

STOICS AND EPICUREANS

By Mark Moore & Mark Scott

I. Epicureans

- A. Background: These philosophers followed the teachings of Epicurus, 341–270 B.C. of the Athenian colony of Samos. He taught his students in his garden, and they had to learn their doctrines by heart. He had more devoted followers and bitter enemies than any of the early philosophers. No other figure of importance arose from his school, although some of the writings of Lucretius (94–55 B.C.) still survive.
- B. Major Beliefs:
 - 1. Pleasure is the highest end of living (this would include good pleasure, such as generosity, patriotism, etc. and not just hedonistic pleasure). Epicurus, "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul."
 - 2. Matter is eternal—this world was not created by deity. "Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing."
 - 3. Death is final—thus no hope. They denied the immortality of the soul. In addition, they denied any future retribution—judgment. Lucretius, "If anyone thinks that nothing can be known, he does not know whether even this can be known, since he admits that he knows nothing."
 - 4. Acquiring friends is vital—perhaps this desire is due to the despair caused by #3.
 - 5. Denied the providential control over human affairs. We have freewill. "Gods might exist but they are too removed from us."
 - 6. Sought to debunk traditional religion with its oracles, divination, magic, etc. "He saw religion as a source of fear; therefore the banishing of the gods brought peace and the possibility of a good life" (Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, p. 298).
 - 7. Perception is the basis of all reason—a pure empirical epistemology.
- C. This is not to be misunderstood with modern Hedonism.
 - 1. Epicurus would forego pleasure which would lead to further pain. For instance, he would avoid getting drunk because of the hangover the next day.
 - 2. He places pleasure of the soul/mind above that of the body. In his analysis there was kinetic (active) and static pleasure, both of which are evaluated by the following three criteria: (1) intensity, (2) duration, and (3) purity (its absence of pain).
- D. Diogenes (c. A.D. 200) aptly summed up Epicureanism: "Nothing to fear in God; Nothing to feel in Death; Good [pleasure] can be attained; Evil [pain] can be endured."

II. Stoics

- A. Background—This philosophy came from Zeno of Cyprus (335–263 B.C.) who died at the age of 96. He regularly held his classes in the porches of the market place, called STOA, specifically the Stoa Poikile—the painted porch—thus came the name "Stoics." [He was the first to scientifically study Greek grammar and vocabulary.]
- B. Famous Stoics:
 - 1. Aratus of Soli (c. 315–240 B.C.) was a stoic quoted by Paul in Acts 17:28, from the opening lines of *Phaenomena*, which, along with Homer was read by all Greek students—it dealt with the phenomenon of seasons and astronomy, so vital to both agriculture and travel.
 - 2. Brutus, the man who killed Julius Caesar. Shakespeare does an interesting character study of this man.
 - 3. Stoicism was well known in Tarsus. At least six famous stoics came from Tarsus.
 - 4. Seneca (c. 1–65 A.D.), was a contemporary of Saul. He was from the equestrian order and the brother of Gallio, proconsul of Achaia who is mentioned in Acts 18:12. He was

the tutor of the young Nero, but finally resigned in despair as Nero "went bad."
 "Seneca's life fell far short of his exhortations to others: after heaping slavish flattery on the living Claudius, he poisoned his memory with malicious satire; if he did not connive at the crimes of Nero, he did not restrain them; while preaching an indifference to material wealth he allowed himself to be enriched while in office; his writings describe in detail moral impurities and violence, so that whatever their author's practice the influence of some of his writings would have stimulated baser instincts" (Ferguson, p. 290). Even so, his writings are closer to Christian teachings than any other philosophy of the day. Tertullian calls him "always our Seneca" (On the Soul, 20). See J. B. Lightfoot, "St. Paul and Seneca" in Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (London 1913; repr. Grand Rapids, 1953), 270–333 for a comparison of the two. Seneca was conservative, in that he proposed to teach young men to worship in piety and not in superstitions. He was also an annihilationist.

5. Epictetus (c. A.D. 55–135) was another notable stoic of the first century whose writings are still extant.
6. Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180) was a stoic and an emperor whose persecution of Christians was among the fiercest and most bloody. His Meditations are extant—a collection of proverbial, miscellaneous musings.

