



# Review

- This social and political setting into which Christianity was born was also a world where religion flourished – indeed, in the everyday lives of people throughout the Roman Empire, religion was a pervasive and powerful force.
- At the time of Jesus and the apostles, what did we say were the four main forms of religion in the Roman Empire (besides Judaism)?
  - Traditional Pagan religion
  - Emperor-worship
  - The Eastern mystery cults
  - Philosophy

# Review

- Roman Pagan Religion involved the worship of a family of gods headed by a chief god whose name was what?
  - Zeus (Latin: Jupiter or Jove)
- There were different Roman gods for almost every aspect of life. Name three of the [Greek/Roman gods](#) that we talked about last week and tell what each god was known for.
- Are there any Greek gods mentioned by name in the NT? If so, who are they and where are they mentioned?
  - Barnabas and Paul were thought to be **Zeus** and **Hermes** in Acts 14:12-13.
  - **Artemis** is mentioned five times in Acts 19:24-35 where Paul, through the proclamation of the Gospel, is said to have hurt the profits of the Ephesian idol makers.

# Review

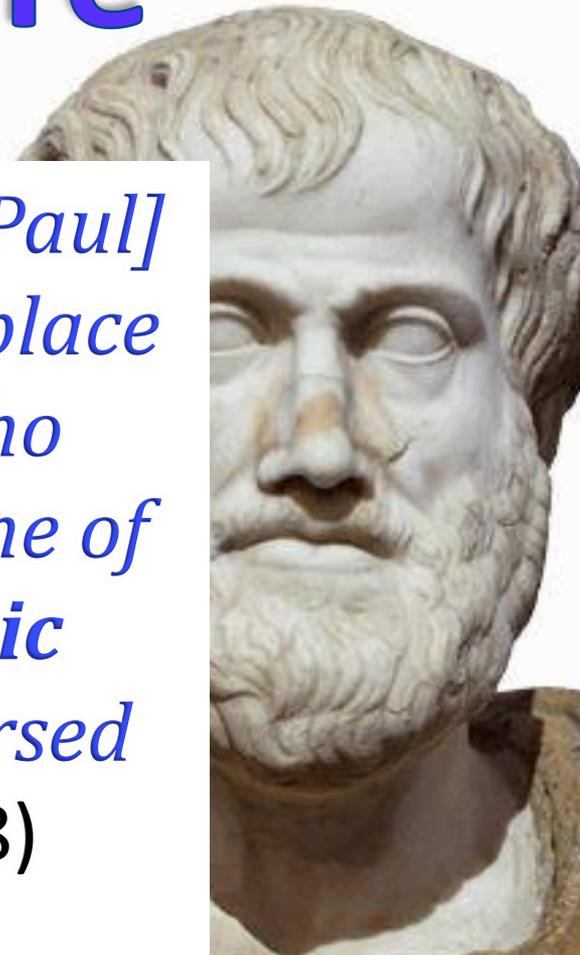
- The amazing growth of Rome's dominion over the Mediterranean world encouraged the Romans to believe that there was a special divine power at work, creating the Empire. In the minds of many Romans, this power was especially connected with whom?
  - the emperor
- The Eastern Mystery Cults were said to have many things in common with Christianity. Name some of the similarities:
  - Worshippers of the Eastern Mystery Cults had to join a mystery cult by a personal decision
  - Had to be initiated into membership by special ceremonies.
  - Were promised eternal life after death
  - Worship of the cult deities involved song, dance, musical instruments, public processions, religious feasting, and prophecy

# Review

- In the Roman Empire, philosophy was not just an academic subject taught in universities. It was a total way of life which promised peace and fulfilment to those who practiced it.
- Name the three chief types or “schools” of philosophy competing for people’s allegiance during the NT period:
  - Platonism
  - Epicureanism
  - Stoicism
- Does the NT refer to any of these philosophies by name? If so, which ones and where are they mentioned?
  - Epicurean and Stoic philosophers interacted with the Apostle Paul in Act 17:17-18

# Philosophy in the Roman Empire

*[While waiting in Athens, Paul] reasoned in ... the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the **Epicurean and Stoic philosophers** also conversed with him. (Act 17:17-18)*



# \*Philosophy in the Roman Empire

- This morning we will be looking at four “schools” of philosophy competing for people’s allegiance at the time of Christ and the apostles:
  - Platonism
  - Epicureanism
  - Stoicism
  - Cynicism

