

Discussing How To Restore The Early Church

Returning Intimacy and Power to the Father's Children

*"I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*
(Matthew 18:19,20)



SECTION 2 - LESSON 15

**The Loss of Our Hebraic Roots:
Man-Centered Hellenized Christendom
The Genesis of Hellenism
*An Allegorized Christianity***



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The Loss of Our Hebraic Roots *Man-Centered Hellenized Christendom*

“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

Most Christians in United States may speak English, but they think “Greek.” Competition between denominations; leaders who seek worldly acclaim; creeds formed through philosophical debate—all are products of Greek/Hellenistic thought which began to insinuate itself within the Church in the second and third centuries.

Hellenistic influence has permeated western Christendom so extensively and for so long that it’s like bad breath: because of the generations of familiarity with it, we’re unaware of its foul presence.

The basis for the **religious humanism** which is saturating western Christianity at ever-increasing levels is found in the Hellenist philosophical spirit. The common thread for both humanism and Hellenism places *man*, not God, as the measure of all things.

Greek philosophy and humanism place man as the *ultimate evaluator* of everything. God (if He is acknowledged at all), and His Word, have merit only as far as man finds useful to himself.

So how does a man-centered religion affect *your* world perspective?

1. There are *no God-given standards*. The boundaries of His Law are open to your own interpretation, or they’re done away with altogether under a misguided definition of God’s “grace”. Ethics and morality are based upon your personal inclination or circumstances rather than on the holy will of God.
2. Man becomes utilitarian. By this we mean that you look for religious practices and faith communities that will meet *your needs and desires*, regardless of God’s purpose for your life. Biblical standards change and evolve according to society’s ever-changing moral decline so that you can blend in with the rest of the world.

How has this “spiritual evolution” impacted western Christianity? A few prevalent examples:

- Worldly forms of music are used to worship a holy God, yet soulish self-satisfaction is the end result.
- Women who call themselves “pastor” encourage independence and autonomy among other women, while men sink into the role of ineffectual spiritual eunuchs.
- Bibles with a genderless God refute the fatherhood of God and His purposeful differences between the genders.

When *your* goals and desires are at the center of your universe, you evaluate relationships and activities according to what *pleases you* most. This is the aim of Hellenism.

Now recall *God's* evaluation of man's inner motive: "*The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time*" (Genesis 6:5). The original sin that's been mankind's legacy since the fall is a reality; your sin nature *yearns* to have its way!

As you observe the westernized Christianity that's being practiced around you, the effects of man-centered Hellenism are glaringly obvious. Compromising the truth of God's Word and yielding to our sin nature has produced:

- A religion with a Christian veneer that consists of 23,000 competing denominations.
- A clergy system which has abided among the top three occupations for divorce for several years.
- A divorce rate that's higher among church-goers than among the unchurched.
- A religion that bears Christ's title yet whose moral and ethical values are no different than those of the world (per Christian pollster, George Barna).

Is any of this reflective of the Church that *Jesus* is building? NO! But the fault of this tragic departure from the biblical pattern lies squarely at the feet of a westernized Christianity that's been dominated by the philosophies and culture of the ancient Greeks.

The Hellenist influence, particularly that of Plato, has severely limited the ability of Christians:

- To *know and experience* the God Who is revealed in the Bible.
- To grasp *personal responsibility* to apply biblical truths to their vital relationships of God, marriage, family and close friendships.

We mentioned in a previous lesson that as the ranks of the early Church swelled with Gentiles, the impact of its Hebraic roots shriveled. Believers became increasingly vulnerable to a wide array of destructive pagan influences and philosophies.

Roman military power had brought with it an admirable road system and a relatively speedy communications network. On one hand, the Gospel message that had permeated Jerusalem could easily flow outward to the Gentile nations of the world.

On the unfortunate other hand, the purity and power of that message were corrupted by the dominant cultural influence of the time, Greek philosophy. The decades following the two Jewish revolts of AD 70 and AD 135 saw a Hellenist, man-centered worldview begin to reshape the Church.

The lessons in Section 2 will examine:

- The beginnings of Greek religious thought, and specifically how it has sidetracked the Church from its Hebraic roots.
- How the Hellenist perspective swayed the Church to be dominated by Roman hierarchy and organization.

Exploration of these factors is important to you because you'll better understand the continuing impact of their influence on both current culture and contemporary Christian practice.