C. Major Beliefs

1. The world was created by Zeus.
2. All things were governed by fates—determinism.
3. Self-denial contributes to the highest end in life. There was a desire to suppress all passions. One was to show indifference to either pleasure or pain and mastery over all lusts. In such indifference one found contentment, thus self-control was a supreme virtue. Basically, they were not happy campers. They were the Pharisees of the philosophers. Apathy made them lose their sympathy.
4. The soul was not immortal but existed until the destruction of the universe. At that time it was either destroyed (some said), or absorbed into the divine essence (others said).
5. Nothing is immaterial, even the Gods (e.g. the Mormons).
6. "The logos became another word in the Stoic system for god, since it maintains order" (Ferguson, p. 284).
7. Stoics used an allegorical method of interpretation.
8. Knowledge is empirically gained—they believed in *tabula rosa* of the soul.

III. Relationship between Epicureans, Stoics, & Christians

A. Similarities between the Stoics and Epicureans

1. They were the two dominant philosophical schools of the day.
2. Both sought to liberate man from fate. Epicureans, by denying the validity of fate; Stoics, by not responding (at least externally and emotionally) to the consequences of fate, either pleasurable or painful.
3. Both sought to be self-sufficient and unaffected by externals.
4. Both had a primary emphasis on ethics.

B. Similarities between Epicureans and Christians

1. Both had a tight-knit community, even using similar terminology.
2. Both were accused of being atheists.
3. Both sought the pleasure of the soul over the pleasure of the body.

C. Similarities between Stoics and Christians:

1. Stoics used some of the same terminology as Christians. For instance, both talked of Logos, Spirit, conscience, virtue, self-sufficiency, freedom of speech, reasonable service, etc. "The biblical injunctions concerning the units of society (Eph. 5:21–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1; 1 Peter 2:13–3:7; etc.) in both form (the reference to stations in society) and content

- (e.g., "it is fitting") show Stoic influence.
2. The similarities go deeper than individual items to a general atmosphere:
 - a. Humankind's persistent evil.
 - b. The need for self-examination.
 - c. Humanity's kinship with the divine.
 - d. Denial of the world's values.
 - e. Emphasis on inner freedom from external circumstances.
 - f. The Stoic natural theology, transmitted via Hellenistic Judaism (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 13–14), influenced Romans 1–2 and Acts 17" (Ferguson, p. 293).
- D. Differences between Stoics and Christians: (These outweigh the similarities)
1. To the Stoics, god was immanent, but not personal. Stoics were pantheists, not believing in a personal creation.
 2. Christians viewed the world as purposeful with both a beginning and an end—the Stoics would own none of this.
 3. Christianity appealed to the masses; stoicism was for the elite. Stoicism talked about ethics from a philosophical point of view, Christianity implemented ethics by connecting its injunctions with a personal absolute Divine. Thus, conscience in stoicism was not nearly as developed as it was in Christianity.
 4. Stoicism had not personal immortality—the "divine spark" in each of us would be absorbed back into the Whole.
 5. Christianity is optimistic and full of joy. Stoics subjugated emotional expression, including joy and hope.
 6. Christians were motivated and driven by AGAPE; Stoics were motivated and driven by self-respect.

NOTE: Paul knows that false knowledge about God leads to idolatry and bad ethics. Paul fights them on their own turf by quoting their prophets. You can see their offspring today in philosophy, psychology, New Age, evolutionary science, and secular humanism.

Are You a Stoic or an Epicurean?

By Mark Moore

Mark the statement you agree with the most:

1. ___ Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.
 ___ If you don't covet anything, you won't be sad if you lose it.
2. ___ The physical world is most real.
 ___ The spiritual world is most real.
3. ___ Death is the end of existence.
 ___ The soul is immortal.
4. ___ Human beings have freewill, we control our own destinies.
 ___ What God ordains to be, will be — we can't change our destiny.
5. ___ Religion, for the most part, is a bunch of superstitions, fear, and magic.
 ___ Traditional religion(s) reveal God.
6. ___ We know things through physical senses (body)
 ___ We know things through revelation and reason/logic (mind).
7. ___ To be truly happy in life we ought to party, hardy!
 ___ Self-denial contributes to the highest end in life.
8. ___ Happiness is found in friendships and pleasures.
 ___ Contentment is found in indifference — if you don't care you won't be disappointed.
9. ___ We will be happiest living in an authentic community.
 ___ We will be happiest being independent and self-reliant.
10. ___ Pleasures of the soul outweigh pleasures of the body.
 ___ Pleasure and pain should be treated with equal indifference.

(The first statements are ideas of the Epicureans, the second of the Stoics. Count the number of each you had and record them below.)

Stoic ___ Epicurean ___

Read through Acts 17:22–31 and place verse numbers by the above statements that Paul addresses in his sermon on Mars Hill.