

“Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Eph. 4:23)

Humanism and Scripture: their influences on our thinking

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This article shows that all through the ages man has sought to follow his own way rather than God's. The Apostle Paul opposed such teachings as put forth by Greek philosophical schools such as the Epicureans and Stoics, philosophies which are still around in the humanistic teachings that pervade society today. In contrast to these, he taught the principles of God's wisdom, as for example in Ephesians 4:21-32.

EVER SINCE the garden of Eden, God has tested man by subjecting him to two contrary voices: God's own commands, and an opposing voice that sets forth an alternative way. Table 1 sets out some typical examples of this.

Thus Adam was expelled from the garden, the children of Israel died in the wilderness and a later generation went into captivity in Babylon because they would not heed the voice of God.

Table 1		
The voice of God	The opposing voice	Reference
Thou shalt surely die	Ye shall not surely die	Gen. 2:17; 3:4
The LORD . . . will bring us into this land	We be not able to go up against the people	Num. 13:31;14:8
The vessels that remain in the house of the LORD . . . shall be carried to Babylon	The vessels of the LORD's house shall now shortly be brought again from Babylon	Jer. 27:16,21,22
The days are at hand, and the effect of every vision	The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth	Ezek. 12:22,23
Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God	If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread	Mt. 4:3,4
If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing	Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved	Gal. 5:2; Acts 15:1
The body is not for fornication, but for the Lord	All things are lawful unto me . . . Meats for the belly and the belly for meats	1 Cor. 6:12,13

God has always sought intelligent obedience from those whom He is calling, but a survey of the contexts of the passages quoted in Table 1 will show that in the majority of cases man has failed the test. He has listened to the seductive voice of the flesh rather than to the commands of the Spirit and has had to suffer the consequences.

These events sound a very serious warning to us, as we live in the latter days of the times of the Gentiles. The two voices are still speaking, and mankind does not have a very good history of obeying the Word of God. “Are we better than they?” (Rom. 3:9). Probably not. We need, therefore, first of all, to be able to distinguish between

the two voices and to know which one is from God.

That might sound simple, but in Jeremiah 28 there is recorded the situation of Hananiah the prophet and Jeremiah the prophet both standing in the temple and saying, "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel" (vv. 2,14). Each claimed to be a prophet, each bore the Yahweh Name (as indicated above by italics), each pronounced a message which claimed to be from Yahweh; but the messages were opposed to one another.

The people had to decide. Who was the true prophet and who was speaking lies in the name of Yahweh? So today, each of the two voices may quote Scripture, both arguments may sound very convincing; but one is wrong.

We are commanded in Ephesians 4:22-24 to "put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and . . . put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness".

The voice of the flesh must be rejected and the voice of the Spirit must be heeded. What is the issue for us? It is not whether or not to partake of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; it is not whether or not to go into the land of promise; it is not whether or not circumcision still applies. All these things are profitable illustrations of the problem, but they do not directly concern us. Our problem is perhaps more subtle, and the Scripture history of it begins in Acts 17.

The Epicureans and the Stoics

When Paul, on his second journey, reached Athens, the record states that "certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him" (Acts 17:18). Why should Scripture bother to notice who these individuals were? They are obviously named for a reason, which investigation of their origins will reveal.

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who lived from 341 to 270 B.C. Of him it has been written: "Epicurus helped lay the intellectual foundations for modern science and for secular individualism, with many aspects of his system still highly relevant some twenty-three centuries after they were first taught to Epicurus's students at his school in Athens".¹ His name has passed into our language; today an epicure is one with refined tastes in food, wine, literature, etc.

The Stoics were disciples of a Greek philosopher named Zeno of Cittium, who lived about 300 to 260 B.C. He is said to be "One of antiquity's boldest yet least known thinkers. Stoic philosophy is in many ways similar to the Taoist philosophy of China. Both teach one to attune with his/her inner nature. Both encourage simple living and contentment with one's present state of being".² Zeno's followers were called Stoics because he taught in a painted colonnade off the Athenian agora (the "market" of Acts 17:17) called the Stoa Poikile. The word 'stoic' has also come into our language to describe a person who has great self-control, fortitude or austerity.

