

Classical Thought¹



The Roman Empire and Classical Thought: The Advent of Christ (2)

Political applications of Jesus' teaching

Jesus taught that his kingdom was international. His kingdom was for all men. While the Romans struggled towards an idea of universal brotherhood and citizenship Jesus taught that within the church all men were equally sons and daughters of God, Jew and Gentile alike, slave and free, male and female. Jesus taught that his kingdom was not based on the application of force (might) but was based on God's grace and truth.

Jesus the Messiah as a philosophical step in the history of Western thought

When Jesus taught that his kingdom was based on the grace of God. He was saying that man needed inward renewal, that redemption is the key to philosophy, to truth and to living a right life. That sounds unusual. All the philosophies studied up to this point have excluded a redemptive dimension because they all begin with the autonomy of man. The philosophies we have previously studied all assume that man is self sufficient, he is alright he just needs to learn more about the world. The assumption that man is alright as far as he goes is the downfall of every pagan or unbelieving philosophy. Christian Philosophy differs at this point because it teaches first the need of redemption. Philosophy cannot really be just an impersonal abstract study of the world. It is highly personal in reality and that makes unbelieving philosophers uneasy when a Christian approach is adopted. They do not mind if you talk about Christians in society putting Christian ideals into practice. But if you say that philosophy must be done either in obedience or disobedience to the Lord who is over all creation this is too personal. Unbelieving philosophers want to make philosophy abstract and

¹ These lessons are derived from material in *The History of Western Philosophy 3 Courses Taught at Christ College* by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

impersonal and Jesus does not allow that. He says “the only way to the Father is through me. I am the truth.” Truth is not some impersonal principle; Jesus says “I am the truth.” Ethics is not a set of abstract principles; Jesus says “I am the way” in other words ethics has to do with exemplifying Jesus' character and showing his grace and truth in your life.

Redemption the Key

Philosophy cannot be impersonal in the New Testament approach. Man's mind is not self-sufficient; man is in need of redemption and in particular man's sin has darkened his mind. Most people who have a superficial knowledge of the New Testament would probably tell you that the New Testament is full of exhortations about sin and redemption but they would think of sin in a behavioural sense – to do with conduct in matters of lifestyle and behaviour. But if you are a student of the New Testament you realise that sin affects the mind of man. The effect of the fall is that sin darkens the *thinking* of man as well as leading him astray in his outward conduct. As Romans 1:18 says, men suppress (“hold” or “hold down”) the truth because of their sin and rebellion. They suppress the truth that is known about God and they become darkened in their own understanding. Their hearts are hardened because they will not acknowledge and live up to what they know in their heart of hearts. God has made himself known but this is not acceptable to them. Instead they try to evade the truth so that though professing themselves to be wise, they become fools. (Romans 1:22) All this is not very flattering to the natural man. The apostle piles up the expressions about the gentile mind: vanity, darkened, alienated, ignorance, hardening. In the New Testament man's problem is not just behavioural it is epistemological. Man does not *think* properly because his mind is darkened. His rebellion alienates him not only from the personal creator but also from his own dignity and the meaning of life that he has as a creature of God. Sin and rebellion is the source of all human distress and redemption is the only solution to man's problems. A Christian world view affects how we see our political lives, our arts our sciences – everything about us. From the Christian perspective redemption is the key.

Christianity and Roman Culture

Christianity did not come into Western history in a vacuum. It came on the stage during the development of the Roman Empire and the relationship of Christianity to the Roman culture that was already on the scene was one of philosophical antithesis (and later political antithesis). We do not find in the New Testament a desire on the part of the followers of Christ to assimilate themselves to the philosophical outlook of their day or the socio-political attitudes and behaviour of their day. Christians were a real pain as far as the Roman Empire was concerned! They were following somebody who claimed to be exclusively the truth and they followed him in an absolutistic sense. There was no question that what he said was right and whatever he taught must be obeyed. This created problems.

