treasures of the ancient world, however, Paul saw as images of gods and places for their worship. And there were a lot of them.

Being provoked by this in his spirit, Paul began telling people about Jesus. He made his way to the synagogue as he had done in various cities before.{2} There he bore witness to Jews and to God-fearing Gentiles.

He also went to the Agora—the marketplace—to talk with the citizens of Athens.{3} Among them were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. After hearing him for a bit, the philosophers started calling Paul a "babbler," a term of derision that meant literally "seed picker." F. F. Bruce wrote that "[this word] was used of one who picked up scraps of learning here and there and purveyed them where he could."{4}

Peddlers of strange new religious beliefs were fairly common in those days. But this was a risky thing to do. It was unlawful to teach the worship of gods that hadn't been officially authorized.{5} Not long before this event, Paul was dragged into the marketplace in Philippi for "advocating customs unlawful for . . . Romans to accept or practice" (Acts 16:19-21). Eventually the people of Athens took Paul to the Areopagus, a powerful court which had authority in matters of religion and philosophy.{6} They wanted to know about these strange new ideas he was presenting.

Paul had the opportunity to tell the highest religious and philosophical body in Athens about the true God.

Greek Religion

As Paul looked around the city of Athens, his spirit was provoked within him. The people of Athens had surrounded themselves with idols that obscured the reality of the one true God.

Other historical writings affirm the prominence of religion in Athens. For example, a second century writer named Pausanius claimed that "the Athenians are far more devoted to religion than other men."{7} His description of Athens names statue after statue, temple after temple. There were statues of gods everywhere, even on the mountains. There were temples built to Athena, Poseidon, Hephaestus, Zeus, Artemis, Ares, and more.

Paul spoke of the altar to the unknown god (Acts 17:23).There were quite a few such altars in those days. The late New Testament scholar, Bertil Gärtner, wrote that these altars were erected "either because an unknown god was considered the author of tribulations or good fortune, or because men feared to pass over some deity."{8}

Greco-Roman religion was mainly about myth and ritual. Myths were the religious explanations of life and the world, and rituals were reenactments of them. Religion was mostly about appeasing the gods with the proper sacrifices to gain their favor and avoid their wrath.

Although morality wasn't closely associated with religion, that isn't to say that the way one lived was irrelevant.{9} As described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the souls of the dead were led by the god Hermes to the depths of the earth to await the decision about their eternal place. The guilty were sent to "dark Tartarus." The pious went to the Elysian Fields.{10} In later years, the place of the blessed souls was said to be in the celestial realm. The afterlife, however, was still one of a shadowy existence.

There was no sacred/profane distinction in the Greco-Roman world; religion was not only a part of everyday life, it was integral to all the rest. Because of that, Christianity was not just a threat to religious belief; it threatened to upset all of culture. This is why Paul ran into such harsh opposition not only in Athens but also in Lystra and Philippi and Ephesus.

We live in a pluralistic society today. So did the apostles. But this did not stop the spread of the gospel. As we see at the end of Acts 17, some people did abandon their pluralism for faith in the one true God.

Epicureanism

When Paul went to the Agora in Athens to tell people about Jesus, he encountered some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicureanism and Stoicism had "an influence that eclipsed that of all rival [philosophical] schools."{11} The late British scholar Christopher Stead wrote that they "offered a practical policy for ordering one's life which could appeal to the ordinary man. It has been argued that this was especially needed in the disorientation caused by the decline of the Greek city-states in the face of Alexander's empire."{12}

The school of Epicureanism was founded by Epicurus in the fourth century BC. His primary goal was to help people find happiness and peace of mind. He taught that a happy life is one in which pleasure predominates. These pleasures shouldn't, however, cause any harm or discomfort. They aren't found in a life of debauchery. Drinking and revelry just bring pain and confusion.{13} Pleasure was to be found in living a peaceful life in the company of like-minded friends. The intellectual pleasures of contemplation were the highest, because they could be experienced even if the body suffered.

There was more to Epicureanism than simply a lifestyle,

however. Epicureans held two basic beliefs which stand in stark contrast to the message Paul preached to the Areopagus. These beliefs were thought to provide the basis for a tranquil life.

First, although Epicureans believed in the existence of the gods, they believed the gods had no interest in the affairs of people. Epicurus taught that the gods were very much like the Epicureans; they were examples of the ideal tranquil life. Although Epicureans might participate in religious ceremonies and "honour the gods for their excellence,"{14} they didn't seek the gods' favor through sacrifice.

