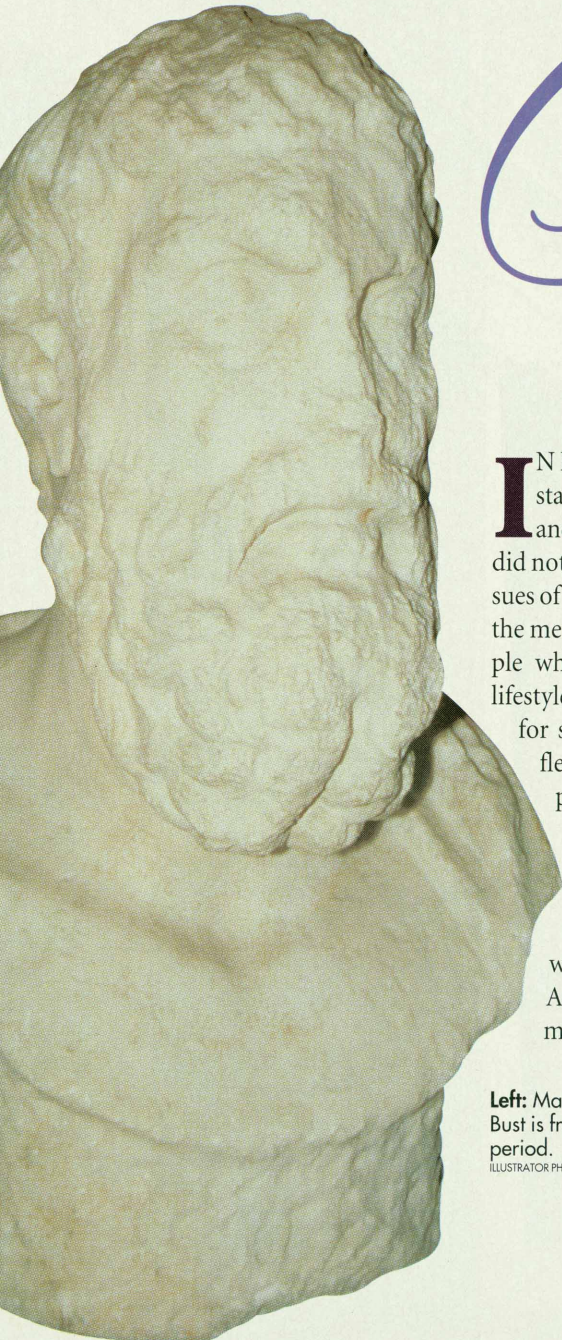


PAUL'S CONTRAST OF FLESH

Spirit

BY FRED HOWARD



IN ROMANS 8:5-8, Paul pointed out a stark contrast between “flesh” (*sarkos*) and “spirit” (*pneuma*). By “flesh,” Paul did not refer to the meaty substance or tissues of the physical body. Rather, he meant the mental attitude of unregenerated people who long for and practice a sinful lifestyle. Thus unsaved people do not long for spiritual things but for worldly or fleshly things. In contrast, saved people have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to help them focus on spiritual things. At least that is the way God intended. However, many genuine believers live a worldly lifestyle much of the time. Accordingly, Paul wrote, “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suf-

fer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15, NASB).

Significantly, in Romans 8 the Greek word for “spirit” (*pneuma*) occurs 21 times. Therefore, Romans 8 refers to the Holy Spirit more than any other chapter of Paul’s letters. The expression “Spirit of God” and “Spirit of Christ” are interchangeable. This fact agrees with Jesus’ statement: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

In Romans 8:6 Paul declared that “the mind set on the flesh (*sarkos*) is death, but the mind set on the Spirit (*pneumatos*) is life and peace.” In each occurrence “Spirit” was capitalized by the translators because it referred to the Holy Spirit. To be Spirit-controlled means to be Christ-controlled or God-controlled. The paradox of the divine Trinity means that God somehow is both

Left: Marble bust of the philosopher Epicurus. Bust is from the 1st-2nd cent. A.D., the Roman period.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JAMES McLEMORE/ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (10/35/18)

Lesson Reference:
LWS: Romans 8:5-8

Right: The Stoa of Attalos in the Athenian agora. The stoa, built in the 2nd century B.C., was a marble and limestone colonnaded building.

Far right: The Propylea, which provided access to the Parthenon and Acropolis in Athens.

one and three. To me, a helpful suggestion is to think of God the Father as the originating cause of creation, revelation, and redemption; God the Son as the mediating cause of creation, revelation, and redemption; and the Holy Spirit as the effecting cause of creation, revelation, and redemption.

Even before his conversion, Paul's Jewish background and his knowledge of the Old Testament meant that he used the terms "flesh" (*basar*) and "spirit" (*ruach*) with ease. For example, Adam referred to Eve as "flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Thus, flesh as bodily substance is neutral, not sinful. All that God created was good. Yet, even good may become bad as the result of human abuse, resulting from the wrong use of human freedom of choice. Because of human sin, God sent the flood "to destroy all flesh" (Gen. 6:17). However, He spared Noah and his family and also pairs of living creatures.