The Roman Empire had a policy that whenever they subjugated a people those people were allowed to keep their religion, schools, family life etc. Everyone did not have to live as if they were in Rome. But there had to be political conformity. The Romans would not tolerate anything less than complete submission to the political authority of Rome. A new sect of the Jews (which is how they saw Christianity) was no problem to the Romans. They did not care. It did not matter to them if (as they thought) the silly Jews had come up with another cult. They allowed any kind of cult to survive under their protection. But when Paul went to Athens we see very clearly the antithesis between the Christians and the philosophers of that day. (Acts 17)

Mars Hill

Many people might have thought that Christians would have wanted to “piggy-back” on the philosophies of their day by picking the best one out of the lot and making it a vehicle for the adoration of Jesus and expressing his claims. But Paul was not interested in synthesising the Christian message with the philosophies of his day. The city is full of idols and Paul is indignant at

this. We think of Athens as the centre of intellectual culture. Why was it full of idols? Philosophers had to live in society and they did not always win over the populace to their view! The Athenians were still a very idolatrous people, full of superstition and mythical ideas of God. Paul began to reason in the synagogue with the Jews and devout persons and in the market place with citizens. Notice that Paul's approach and the authority to which he appeals is the same in the synagogue as in the market place. He reasons with men and uses the same argument in both places. In both places he assumes the ultimate authority of *Scripture*. Paul was not someone who was trying to find common ground with them or asking to fit Jesus into their philosophy. "What will this babbling say?" asked the stoics and epicureans in Acts 17:18. This is not at all flattering as "babbling" is a reference to a gutter sparrow. They were being nasty. "He does not know what he is talking about! He seems to be setting forth strange gods". They did not understand Paul because he taught "Jesus and the resurrection." In Greek "Jesus" is masculine and "resurrection" feminine so they probably thought he was presenting two new gods; Jesus and his female counterpart Resurrection.

Before Paul's time in Athens, Socrates (c.470 – 399 BC)² was brought up on charges of corrupting the youth and *setting forth new gods*. He was accused of being an atheist because he did not follow the state gods of his day. Now here is Paul getting into the same trouble. They got hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus which you can read of in Plato's dialogues. It was a long standing court in Athens and by the days of the New Testament its job was to primarily to investigate teachers in Athens and certify them as safe. They asked Paul, "may we know what this new doctrine whereof thou speakest is?" and Luke comments that they loved gossip and ear-tickling. The governing philosophic attitudes in Athens at this time were Scepticism³ (nobody can know anything for certain), Epicureanism⁴ (live for pleasure), and Stoicism⁵ (whatever is is right.)

Paul says, "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious for as I passed by... I found an altar... to the unknown god. Who therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." This loses the sceptics. Paul says he is going to "declare" and the word means "declare with authority." Paul says in other words "I'm going to tell you the truth." Sceptics say no one can tell what the truth is. "Who do you think you are Paul?" they would have been thinking.

Paul says their lifestyle and teaching displays ignorance ("ignorantly worship") this might be seen as common ground but an antithesis being set up. Paul is saying "You are wrong and I am right." Paul goes on, "God who made the world..." (Acts 17:24) now he's lost the Stoics. They did not believe God created the heavens and the earth. God for the Stoics is the *λόγος* and reason that governs the universe; god is a principle of nature to the Stoics, not the Creator.

Paul continues, "God dwelleth not in temples made with hands." He was probably saying this with the Parthenon⁶ in view. "He is not worshipped by men's hands..." Paul continues and explains that God is the source of everything. Then he says God has "made of one blood every nation..." here is the true universal brotherhood of men. It is not found in the Roman empire or stoic philosophy. All are creatures of God. Paul speaks of the "appointed bounds..." and it is as though he is saying, "you are right that God controls the universe but he is not a god that's natural flowing through the changing affairs of the cosmos." Then he says that God did this "that they might seek him if haply they might feel after him." "Feel after" here is the same verb used by Homer to speak of the Cyclops who has lost his eye groping in the dark. There is no excuse for "he is not far from every one of us" and "in him we live and move and have our being." "Even your own poets know this," says Paul. Paul's quotation from Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus here does not mean Paul agreed with the Stoic philosopher but rather he was explaining that even in their darkness they could not escape the truth about God.

2 See Term 2 Week 4 Day 4.

3 See Term 2 Week 1 Day 4.

4 See Term 2 Week 2 Day 4.

5 See Term 2 Week 3 Day 4.

6 Illustrated above.

“Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God we ought not to think...” Paul goes on, in other words “so you are wrong...” In verse 30 he calls on them to repent, to change their minds because God has sent his son and now everywhere men are to bow the knee to him. He tells them of the coming judgement and then says of Jesus that God had raised him from the dead. He speaks of a God who intervenes in the natural order and *raised his son from the dead* to be the judge of all men. At the founding of the Areopagus, according to Aeschylus' play *Eumenides*, the god Apollo says, “When the dust hath drained the blood of man, once he is slain, *there is no resurrection.*” Paul represents the philosophical antithesis to the outlook of the Greeks. He speaks in confrontation not compromise. Some mocked openly. Some said, “we will hear you again...” meaning, “we don't have an answer so go away.” But certain men “claved to him and believed...” probably two leading citizens because they are named.

