

Psychagogy in Paul: What Is It, How Does it Help Us Understand Paul, and Why Does it Matter?

Timothy W. Seid, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies,
Earlham School of Religion, Richmond, Indiana

In most circles I'm embarrassed to use the term psychagogy, because no one seems to know what it is outside of a small group of scholars. And even then, the word doesn't appear very often in scholarly literature. I like to use the term because it represents a very important field of study related to the writings of Paul.

When I titled a class "Pauline Psychagogy," I heard back from someone asking me if I meant to write "psychology," and that the word "psychagogy" wasn't in the dictionary. I mentioned my class to Luke Timothy Johnson and he teased me, implying that I was just choosing a foreign word to make something sound scholarly. When I described this course of study to a former seminary professor, he wanted to know what that had to do with ministry in the church.

I want to take this opportunity to answer the burning questions about psychagogy: What is it, How does it help us to understand Paul, and What difference does it make?

What is it?

We're familiar with the term psychology. It's a study of the human self or mind. Although the term is based on Greek words, it is not a term from Greek literature. Psychagogy means the guidance of the soul. A psychagogue is a soul guide or as we call the person today, a spiritual director.¹

That's a simple definition of psychagogy. Now let me briefly trace the history of this study. The use of the term psychagogy seems to stem from German classical scholarship. Two classic works in German describe the practices of ancient philosophy with the language of "soul leading" or "soul guidance."² Other scholars have built on this work to emphasize that ancient

¹ For a classic description of psychagogy, see Ilsetraut Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, ed. A. H. Armstrong, *World Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

² Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung; Methodik Der Exerzitien in Der Antike*, [1. Aufl.]. ed. (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1954).; Ilsetraut Hadot, *Seneca Und Die Griechisch-Römische Tradition Der Seelenleitung, Quellen Und Studien Zur Geschichte Der Philosophie; Bd. 13*; (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969)..

Greek philosophy was not the kind of academic enterprise we might think of today, but it focused on how to live life well.³ How does a person become the best that a human can be?⁴

Psychagogy has found its way into North American scholarship through the work of Abraham Malherbe of Yale. His small book *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care*⁵ describes psychagogy by comparing the practices of Cynics to that of Paul. Recent work that discusses Paul as a Jewish follower of Jesus within a Greco-Roman context of philosophical groups has appeared mainly in collections of articles.⁶ Much of that work comes from the Hellenistic Moral Philosophy & Early Christianity unit of the Society of Biblical Literature. Many of those scholars were colleagues of Malherbe at Yale, were his students at one time, or are students of his students. That's where I and my fellow-students at Brown University come in. For instance, one of my fellow-alums, Clarence Glad, had his dissertation published, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*.⁷

³ Here I refer to the translated works of Pierre Hadot: Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Arnold Ira Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).; Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, 1st Harvard University Press paperback ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).; Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: London, 2004).

⁴ A leading figure in the application of ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary issues is Martha Nussbaum. Her work that bears directly on this topic is: Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 1994).. Also see the following works along the same lines: Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).; Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).; Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation, The Gifford Lectures*; (Oxford England: New York, 2002).; Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 1st Vintage Books ed., *The History of Sexuality; Vol. 3*; (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

⁵ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁶ David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks, eds., *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).; John T. Fitzgerald, ed., *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World*, vol. 82, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).; John T. Fitzgerald, Dirk Obbink, and Glenn Stanfield Holland, *Philodemus and the New Testament World, Supplements to Novum Testamentum; V. 111*; (Leiden: Boston, 2004).; John T. Fitzgerald, Thomas H. Olbricht, and L. Michael White, *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe, Supplements to Novum Testamentum; V. 110*; (Leiden: Boston, 2003).; J. Paul Sampley, ed., *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

⁷ Clarence E. Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy, Supplements to Novum Testamentum; V. 81*; (Leiden: New York, 1995).

The way I am going to describe psychagogy, however, goes beyond how others have interpreted its place in Paul's work of developing communities. It certainly builds on the research of others, but the conclusions I reach reflect my own line of study. What follows first is a brief synopsis of the practices of ancient Greco-Roman philosophy during the late republic and early Roman empire.

The best way I have found to describe this is to talk about the scale of nature.⁸ Every object in nature belongs to a particular group based on similar characteristics. As we ascend this ladder, subsequent objects bear characteristics of the preceding but have more advanced features. A rock or a stick for instance has the quality of movement from outside itself, but it is inanimate – it doesn't have a soul. An animal can also be moved, but it can also move itself and it has a soul, but it doesn't have rationality. Humans have movement, have a soul, and also share an aspect of the highest order of being by having reason or logos. Humans, however, are plagued by debilitating passions like fear and desire, and often live a troubled existence due to dependence on outward circumstances and fate. The highest order of being is god or the gods. A god is an immortal being, pure rationality the Stoics would say, who dwells in perfect tranquility, not dependent on anything.

When a human is born, the infant is like an animal, whose basic instinct is self-preservation and acting on its impulses. As a person develops, he or she is to learn to judge the appearances effected by the impulses in order to do what is virtuous. Gradually the person is able to moderate or even extirpate the passions. Reason becomes dominant and the person learns to live according to nature, to be self-sufficient, to be self-controlled, and thereby to be tranquil and happy. The goal of the human is to move up the scale of nature in order to achieve a godlike state and even to become immortal after death.⁹ Heroes like Heracles (Hercules) attain such a

⁸ I am dependent here on the work of Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford Oxfordshire Clarendon Press: New York, 1985).