# \*Platonism

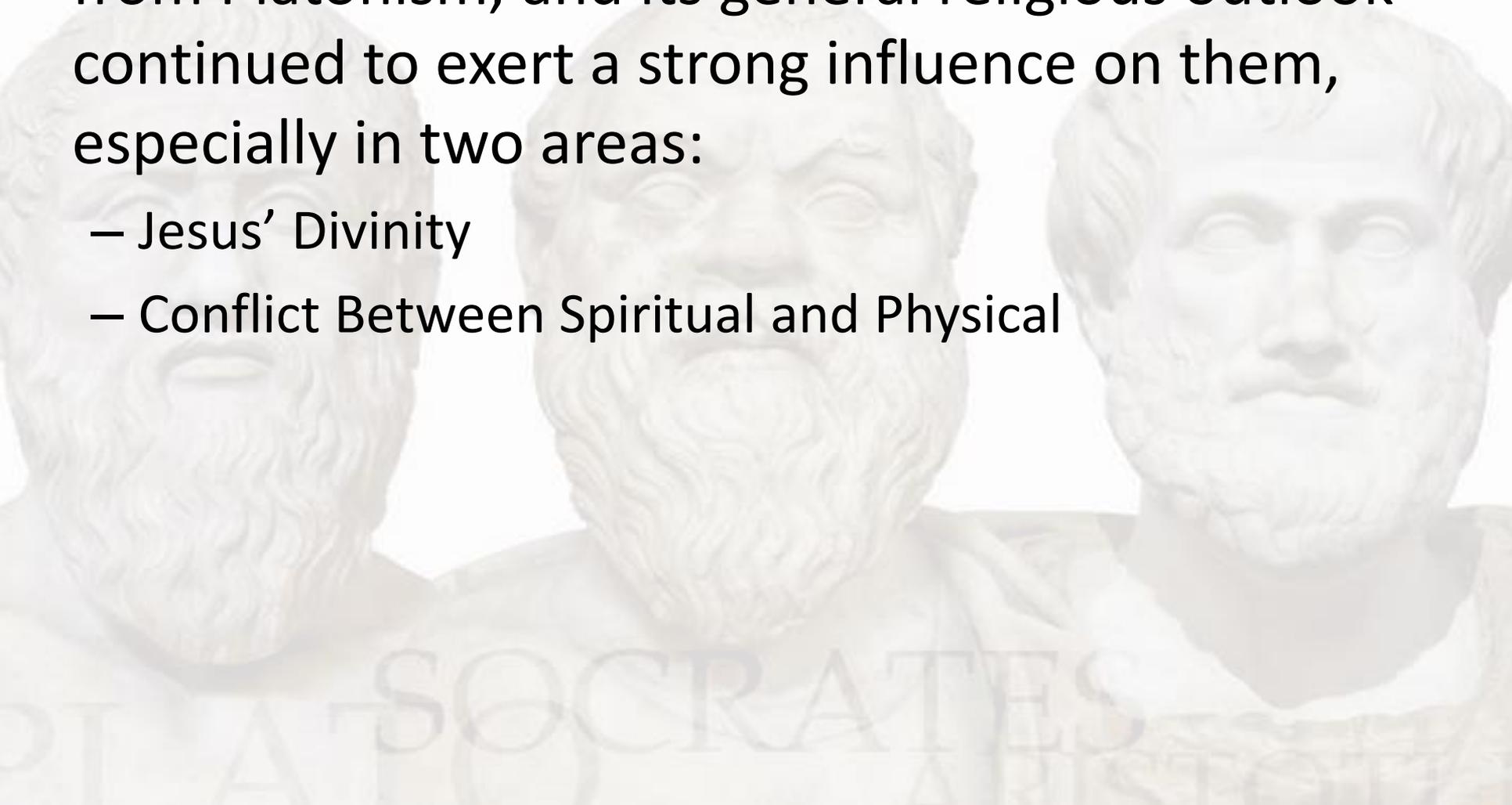
- Named after the great Athenian philosopher Plato (427–347 BC).
- Socrates (470–399 BC), Plato's teacher, had been condemned to death, as an incredulous corrupter of youth.
- Socrates, himself, never wrote down any of his ideas, so it's hard for us to know exactly what Socrates believed because everything that we know about him comes from the writings of those who knew him (i.e. Plato and others).
- Plato wrote several dialogues in Socrates' defense, and by the first century Socrates was considered one of the greatest sages of antiquity.
- Along with his teacher, Socrates, and his most famous student, Aristotle (384–322 BC), Plato laid the foundations of Western philosophy and science. (*Plato*; Encyclopedia Britannica)

# \*Platonism

- Plato believed there were two realities:
  - The ideal, unchanging, eternal realm of God
  - The constantly changing world of space and time where we live
- Plato taught that everything in our physical world is a copy or attempt to represent the ultimate reality that exists in the eternal realm.
- The human soul, according to Platonists, was itself eternal (that is, the soul had existed from all eternity, and was by nature immortal and incapable of being destroyed), and therefore the soul had more in common with God than with the world.
- By contemplating God, Plato believed that the philosopher will become more and more like God – which he believed to be the philosopher's ultimate goal.