We may wonder how other nations and their best thinkers have dealt with questions concerning flesh and spirit. As Paul waited for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens, he was provoked by the widespread idolatry. As he witnessed in the market place, the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were amused at his preaching. Some of them said, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" (Acts 17:18a, NASB). Since the Greek word for "babbler" means "seedpicker," they probably compared Paul with a familiar bird that searched the Athenian streets for morsels



of food. They also accused Paul of promoting "strange deities" because Paul "was preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18b). Since the Greek word for "resurrection" is a feminine word, *anastasis*, (meaning "standing up"), the Greek philosophers evidently thought Jesus was a male deity and Anastasis was his goddess companion.

Although we do not know the identity of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, we do know about their background. Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who taught there was no life after death. Although his life and teaching consisted of moderation, he was disappointed in many of his followers who lived for sensual pleasure. As a result, Epicurean philosophy became condensed to the saying: "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Jesus apparently was familiar with Epicureanism. He told a parable about a rich man who said, "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry'" (Luke 12:19, NASB).

What about the Stoics? The father of stoicism was a Greek named Zeno. Since

he lectured from a porch (*stoa*), actually an open colonnade in Athens, he and his followers were called Stoics. Their central doctrine was "apathy" (*apatheia*) or insensibility. Although the Stoic philosophers in Athens ridiculed Paul, he later wrote something that they would have approved. To the Philippians, he wrote: "for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstance I am" (Phil. 4:11, NASB). Although the Stoic philosophers usually did not agree fully with one another, their central doctrines were "apathy" and "virtue." They acknowledged the deity of Zeus, borrowed by the Romans and renamed Jupiter. Their concept of the afterlife was somewhat vague and evidently did not include the concepts of heaven and hell. However, with their devotion to duty and refusal to complain about bodily injury, they made excellent soldiers. Although the Romans were not as innovative as the Greeks, they did not hesitate to borrow good ideas and use them to their advantage.

With reference to the early religious sects, the greatest threat to the early church was gnosticism. The term is from *gnosis*, the Greek word for "knowledge."



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According to the gnostics, knowledge is superior to faith in the Christian experience. Also, the gnostics believed that all flesh is evil and only spirit is good. As a result, they claimed Jesus never had a body. He just seemed to have one. From the Greek verb *dokeo* (meaning “think, believe, suppose”), the docetic gnostics insisted that Jesus was like a ghost or apparition. If people reached out to touch Him, they merely were grabbing at the air. Accordingly, the incarnation never took place. Thus, the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ birth were just folklore, and no virgin birth occurred.

Many Bible students believe that the apostle John challenged the gnostics and thoroughly exposed their false doctrines. For example, John began his Gospel with the words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1, NASB). As a whole, the gnostics believed that the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at His baptism but deserted Him at, or just before, the cross. Likely, John refuted the gnostics when he wrote: “This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood” (1 John 5:6, NASB). After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the eleven who doubted that He was real. To assure them of His resur-

rection, He said, “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39, NASB).

What can we say about our modern situation? Although we do not have gnostics, Epicureans, and Stoics to confront, we have many differences of opinion about what is spiritual and what is worldly or fleshly. Unfortunately, even the vocabulary of professed Christians does not agree. To many, a “saint” is a person whom the church has set apart because of his or her outstanding ministry or service to the church. Yet, when Paul wrote “to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling” (1 Cor. 1:2), he referred to all genuine believers in the Corinthian church. Since the basic meaning of “sanctify” is “to set apart,” God has set apart as His children all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Today many professed Christians differ over the matter of formality or informality as the best way to worship God. Although most older Christians prefer familiar hymns from traditional hymnals, many younger Christians prefer fast-paced choruses, raising hands, and other informalities. Also, pastors differ greatly in the content and method of

Above: An overview of the marketplace of ancient Athens from atop Mars Hill with Athens in the background.

their preaching. Thus, worship practice cannot be the standard by which we understand what is fleshly and what is spiritual. The two concepts are best understood within the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ and the teaching of the Word.

With reference to the “flesh,” some professed Christians do not think the flesh is neutral, but that it is positively evil. Therefore, the flesh must experience pain to keep it under control. For example, a male group called flagellants punish their bodies as a sacrificial act of worship. I vividly recall having seen a picture of a large group of flagellants in a procession. Their backs were bare and as they marched they flailed their backs with whips tipped with metal barbs. As a result, each man’s back was profusely bleeding from his self-inflicted wounds. Maybe I am just a coward, but I cannot see how abusing one’s body is pleasing to God. Thus, we must relate to Christ in such a way that He can remove fleshly tendencies from our lives.

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