A second key belief was the denial of the afterlife. Epicurus taught that after death comes extinction. According to their cosmogony, the world was created when atoms, falling through space, began to collide and form bodies. Like the heavenly bodies, we also are merely material beings. When we die, our material bodies decay and we no longer exist.{15} Thus, there was no fear of judgment in an afterlife.

Stoicism

As Paul mingled with the people in the Athenian Agora, he spoke not only with Epicureans, but with Stoics as well.

Stoicism was a school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Cyprus who lived from 335 to 263 BC. During a time of political instability, Stoicism "provided a means for maintaining tranquility amid the struggles of life."{16} As with Epicurus, freedom from fear was a motivating force in Zeno's thought.{17}

What did the Stoics believe that released them from fear? Stoicism changed over the centuries, but this is a good general description.

While the Epicureans believed the gods didn't get involved in

the affairs of people on earth, Stoics denied the existence of personal gods altogether.

Stoics believed the—universe began with fire that differentiated itself into the other basic elements of water, air, and earth. The universe was composed purely of matter. The coarser matter made up the physical bodies we see. The finer matter was defused throughout everything and held everything together. This they called *logos* (reason) or sometimes breath or spirit or even fire. The idea of logos meant there was a rational principle operating in the universe.

Because the universe was thought to be ordered by an inbuilt *principle* and not by a *mind*, Stoics were deterministic. This raises a question, though. If everything was determined, what would that mean for ethics? Virtue was of supreme importance for Stoics. How could one choose the good if one's actions are determined? One answer given was this: while *people* had the freedom to choose, the universe would do what it was determined to do. But if one wanted to live well, one had to live rationally in keeping with the rational order of the universe. To do otherwise was to make oneself miserable.

Some Stoics believed that the universe would one day erupt in a great fire from which would come another universe. Others thought the universe was eternal. Some believed that in future universes, people would repeat their lives over and over. Others believed that death was the end of a person's existence. In either case, there was no immortality as we understand it.

Thus, Stoics sought peace in their troubled times by denying the existence of meddlesome gods and an afterlife that would bring judgment.

Paul's Speech

When Paul was allowed to speak before the Areopagus, he made a strategic move. By pointing to the altar to the unknown god, and later referring to the comments of the Greeks' own poets, he averted the charge of introducing new gods. At least on the surface!

Having brought their admitted ignorance to light, Paul told them about the true God. His declaration that a personal God made the heavens and the earth was a direct challenge to the Epicureans and Stoics. His announcement that God didn't live in temples or need the service of people was a challenge to the practices of the religious Greeks.

Paul told them that God wasn't far off and unknown. The phrase "in him we live, and move, and have our being," which refers to Zeus, likely comes from Epimenides of Crete. The line, "we are his offspring," is found in a poem by Aratus.{18} Paul wasn't equating Zeus with God, but was telling them *which* God they were really near to.

Then Paul delivered a charge to the people. God was overlooking their time of ignorance and calling them to repent.{19} This was more than simply a call to a virtuous life as with the philosophers or a call to perform the required sacrifices to the gods. This repentance was necessary, Paul said, for God has set a time to judge the world through His appointed man, and that judgment is assured by the raising of that man from the dead. (2:26)

This was too much for the people of Athens for a few reasons. First, Paul presented an entirely different cosmology. History, he told them, was bound by the creation of God on one end and the judgment of God on the other. Second, there was no room for a historical resurrection in Greek thought. The dyings and risings of their gods didn't occur in space-time history.

By attacking the Greeks' religion, Paul attacked the foundations of their whole cultural structure. New Testament scholar Kavin Rowe writes that, because religion was so interwoven with the rest of life, Paul's visit to Athens –and to Lystra, Philippi, and Ephesus as well–"[displays] . . . the collision between two different ways of life."{20}

The gospel we proclaim doesn't just lay claim to our religious beliefs. It affects our entire lives. Paul knew what was central to the Greeks, what was the core issue that had to be addressed. Likewise, we need to know the fundamental worldview beliefs of our neighbors and how to address them with an approach that will get us a hearing.