The Loss of Our Hebraic Roots

The Genesis of Hellenism

Many centuries before Christ's advent, the Greeks had been known for their wide array of mythological deities. These "gods" were beset by the same personality quirks and behavioral foibles as mankind. You may remember what Paul discovered as he strolled across Athens, "*For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD...*" (Acts 17:23).

Athenians in general were consumed with anxiety that they might offend any of the gods that they perceived could rain destruction upon them. Followers of these gods feared their superhuman capabilities and presented offerings and worship to avoid personal calamity and retribution. They couldn't imagine *relating* to a god; they were more intent on escaping the notice of their capricious deities.

Some Greeks, however, refused to be enslaved by idols. By the seventh century BC, philosopher-mathematician **Thales** tried to dissuade the educated populace from fables. Guided by the natural senses and by reason, Thales argued, all of nature could be understood through scientific observation and measurement.

Nature was the life source of energy that controlled all of earth's activities. *Nature alone* was responsible for what could be experienced and examined.

Note: The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century followed the same line of reasoning. Scholars at that time denied any divine intervention into life. Rather, they elevated **rationalism and science** as man's guiding power. Faith that was dependent on obedient trust in a righteous and loving Lord was replaced by **reason**. Rationale and scientific justifica-

tion produced a religion of Christianity that was based on mental assent to creeds rather than Spirit-empowered faith-in-action.

The **Humanist Manifesto** that so controls American education today reflects this ancient Thalesian fallacy. *Rationalism* was the guiding factor behind the German Higher Criticism theologians of the nineteenth century who so openly attacked the miraculous in the Bible and even questioned its authenticity. This assault on the reliability of the Bible overflows liberal Christendom today as scriptural truths are manipulated to suit sinful cultural standards.

Church councils over the centuries have doggedly ignored the Hebraic foundations of the earliest Church. They have relied instead on *reason* and *debate* to produce the vast array of man-created denominations we see today. The sacred text which so clearly demonstrates a Hebraic perspective of *continuity* between the testaments was read through a Hellenized philosophical veil. The western church in particular has suffered from the fracture that reason-dependence and argumentation have produced.

Since the ancient Greeks had no sacred texts from which to derive absolute standards, truth was therefore relative. The manner in which truth was accepted depended on the situation, as in today's *situation ethics* in which truth is altered to fit a predetermined outcome. (As the writer of Ecclesiastes lamented, there is nothing new under the sun!)

The difficulty in Thales's reliance on reason and observable measurement was this: If reason were the determinant for

truth, *whose* reason was to be followed? And *whose* conflicting measurements and standards were to be followed?

The philosophical chaos that ensued led to the Sophist rationale of the fifth century BC. The **Sophists** maintained that people should strive for *self-fulfillment* in the here and now. Any pursuit was beneficial only insofar as it benefited the individual, *i.e.*, “What will *I* get out of this?” (Isn’t this the goal of the demonic “health and wealth gospel” and corporation-modeled “church-growth movement” which influence a large segment of Christendom in the United States?)

Needless to say, the civic authorities were not thrilled with Sophist individualistic line of thought. What would happen to the collective society if everyone did his own thing? (Ask yourself the same question as it pertains to the Church: What happens to the unity of the Body of Christ when so many start their own denomination to focus on their particular distinctive?)

Out of this argument between narcissism and collectivism emerged **Socrates**. This philosopher insisted that there must be absolutes of good, of justice, of virtue. Once the mind is trained to seek these standards, then man can, *through rationalization*, develop his own reasons and means to attain these ideals. (Keep in mind that the foundation for this reasoning is that man is basically good. The Greeks did not ascribe to the Bible’s concept of humanity: people controlled by their sin nature and bent on evil when left to their own devices (see Genesis 8:21)).

Socrates’s disciple **Plato** recognized the limitations of each man’s ability to discern what goodness and justice really were. Turning instead to the concept of *cosmic dualism*, he postulated that life was divided into two components:

- First, the *transcendent spiritual arena* of eternal truths. This was an ideal, an unattainable higher echelon or state of existence but a worthy goal to aim for. Only this spiritual level had any good in it.
- Second, the *temporal realm of the physical*. Earthly concerns, such as food, shelter and vocation, were vulgar and common but unfortunately necessary for existence. Plato considered the physical arena of existence “evil”.¹

Keep in mind: Labeling the body as wicked and only the spirit as honorable was in direct opposition to the Hebraic view of humanity. God had formed man out of dust for relationship with Him both on earth and in eternity. From the mouth of God came not only the appraisal of His physical creation as “good”, but of man as “very good”!