The teachings of these two philosophers are summarised in Table 2.

	Epicureans	Stoics
1	The gods are remote and indifferent to evil	God does not have personality
2	The universe is material and governed by chance	Human life is governed by fate
3	Sensation is infallible and anything can be asserted as true	Man cannot change the determined course of events
4	The senses are to be gratified and the desires of the stomach are the root of all good	Moral values can be changed by circumstances
5	Pleasure is the sole good and pain is the sole evil	Hardship and pleasure should be encountered with complete indifference
6	There is no such thing as absolute justice	Absolute apathy is the highest moral virtue

"In a real sense, what is distinctive to humanism is its commitment to a set of ethical values. For the humanist *the central value is the achievement of the good life here, now and for each and every person*. This means self-realisation, creative fulfilment, and joyful exuberance. In a just society every person is equal in dignity and value. This means each individual (whether the ruler or the ordinary citizen) is equal before the law and should not be deprived of the opportunity to participate in society *and achieve the good life*. It also means that no person should be denied equal access because of . . . gender or sexual orientation. *The right to self-determination is thus basic. Individuals ought to be given the freedom to select their own values, careers, partners, or lifestyles so long as they do not deny the same right to others*. What is especially surprising today, given the rapidity of scientific, technological, economic, political and moral change on a global scale, is the persistence of ancient religious systems: Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam etc. *These systems provide belief in the supernatural deity or deities, and also in the idea of human salvation and obedience to divine commandments*. Humanism is non-theistic and it rejects these supernatural doctrines and provides a naturalistic humanist alternative. The central issue concerns the meaning of life and the role of the human person on this planet. *The humanist outlook is based upon the sciences; that is, upon the best theories that have been developed and have been experimentally verified*. Humanism draws upon the physical, biological, social and behavioural sciences in order to explain how nature operates and why human beings behave the way they do. *And we wish to use reason to resolve our problems, not placate a non-existent God for succour*. What we are confronted with are ancient metaphysical and supernatural systems, which seek to explain the universe and attempt to derive moral and in many cases even political injunctions from their religious faith".

Paul Kurtz, *Agenda for Humanism in the Twenty-First Century*³

It is very interesting to compare these teachings with those of modern humanism, as given in the quotation from a modern humanist in the panel above, especially in the statements I have put in italics.

Thus several aspects of modern humanism can be seen in the creeds of the Epicureans and the Stoics, and these philosophers were in fact the great-great-grandfathers of modern secular humanism. Acts 17, therefore, provides us with a Scriptural model for dealing with the humanist view, for Paul recognised that these philosophies were completely subversive of the Truth.

I believe that Paul's argument on Mars' Hill is based on Isaiah 45, which contains all his major points. Obviously he does not quote Isaiah because he is speaking to Gentiles, to whom Scripture would have no authority. His address can be summarised as follows:

vv. 22,23. Paul used their attitude, and the altar he had seen, as a starting point; then he accused these 'wise' men of ignorance!

vv. 24,25. He preached God as the Creator (this was his normal approach to a Gentile audience, see 14:15-17) and the sustainer of life, thus refuting points 1 and 2 of the Epicurean creed and point 1 of the Stoics', as shown in [Table 2](#).

v. 26. He contended that God is in control all of His creation in time and space, thus opposing point 2 of the Epicurean creed and point 2 of the Stoics'.

vv. 27,28. He argued that man's task is to seek God, for He is very near to us, countering point 5 of the Epicureans and points 3 and 6 of the Stoics' beliefs.

vv. 29,30. Paul then demonstrated that their ideas of God were wrong, they were ignorant, countering Epicurean teachings 1-3 and Stoic teachings 1-4.

v. 31. Finally he showed that God, not fate, is in control, He is not indifferent to evil, His standards are absolute and constant. The world will be judged, not by God, but by a man raised from the dead, refuting point 6 of the Epicurean creed.