Notes

1. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 349.
2. Acts 13 gives a good picture of how Paul presented the gospel to his fellow Jews.
3. The Web site Ancient Athens 3D gives an interesting visual representation of the Agora, the marketplace, as it looked in Paul's day. ancientathens3d.com/romagoralEn.htm.
4. Bruce, *Acts*, 351, n. 20.
5. Charles Carter and Ralph Earle, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 256, and Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostle," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., J.D. Douglas, assoc. ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976-1992), CD.
6. See C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 31.
7. Pausanius, *Description of Greece*, "Attica", 1:24:1, written c. AD 160, www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pausanias-bk1.html
8. Bertil Edgar Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis, vol. 21 (Uppsala, 1955), 245, quoted in Everett Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 270. See also

the discussion in Carter and Earle, *Acts*, 259.
9. This may seem inconsistent. But one must keep in mind that religion wasn't one aspect of life that was clearly distinguishable from the rest. Life was all of a piece in the ancient world.
10. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity,* 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 233.
11. Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 40.
12. Ibid.
13. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, quoted in Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, bk. 1, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985), 407-08.
14. Copleston, *History*, 406.
15. Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 42.
16. Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, and James K.A. Smith, *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), s.v. "Stoicism."
17. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 333.
18. Carter and Earle note that this line also appears in Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus. I credited Aratus with the line because F. F. Bruce notes that Kirsopp Lake "points out that the immediately following lines of Aratus's poem have 'a strong general resemblance to v. 26 of the Areopagitica'" (Bruce, *Acts*, 360, n. 50). It could be that Aratus got it from Cleanthes (cf. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 37-38).
19. Some Christians hold that the Greek word for "repent," *metanoeō,* means merely to change one's mind. This sometimes comes up in Lordship salvation debates. The basic meanings of the two parts of the word aren't sufficient for understanding its use. *Metanoeō,* in the New Testament, denotes conversion. "The predominantly intellectual understanding of *metanoeō* as change of mind plays very little part in the NT. Rather the decision by the whole man to turn round is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward turning nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas." Colin

Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1975), s.v., "Conversion, 358).
20. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 50, 51.

The World of the Apostle Paul

Rick Wade examines different aspects of life in the day of the Apostle Paul: religion, philosophy, the family unit, social morality, and Christians' conflict with the culture.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Religion

The purpose of this essay is to take a look at the Greco-Roman world in which the Apostle Paul lived so that we can better comprehend his ministry. Understanding the historical context helps us to gain such a perspective. We'll discuss religion, philosophy, the family unit, and the social morality of the Hellenistic culture with a concluding look at the conflict Christians faced.

Let's begin with the religion of the first century. Two episodes in the book of Acts provide insight into the religious beliefs and practices of that time.

In Acts 19 we read about the trouble Paul's companions got into over His ministry in Ephesus. Craftsmen who made miniature shrines of Artemis, the local deity, objected to Paul's teaching that "man- made gods are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26). In Paul's world, religion was an integral part of

everyone's life. State-sponsored civic cults were one religious expression participated in by everybody. Historian Everett Ferguson notes that "the most deeply ingrained religious beliefs and practice in both Greece and Rome. . . . were associated with the traditional civic cult."(1) The state both funded and profited by these cults.

Each city had its patron deity. The city of Ephesus honored Artemis, the goddess of nature and of childbirth. The statue of Artemis stood in a magnificent temple, four times as large as the Parthenon in Athens. Deities such as Artemis were honored with festivals, prayers, and sacrifices. Annual festivals included banquets, entertainment, sacrifices, processions, athletic contests, and the performance of mystery rites. Prayers included invocation, praise, and petition with the goal of receiving the favor of the goddess. Sacrifices were offered for praise, thanksgiving, or supplication.

The riot in Ephesus that resulted from Paul's teaching was prompted partly by monetary concerns; the craftsmen were afraid of losing business. But the chant, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" which went on for two hours—by people who didn't even know what the specific problem was—shows that money was not the only issue. The strength of religious devotion to the civic cults was such that Roman emperors saw the advantage of identifying with them instead of fighting them. We'll talk more about that later in this essay.

Ephesus was also a major center of magical activity, another part of the religious practice of the first century. In Acts 19 we read about practitioners of magic or sorcery forsaking their practices and burning their scrolls as they publicly declared their new faith.

The Ephesians' scrolls contained secret words and formulas which were used to force the gods to do one's bidding. The precise formula was critical. Practitioners sought wealth, healing, or power; they even used magic in an attempt to gain

another person’s love. Because it was also believed that to know someone’s true name was to have power over that person, names and formulas were blended to produce strong magic.

Paul carried his message to a world with a multitude of religious beliefs, and the message he proclaimed showed its power over them. As we look at our culture with its increasingly pluralistic religious spectrum, we must remember that we, too, carry the same gospel with the same power.

Philosophy

When the Apostle Paul visited Athens, he took the message of Christ to the marketplace where a wide variety of people could be encountered. Among those he talked to were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. We read about his encounter with them in Acts 17.