By God’s design and intent, man was created in His image with both a physical body and a spirit. These two aspects defined “man”. And, God, Who is Spirit, placed such great value on His *physical creation* because it testified to His greatness:

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Plato’s dualist deceit entered Christianity through the writings of Greek philosopher converts. Not only did their Platonic teachings nullify the Hebraic foundations of the Church. These “Fathers of Hellenism” also wrote feverishly to reconcile Platonic thought with Christianity.

The dualist concept of the spiritual realm as “good” and the physical as “evil” brought about the myriad of *religious rituals* that abound in Christendom today.

Has it ever occurred to you that many of your faith practices emanated from pagan sources rather than from your Hebraic forefathers? Yes or No? Describe what you believe to be God’s heart as He sees His children engaged in pagan religious practices.

Can you recognize any *dualism* in your own religious beliefs or practices, whereby the spirit is good but the physical is evil? Yes or No? If yes, list a few.

The Loss of Our Hebraic Roots An Allegorized Christianity

We’ve discussed some of the key players *prior* to the incarnation of Jesus who set the stage for disassociation from Older Testament truth. Let’s investigate some post-ascension, Hellenism-saturated individuals.

Mid-second century Rome found a wealthy man of influence named **Marcion** promoting an anti-Semitic heresy. Borrowing a view from Plato, Marcion maintained that the God of the Older Testament was evil. By association, therefore, the *chosen people* of that God were evil as well.

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures, pro-

claimed Marcion, demanded sacrifice and blind obedience to unreasonable laws. The Newer Testament, however, introduced Jesus as a “god of love”, one in whom there could be no relationship to the wrathful deity of the Older Testament.

While Marcion’s views were ultimately denounced and he himself excommunicated by the church in Rome, traces of his views still permeate western Christianity. Many congregations relegate the Hebrew Scriptures to an occasional reference, as though Jesus had appeared and taught out of some spiritual void.

Others deny that God has a hand in either the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel that He promised them, or that He will fulfill His promise to reveal to them the One they pierced (see Zechariah 12:10).

A far deeper wedge was driven between Hebraic and Hellenic believers with the teachings of **Origen**, often called “*the father of Christian theology.*” Based in Alexandria, Egypt, he had been enveloped by Hellenistic dualist teaching.

As Origen studied the Newer Testament from a dualist framework, he convinced himself to allegorize the Older Testament *away from its historical perspective*. He considered the writings and history of the Hebrew Scriptures to be too “earthy” to reconcile with his anti-physical framework.

The result of Origen’s revamping the reality of God’s very real interaction with His covenant people Israel nullified any responsibility to His Law as a guide for a life that pleases God. In fact, anything that concerned the responsibilities of day-to-day living from a practical stance was disdained.

Yet, our Father intended that the Hebrew Scriptures serve as an object les-

son and caution for followers of His Son, especially if they think they can ignore the Older Testament commands that Jesus deepened and expanded. The character of our God is unchangeable, and the same persistent disobedience that brought chastisement upon His beloved Israelites can come upon His wayward church as well.

Note Paul's admonition to followers of Jesus *today*:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11).

The book of Exodus and the Prophets, especially Ezekiel, abound with a phrase aimed directly at the Gentile nations God was chastising: "*that they may know that I am the LORD (YHWH).*" This all-powerful God of the Hebrews purposed that His covenant name, **YHWH**, the great I AM, be made known. HE was the One Who had orchestrated the sword, famine and pestilence that came upon the persecutors of His chosen people.

This awesome and holy God intended for a *holy and awesome fear* of His power to come upon the heathen nations. And, in reiterating that name to His people Israel, He was reminding *them* of the reverential fear due His awesome Presence.

Contemporary westernized Christianity has minimized any focus on the Hebrew Scriptures. The vast majority of churchgoers are bereft of the *fear of the LORD* of which God so diligently reminded our spiritual predecessors.

How does ignorance of holy fear affect *you* as a follower of Jesus? The very warnings to which Paul referred in

1Corinthians 10:11 were found in the *Older Testament*, and were soundly recounted as the early followers of Jesus were disciplined. Even as they deepened their walk in the Spirit, these folks became well-grounded in the character of God through the example of His interaction with the Israelites.

Be assured of this: There aren't *two Gods* in the Bible! The same God Who displayed both His mercy and His justice is present in the Older as well as the Newer Testament. Remember, Jesus is eternal—the same *yesterday, today and forever* (Hebrews 13:18). He existed in union with His Father *before* His incarnation. The same *holy fear* our holy Lord commanded His Beloved Israel is required of the Bride of Christ as well (1 Peter 2:17)!