Thus Paul did not hide the truth; to both Jew and Gentile he preached fearlessly, whether they would hear or forbear. He is our pattern; our task is to preach repentance from sin and the

1. For further information see his web site(!) at www.epicurus.net.
2. Quoted from an article to be found on www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/4617/stoic.html.
3. www.iheu.org/IHN/v3-1/paul_kurtz.htm.

coming Kingdom. We are not a public education service; we should be a community of preachers of the gospel.

The issues which arise from the conflict between humanism and the Word of God can be seen in a number of Paul's epistles. We will now briefly consider situations that are dealt with in 1 Corinthians 6 and Ephesians 4.

The effects of philosophy—moral standards at Corinth

Twenty times in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul uses the words 'wisdom' and 'wise' as he argues against the philosophical values of this world and seeks to demonstrate the superiority of the wisdom of God. Then in 5:1 he turns to the first of the major problems that the philosophy and deceit of the world had caused in Corinth. One of the members of the ecclesia was committing fornication with his father's wife. The first thing to notice about this situation is that Paul is very careful not to call this individual 'brother'; the man was walking in darkness and was not in fellowship with God. We should take the same attitude in the ecclesia today towards those who manifestly do not believe the Truth or do not walk according to it.

So why did the ecclesia not deal with this situation? The answers to this question may cast some light on the related question, Why do ecclesias not deal with moral issues today? Paul shows that the ecclesia had been spoiled by "philosophy and vain deceit" (Col. 2:8).

- 1 In 5:9,10 he shows that they had misinterpreted his previous letter and by their 'wisdom' had made nonsense of its teaching. The principle of the Truth is that if a member of the ecclesia is living like someone in the world they are not in a fit state to break bread.
- 2 Paul next shows in verses 12 and 13 that, for whatever reason, they had failed to appreciate their role as judges in the household. We need to be aware that it is our role to "judge them that are within" (v. 12). We dare not take the view advocated by one Christadelphian writer that the day of the Lord's coming is so near that we can safely leave all of these issues to him.
- 3 The next argument that the Corinthian brethren put forward is certainly seen in the ecclesias today. In 6:5-7 Paul responds to their claim that there was no one in the ecclesia who could judge the case. Similarly one has

heard it said in the modern context, We all sin, how can we judge another brother in view of Matthew 7:1-5? Paul continues in verses 9 and 10 to show that there are certain classes of sins that exclude those who commit them from the Kingdom; such things cannot have a place in the ecclesia. The Corinthian brethren had been "deceived" by the philosophers into thinking that these things were not matters of salvation.

- 4 In verses 12 and 13 Paul exposes the depth of the false teaching and gives his response to it. *Epicurean* teaching (and modern humanism) argues that all the appetites of the body must be satisfied. Thus they said, "Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats". Paul shows, firstly, that the end of all flesh-centred thought and action is death; secondly, that the Epicurean principle is invalid in the face of God's *absolute* laws—a concept rejected by the philosophers—and, thirdly, that God has commanded repentance from these things and will judge men for them.
- 5 Finally, in verses 15-20, Paul demonstrates that the saints cannot be one with the moral evil of the world but must be one with the character of God. The apostle's comment in verse 18 reminds us of Joseph, who, when Potiphar's wife tempted him, saw an open door and fled. Verse 20 refutes the concept of humanism that man is on his own with no responsibility to higher authority. The saints have been redeemed by God and therefore ought to live solely unto Him.

These are concepts which neither the Epicureans and Stoics, nor the modern humanist, can comprehend. *Humanism* is a very expressive word—it puts *man* at the centre of all things. By contrast, the Scriptures exhort us to be *Godly* and *Godlike*, that is, to put *God* and His ways first in our lives. How we should do this is illustrated in the final section of this study.