# \*Platonism

- Many of the early Church fathers were converts from Platonism, and its general religious outlook continued to exert a strong influence on them, especially in two areas:
  - Jesus' Divinity
  - Conflict Between Spiritual and Physical



# \*Platonism and Jesus' Divinity

- The thinking of many early theologians was strongly colored by Platonism's extreme emphasis on the sheer gulf between the changing physical world in which we live and the eternal unchanging God.
- This made it difficult for some Christian thinkers to understand how an unchanging God could have entered the world by becoming a man in Jesus Christ
- To solve the problem, they were tempted to say that Christ was something less than absolutely divine.
- It was not until the Arian controversy was debated and resolved in the 4th century that the Church finally purged this idea out of its theology.

# \*Platonism and the Conflict Between the Spiritual and the Physical

- Platonism's teaching on the superiority of the soul and the spiritual life over the body and physical life held powerful attractions for many Christians.
- It produced a tendency in some of them to interpret the spiritual life as a war between body and soul.
- Taken to its logical conclusion, this resulted in the belief-system known as **Gnosticism** – a set of teachings that were already beginning to take root at the time of the apostles and developed into a fuller form beginning in the second century.

# \*Epicureanism

- Epicureanism, named after Epicurus (342-270 BC), who founded a school of philosophy in Athens in about 307 BC.
- Epicurus taught that pleasure was the supremely desirable quality.
- However, he did not define pleasure in terms of physical self-indulgence.
- According to Epicurus, people could achieve true happiness only by a life of quietness, retirement, peace and self-control.
- Unlike Platonism, Epicureanism was an anti-religious philosophy:
  - Epicurus said that fear of the gods and of what happened after death was one of the main causes of human anxiety. But in reality, the gods took no interest in humanity or human affairs, and there was no life after death.
  - Epicurus held that people must recognize this, if they were to be free from fear and live happy and peaceful lives.

# \*Stoicism

- This school of philosophy did not have a single founder. Its main thinkers were three Greek philosophers: Zeno (334-262 BC), Cleanthes (died 232 BC) and Chrysippus (280-207 BC).
- The name “Stoic” comes from the Stoa, a hall in Athens where Zeno taught.
- Stoics were materialists; they held that everything was ultimately made of matter. They defined the matter from which everything is made as a kind of fire.
- Stoics were basically fatalists who believed that the universe was controlled by a power to which they gave different names – God, Fate, Providence, Reason.

# \*Stoicism

- Ancient Stoicism taught that men must achieve tranquility by accepting what Fate had determined for them and suppressing any desires for that which they could not have.
- Thus the Stoic soul stood firm in the storms of life by practicing apathy, the discipline of not being attached to people or things. If a person was not emotionally attached to things, he could not be victimized and thus could live in tranquility.
- Stoics called for the virtue of courage in facing whatever was to come.
- Christians often admired Stoic convictions, once those convictions were refitted for Christian teaching.
- For example, Stoics called for facing suffering with courage, independence from the things of this world, and a trust in a greater providence.

# \*Stoicism

- The great Stoic philosophers of the 1st century AD, Seneca (4 BC-AD 65) and Epictetus (AD 55-135), often spoke in an almost Christian way in their writings about morality, and Christians read them with admiration.
- Stoicism was quite influential on early Christian thinking about ethical issues and ideas of divine providence.

# \*Cynicism

- For the Cynics, the purpose of life was to:
  - Live in virtue
  - Live in agreement with nature.
- Cynics believed that, as reasoning creatures, they could gain happiness by rigorous training and by living in a way which is natural for themselves, rejecting all conventional desires for wealth, power, sex, and fame.
- Instead, they believed that they were to lead a simple life free from all possessions.

# \*Cynicism

- The Cynics were:
  - Ascetics (practiced severe self-discipline and abstention)
  - Antinomians (against the established norms)
  - Anti-intellectuals
  - Highly individualistic
- They despised the speculative theories of the academics which they thought had no practical benefit for the individual, but enslaved him with false obligations.
- They ridiculed luxury and sensual pleasures and idolized poverty.

# From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

*But you will receive power when  
the Holy Spirit has come upon  
you, and you will be my  
witnesses in Jerusalem and in all  
Judea and Samaria, and to the  
end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

*and you will be my witnesses  
to the ends of the earth*

# \*From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

- In its first years, Christianity was a religious movement which blossomed exclusively within the confines of Judaism, and revolved around Jerusalem as its spiritual home.
- The original followers of Jesus were all Jews, and they had no intention of being anything other than faithful and pious Jews. They continued to worship in the Jerusalem temple, to obey the law of Moses, and to have a negative attitude towards Gentiles.
- Yet by the end of the first century, events had transplanted the Church from its original Jewish soil into the Gentile world, where it became an almost exclusively Gentile movement.
- How did this astonishing change take place? We find some clues in the book of Acts.