Willful disregard of the relational responsibilities of holy fear and love-grounded obedient trust that God called for in His "wife" Israel opened the way for heresy to be accepted in the Church. In place of the literal text that God had revealed to His people Israel, Origen developed a system of *typology*. Older Testament truth became a *symbol* of what God intended to apply to the Church. Christ was read into every possible context so that anything that smacked of the reality of daily earthly life was erased.

It was only a short step to transfer the promises made by God to Israel to the *Church* as Christ was "read" into Older Testament passages. An obvious example is the prevalent view that the Song of Songs was really all about Jesus and the Church.

Out of Origen's teaching emerged the lie that all of the Older Testament curses were the legacy of the Jews, while all of the blessings would be inherited by the Church. Such interpretation nullified

God's focus on the Jewish people as His precious and chosen people in whom HE would put a new spirit (see Ezekiel 11:19). Origen essentially nullified the *everlasting promises* that God directed specifically to the Jews!

The Hebrew Scriptures were reinterpreted so that only that which could be "Christianized" in the Newer Testament had validity. Origen's teaching led Christians to claim that they were "**The New Israel**", and spawned what is known today as "Replacement (or supercessionist) Theology." In other words, the Jewish people have ceased to be part of God's promises and plans because they've been *replaced* by Christians.

Today's negation or minimization of the Older Testament within the Christian community can be traced back to Origen. Yet Paul affirms, "**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work**" (2 Timothy 3:16,17)—and the only Scripture in existence when he penned these words was the **Older Testament**.

Eager theological students from all over flocked to Alexandria to be impregnated with Origen's teachings, which they then propagated throughout the known world. The tragic outcome of this perpetration has penetrated contemporary Christian thought today. Many think that:

- The Older Testament, especially its curses, was written solely for the Jew. The Jewish people are no longer part of God's plan, notwithstanding multiple *everlasting promises* He has made to them!

- The Laws of God found in the Older Testament are meaningless to Christians. (The Book of 1 John totally disproves this lie.)
- Both the Older and Newer Testament blessings apply to Christians, who are "The New Israel". (See Romans chapters 9-11 for a sound refutation of this deception!)

You may be asking yourself how believers could so willingly stray from the truth as it had been presented in the Word. Initially, the majority of Christians opposed Origen's teachings.

Remember, the Alexandrian system of allegory which *explained away* the context and content of the Hebrew Bible emanated from the converted Greek philosophers who desired to integrate Greek philosophy with the Bible. NOT ONE among the Hellenist philosophers who so influenced the church sought to trust and obey the God Who had revealed Himself first in the Hebrew Bible.

Over time the Hellenist writings of the Church Fathers were venerated by the religious system even more highly than the Scriptures. Therefore no pressure was exerted to stay true to the meaning that had been *intended by the Scripture writers*.

As students from the Alexandria schools spread and established their own arenas of instruction, Hellenist-influenced interpretations gained ground steadily, ultimately achieving near-universal acceptance within the Church.

By the early fifth century the use of allegory had become engrained in ecclesiastical thought. This was due particularly because of the tremendous influence of **Augustine**, whose writings held enormous sway in broad areas of Christendom.

This late fourth-century theologian also promoted the concept that *church*

authority superseded that of the Scriptures. This was the basis by which Roman Catholicism, then and now, asserts that *both* the Bible and “church tradition” are the foundation for religious practice.

Augustine’s writings undergirded an educated clergy class who were endowed with great power over the common man. Anyone who objected to anything the clergy taught or did was threatened with *excommunication*, a fearful prospect in which the disobedient individual was forbidden the Eucharist and any of the other Sacraments. This was serious business!

Because clergy dominance was so well-entrenched within Christendom, clergy-controlled Church Councils formulated creeds that fit neatly into their syllogistic, left-brain thinking pattern. [See Lesson 8. Restoring the Early Church: **A Hebraic Perspective: Hebraic Logic.**]

The impact of these anti-Semitic philosophers has not faded. Today within Protestantism, any time you hear someone proclaiming they’re part of a “New Testament Church”, they’ve succumbed to the teachings of Origen or other Hellenist-influenced writers. Anytime Newer Testaments are singled out for distribution without including the Older Testament, Hellenism rather than God is being upheld.

Have you been exposed to allegory as a means to spiritualize parts of the Older Testament so that they would apply to the Church? Describe the teaching you received.

Bibliography

1. See Christian Overman, *Different Windows* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989) p. 108.