Who were these Epicureans and Stoics? I’d like to give a thumbnail sketch of their ideas about God, man, and the world which will help us understand why Paul what he did.

Stoicism and Epicureanism were philosophies which were developed to free people from the concerns of the present life.

Stoicism was materialistic and pantheistic. That is, Stoics believed that everything was composed of matter. The higher form of matter was of a divine nature, and it pervaded the universe. They called it various things: fire, Zeus, or even God. They believed that this divine “fire,” or God, generated the universe and would one day take the universe back into itself through a great conflagration. This cycle of creation and conflagration is repeated eternally.

Stoicism was thus deterministic. Things are the way they are and can’t be changed. To find true happiness, they believed one should understand the course of nature through reason and simply accept things the way they are.

In contrast to the Stoics, Paul taught that God is personal and not a part of this universe. He also taught that there would be a judgment to come, not a giant conflagration leading to another cycle.

Epicureans focused on the individual's happiness, also, but they went in a completely different direction than the Stoics. They believed that the way to happiness was through maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Tranquility was sought through a quiet, contemplative life lived among a community of friends.

Epicureans were materialists, also, but they weren't pantheists. They believed the universe was formed from atoms falling through space which occasionally bumped into each other accidentally, eventually forming the stars and planets and us. When we die, we simply become dissolved into atoms again. Epicureans believed in the gods, but thought they were like men, only of a higher order. The gods resided out in space somewhere, enjoying a life of quiet pleasure like that of the Epicureans. They had nothing to do with men. Apart from participation in sacrifices and religious rituals for aesthetic purposes, Epicureans believed humans needn't worry about the gods.

Against the Epicureans, Paul taught that God *is* involved in the affairs of His creation and created us specifically to search for Him. Of course, Paul's doctrine of a future judgment didn't fit with their thinking either.

As Paul evangelized the Greek world, he sometimes used their terminology and concepts; he even quoted their poets. But he preached a very different message. Maybe we, too, can find common ground with our culture by knowing what people believe and by putting the gospel into terms they understand. Without modifying the message itself, we must phrase it in a way that it can be understood. If we don't, we'll have a hard time getting people to listen.

The Family Unit

We've given some attention to the religion and philosophy of Paul's day, but what about the social structures of the Greco-Roman world? More specifically, what was the family like in the first century?

By the first century A.D., marriage was mostly by mutual consent. Historian Everett Ferguson describes marriage this way: "Consent to live together constituted marriage in all societies, and the procreation of children was its explicit object. Marriages were registered in order to make the children legitimate."(2) Although marriages were mostly monogamous, adultery was common. Divorce required only oral or written notice.

Men had the dominant role in the family. They had absolute authority over their children and slaves. Wives remained under their fathers' authority. Men occupied their time with business interests and such social outlets as banquets, and the gymnasia which included exercise facilities, pools, and lecture halls. These functioned as community centers.

In the husband's absence the wife might conduct his business for him. However, managing the home was the wife's primary responsibility. Ferguson quotes the Greek writer Apollodorus who said, "We have courtesans for pleasure, handmaidens for the day-to- day care of the body, wives to bear legitimate children and to be a trusted guardian of things in the home."(3)

Women weren't necessarily confined to the home, however. Some engaged in occupations as diverse as music, medicine, and commerce. Many held civic office, and some held leadership positions in the religious cults.

Children were not considered a part of the family until acknowledged by the father. They could be sold or exposed if

not wanted.

Parents were on their own to find suitable education for their children. Girls could go to the elementary schools, but that was rare. They mostly learned household skills at home. Although most boys learned a trade at home or through an apprenticeship, they could go through a series of primary, secondary, and advanced schooling depending on their class status. Rote memorization was a key element in primary education. Rhetoric was the most important subject in advanced education.

Slaves were a part of the family unit in the Roman Empire. They might be obtained through a number of means including war, child exposure, and the sale of persons to pay debts. Slaves might work in the mines, in temples, in homes as teachers, or in industry; they even held high positions as administrators in civil bureaucracy. Slaves often earned enough money to buy their own freedom, although they had to continue working for their former owners.

Into this society the apostles brought new ideas about the value of the individual and about family relationships. Husbands were to be faithful to their own wives and to love them as their own bodies. Children were to be seen as much more than economic assets or liabilities. Masters were told to treat slaves with justice and fairness. People today who revile Christianity as being “oppressive” probably have no idea how much it elevated people in the Hellenistic world.