The effects of the Truth—sound teaching in Ephesians

In Ephesians 4:21-24 Paul taught the Ephesian brethren and sisters to "put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and . . . put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness". How are we to do this? I am convinced that the Word of God never gives us instruction in what we should do without showing us how to do it, either by pre-

cept or by example. Ephesians 4:25-32 is but one example in Scripture of how this process can be worked out in our lives.⁴ Let us look at some key points in this passage.

- v. 25 No lying.** The word translated “putting away” in verse 25 is the same as that translated “put off” in verse 22. The hateful activity of lying must be put aside like a garment and replaced by the positive virtue of always speaking the truth. The reason for this is that “we are members one of another”, therefore truth should be the only language current amongst us. There should be no ‘white lies’ and no ‘being economical with the truth’ in our dealings with each other.
- v. 28 No theft.** In a similar way, the brother who once enriched himself at the expense of others must now be a contributor to the needs of his brethren. The contrast is between one who by stealth takes that which belongs to another and one who exhausts and wearies himself to provide for the needs of others. Thus the focus turns away from self (the centre of humanist thought) to the community of the saints, those whom God is seeking for His Kingdom.
- v. 29 Sound speech.** The word translated “corrupt” here is used in passages such as Matthew 7:17,18; 12:33 and Luke 6:43 to describe a tree producing rotten fruit, or the rot itself. No one would eat such fruit, and no one should hear rotten words coming from our mouth (“communication” here is the Greek *logos*). Rather, our words should strengthen and build up the ecclesia. When the audience in the synagogue in Nazareth heard Jesus speak they “wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth” (Lk. 4:22). There is our pattern and example.
- vv. 31,32 The transformation.** In putting off the old man (v. 22) we must put off: “bitterness” (*Strong’s* number 4088). This attitude was found in Simon the sorcerer,

who tried to buy the gift of giving the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:23);

“**wrath**” (2372). We are not to behave like the Jews of Nazareth, who were “filled with *wrath*” against Jesus (Lk. 4:28);

“**anger**” (3709). James wrote: “let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to *wrath*: for the *wrath* of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (Jas. 1:19,20);

“**clamour**” (2906). The word is used of the “great cry” in the Sanhedrin in Acts 23:9, and also in Revelation 21:4, where we are told that there will be no “crying” in the final consummation;

“**evil speaking**” (988). This word is that from which we get our word ‘blasphemy’, and should clearly form no part of the speech of those who have “put off . . . the old man”;

“**malice**” (2549). Another word used of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8:22: “Repent therefore of this thy *wickedness*”.

Yet this is only half the task. We must also “put on the new man”, and be:

“**kind**” (5543). God is “*kind* unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Lk. 6:35), and so should we be;

“**tenderhearted**” (2155). This is a word used in only one other passage: “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be *pitiful*, be courteous” (1 Pet. 3:8);

“**forgiving**” (5483). When confronted with Jesus’s parable of the two debtors, and the question, “which of them will love him most?”, Simon the Pharisee replied: “I suppose that he, to whom he *forgave* most” (Lk. 7:42,43). It was a right judgement, and our love for God will be in proportion to our appreciation of the mercies we have received from Him.

4. Other helpful examples can be found in Romans 13:12; Colossians 3:8; Hebrews 12:1; James 1:21, and 1 Peter 2:1.

As men waiting and preparing for the kingdom of God . . . they [the believers of the gospel] accept the position of “strangers and pilgrims” among men. They are not at home; they are passing on. They take no part with Caesar. They pay his taxes and obey his laws where they do not conflict with the laws of Christ; but they take no part in his affairs. They do not vote; they do not ask the suffrages of his supporters; they do not aspire to Caesar’s honours or emoluments; they do not bear arms.

Robert Roberts, *Christendom Astray*, Lecture XVII