Paul leaves Athens and writes First Corinthians. First Corinthians 1 from verse 18 is an appropriate summary of his encounter: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

Paul has just been in court with them and he writes “Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (v.20) He goes on to develop the theme of antithesis: God's wisdom and man's foolishness; man's wisdom and God's foolishness. Christ is a stumbling block to the Jews who can't get over the idea of a dying Messiah and the Greeks don't see the wisdom here at all; they see foolishness. But those who are called see “power and wisdom.”

Christianity and the Roman Empire

With the advent of Christ we do have a distinctive philosophical outlook. This outlook creates a philosophical antithesis and a political antithesis. Jesus' kingdom has political ramifications. The Roman empire is happy to have Christians teach whatever they wanted – you could even have a king of the after life. But if you teach that there is a king in *this* life... Pilate could not let Jesus off.

John tells us in Revelation 1:9 why he is on the island of Patmos. He is a partaker with his readers in the tribulation for the Word of God. In Revelation 13 we have the unhappy encounter between the beast and Jesus' followers. The beast is a political character which arises from the sea. He has seven heads and ten horns and is not happy with those who oppose him. The second beast requires that buyers and sellers have his mark on their forehead and hand. This is just where the law was to be written in the Old Testament so this beast competes with God for ultimate authority. We see confrontation and not compromise. Who is the beast? It is the Roman Empire. His heads are the emperors of Rome. The angel says he has seven heads. Rome is built on seven hills. There are also seven kings of Rome. These are the rulers of the empire in Rome. Five of them are past and the sixth now reigns in John's time. The seventh will reign a short time. Revelation is the only book in New Testament which gives a specific date – John was writing in the time of the sixth emperor of Rome. When was this? Does Julius Caesar count? Josephus and other writers consider him to be the first emperor. The sixth is Nero. The number 666 was calculated from the letters of Nero's name. The code that John used avoided using the name and so would protect those who took the message.

The Roman Republic had not been able to answer the basic questions for its citizens. It based its authority on military strength alone and had no world view or ethical foundations. The Republic of Rome tried to found a culture on its consuls, its political figures, its elite and the gods – who were just a kind of amplified humanity and so contributed to the problem. This left Rome without a sufficient base for society. As a result self-interest began to replace social interest. Amid the threats of riots and chaos which threatened to overwhelm the Republic, its leaders turned instead to a

dictator, an emperor, to bring peace, stability and predictability. Augustus represented the offer of peace and prosperity – in exchange for freedom. “Make me your god: I will give you peace,” he said in effect and people accepted it.

But Christians could *not* accept it. They could not worship the Caesar as lord. There are many accounts of Christians who were martyred for this reason. Roman soldiers often did not want to do carry out the sentence. “Look,” they would say, “just say these words 'Caesar is Lord,' even cross your fingers so we all you know your lying, just do it and we wont have to kill you.” Thy were trying to be nice but their philosophical world view would not let them see the significance of declaring Caesar as lord. They thought religion was just fairy tales so there was nothing wrong with just saying the expedient thing. But the Christians would not do it. Becoming a Christian meant becoming opposed to the culture of a political order where Caesar can consider himself lord so they were often martyred.

The Empire Falls: Christ's Kingdom Goes On

You might think the church had no future with the whole might of the Roman empire against their small band. Why could they hold out against Roman persecution? Because they believed that the infinite personal God had spoken in his word and had come into this world in the person of his Son and since they believed in God 's involvement and absolute sovereignty and holiness and that he had inspired the Old Testament, the Christians did not have to give in to the relativistic culture of Rome. They did not just say, “well, you've got to get along in this world and everything is relative so we might as well do as the Romans tell us to do.” they had a higher standard or law not only to justify them in their religious worship and the things that made them distinctive but they also had higher standards by which they could judge the state. The Roman Empire did not have that higher standard; it had only human, finite resources to build and sustain the empire. It was like a hump back bridge, adequate for an ox cart but not a modern lorry. So long as the pressure was not too great it got along okay but since it did not have a sufficient philosophy or religious basis for the culture, internal problems and external pressure caused it to collapse. When it collapsed, Christianity did not collapse.

Christians had resisted mixing the Roman perspective and their own and would not say, “Caesar is lord.” They based their outlook on the authority of God who had revealed himself; they had absolute values that did not go the way of Rome and Roman culture. The strength of the church – having universal and absolute values – was also its offence. As long as the church has universal and absolute values based on revelation of an infinite personal God the church is in a position to judge the state and resist the state. Christians can appeal to the Word of God above the state and at the same time maintain the dignity of the individual.