Social Morality

Moral instruction in the Hellenistic world was found more in philosophy and custom than in religion. Religion was largely external; that is, it was a matter of ritual more than of inner transformation. Philosophy sought to teach people how to live. Philosophers gave much attention to such matters as virtue, friendship, and civic responsibility.(4)

Historian Everett Ferguson notes that evidence from the Greco-Roman era indicates that many people lived quite virtuous lives. Inscriptions on grave stones, for example, include praises for husbands and wives for kindness and faithfulness.(5)

In spite of all this, history reveals a morally debased culture in the first century. One example is sexual immorality. "The numerous words in the Greek language for sexual relations," says Ferguson, "suggest a preoccupation with this aspect of life."(6) As I noted earlier, adultery was common. Men often had courtesans for physical pleasure. Homosexuality between young men or between an older and a younger man was openly accepted. Temple prostitution was part of some religious cults.

A low estimate of human worth was exhibited in the Hellenistic world. Earlier I mentioned child exposure as a way of getting rid of children. Unwanted babies—more often girls—were put on the garbage pile or left in some isolated area to die. They might be picked up to be used, to be sold as slaves, or to serve as prostitutes.

The brutality of the day was seen most clearly in the games in the Roman amphitheaters. Ferguson notes that, "The amphitheaters of the west testify to the lust for blood under the empire. The spectacles of gladiatorial combat—man against man, man against animal, and animal against animal—drew huge crowds and replaced Greek drama and athletics in popularity."(7) Executions were considered less exciting than mortal combat. Consequently, when executions were included in the day's program, they were typically carried out during the lunch break. One of the ways criminals were disposed of was by dressing them in animal skins and throwing them to wild animals.

Such brutality was extended to the Christians in the days of persecutions. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* records that Nero had

Christians thrown to the wild animals. He also had them dipped in wax, mounted on trees, and burned like giant torches in his gardens.(8)

Into this world of immorality and brutality came the message of love and righteousness found in Jesus. As with Judaism before, Christianity put religion and morality together. It revealed God's standard of goodness and the sacrificial love of Christ, and it provided the power to attain that standard through the regenerating work of the Spirit based on Christ's work on the cross.

Today, ethics and religion are again separate. And the results are being seen. But as in the first century, Christians today have a message of grace for our society: God not only tells us what *is* good, He also enables us to *be* good.

Christians' Conflict with the Culture

In the early church, the character of Christians was very important for gaining a hearing and for winning converts as they boldly gave testimony of their new faith.

What were these Christians like? The writer of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, written probably in the early second century, said this about them: "They marry as do all; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all."(9)

If their lives were of such an exemplary nature, what was it that got Christians into so much trouble? Two of the most important factors were their unwillingness to participate in religious rituals and their refusal to bow before the images of the emperors.

Earlier I mentioned the importance of the civic religious cults in the Hellenistic world. The people believed that the gods required their sacrifices and other observances; otherwise, they would be angry and take their wrath out on the people as a whole. For the Christians to refuse to participate was to risk angering the gods.

The other factor was the matter of emperor worship. When Rome conquered the Western world, the rulers saw how important religion was to the people. Rather than fight against this, they took advantage of it by putting images of the Roman emperors in places of worship with the other deities. This wasn't a big problem for the Greeks. Apart from the fact that the Romans were their rulers, Greeks weren't exclusive in their worship. To worship one deity didn't preclude worshiping others as well.

For the Christians, however, Jesus was *Lord*; there could be no other gods besides Him, and they couldn't bow before anyone who claimed divine authority, including the emperor. However, since in the minds of the Romans the emperor represented the state, to refuse to bow before his image was to be an enemy of the state.

Thus, because of their refusal to participate in these activities, Christians were called atheists and enemies of the state. Their behavior was baffling to their neighbors. Why couldn't they just go through the motions? As I already noted, religion was non- exclusive. The people didn't necessarily *believe* in the gods to whom they made sacrifice, anyway. And since there was little or no connection between religion and ethics, one's religious activities didn't normally affect one's moral life. So, why couldn't the Christians just play along? The reason they couldn't was that to bow before the emperors or the gods would be to commit idolatry which was *the* fundamental sin in the early church.

Christians in the early church had to decide where they could

conform to their society and where they couldn’t. There was a difference of opinion as to what was appropriate and what wasn’t. But it was clear that anyone who would be identified as a Christian had to draw the line here: Jesus is Lord, and there is no other.

Notes

1. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 188.
2. Ibid., 68.
3. Ibid., 70-71.
4. Ibid., 303.
5. Ibid., 64.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 94.
8. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, (Old Tappen, New Jersey: Spire Books, 1968), 13.
9. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 136.