⁹ The issue of the immortality of the soul is a complex one. In both cases, early Hebrew and Greek texts reflect the concept of humans at death proceeding to an underworld and existing as shadowy beings. Even though Epicureans held that the soul cannot exist without the body after death and the Stoics considered the human soul to return to the Logos, other philosophers were influenced by the Pythagorean-Platonic concept of the immortality of the soul. See Werner Jaeger, "The Greek Ideas of Immortality," in *Immortality and Resurrection; Four Essays by Oscar Cullman, Harry A. Wolfson, Werner Jaeger, and Henry J. Cadbury*, ed. Krister ed Stendahl (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

state through their endurance or through a noble death. Philosophers who advance to such a level of perfection are referred to as a sage and are thought to attain a divine status.

Cicero, for instance, in *De Amicitia* writes about Scipio, “If it is true that the soul of every person of surpassing excellence takes flight, as it were, from the custody and bondage of the body, to whom can we imagine the way to the gods more easy than to Scipio?”

Seneca portrays the uncertainty of most philosophers about life after death, but includes the possibility of a divine existence for the great-souled (*magnus animus*) person: “Let great souls comply with God’s wishes, and suffer unhesitatingly whatever fate the law of the universe ordains; for the soul at death is either sent forth into a better life, destined to dwell with deity amid greater radiance and calm, or else, at least, without suffering any harm to itself, it will be mingled with nature again, and will return to the universe” (Seneca, *Epistle 71.16*).

Epicurus concludes his *Letter to Menoeceus*: “Do you then study these precepts, and those which are akin to them, by all means day and night, pondering on them by yourself, and discussing them with any one like yourself, and then you will never be disturbed by either sleeping or waking fancies, but you will live like a god among men; for a man living amid immortal gods, is in no respect like a mortal being.”

The Epicurean poet Lucretius then wrote of Epicurus in Book Five of his *De Rerum Natura*:

Who has such power within his breast that he could build up a song worthy of the majesty of nature and these discoveries? Who has such mastery of words that he could praise as he deserves the man who produced such treasures from his breast and bequeathed them to us? No one, I believe, whose body is of mortal growth. If I am to suit my language to the majesty of nature as revealed by him, he was a god – a god indeed, my noble Memmius – who first discovered that rule of life that now is called philosophy, who by his art rescued life from such a stormy sea, so black a night, and steered it into such a calm and sun-lit haven. But life could not be well lived till our breasts were swept clean. Therefore that man has a better claim to be called a god whose gospel (*fama*, “message”), broadcast through the length and breadth of empires, is even now bringing soothing solace to the minds of men.”¹⁰

Fundamental to living life well is to make progress (*prokopē*) toward a goal (*telos* or *skopos*). That goal is bound up in one word, the Greek word *eudaimonia*. While most texts simply translate the word as “happiness,” more recent classicists have constructed expressions

¹⁰ Titus Lucretius Carus and tr, *Lucretius: On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. E. Latham, *Penguin Classics* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1951), 171.

like “the human flourishing life.” Seldom do classicists want to understand *eudaimonia* with its theological implications. Although the meaning of words is not simply a construct of their etymology, it is important to realize that within that term is the word *daimon*, the word for a divinity: *eudaimonia* is a “good divine state.” *Eudaimonia* or its synonym “blessedness” (*makarios*) describe the condition of the gods.

The classic description of *eudaimonia* occurs in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle puts “happiness” in this theological context.

It is this that gives rise to the question whether happiness is a thing that can be learnt, or acquired by training, or cultivated in some other manner, or whether it is bestowed by some divine dispensation or even by fortune. Now if anything that men have is a gift of the gods, it is reasonable to suppose that happiness is divinely given--indeed of all man's possessions it is most likely to be so, inasmuch as it is the best of them all. This subject however may perhaps more properly belong to another branch of study. Still, even if happiness is not sent us from heaven, but is won by virtue and by some kind of study or practice, it seems to be one of the most divine things that exist. For the prize and end of virtue must clearly be supremely good--it must be something divine and blissful.

So what do philosophers do? How do they practice psychagogy? They first seek to persuade people to abandon conventional wisdom and the continual striving for reputation, wealth, and luxury. Protreptic literature is that which encourages people to take up the philosophical life, to be free from fear and anxiety, to become a virtuous person who will come to know the flourishing and divine life of the sage, in whatever social level or occupation they find themselves.¹¹ Lucian of Samosata describes his experience of hearing the Platonic philosopher Nigrinus; his report reads like a testimony of a conversion experience following a Pentecostal tent meeting.

This he (Nigrinus) said, and much more to the same effect. At length he was silent. All the time I had listened in awestruck attention, dreading the moment when he should cease. And when it was all over, my condition was like that of the Phaeacians. For a long time I gazed upon him, spellbound; then I was seized with a violent attack of giddiness; I was bathed in perspiration, and when I attempted to speak, I broke down; my voice

¹¹ For example, “Led on by his theme, he spoke the praises of philosophy, and of the freedom which philosophy confers; and expressed his contempt for the vulgar error which sets a value upon wealth and renown and dominion and power, upon gold and purple, and all that dazzles the eyes of the world,--and once attracted my own” (Lucian of Samosata, Nigrinus)! On conversion in Greco-Roman groups, including philosophical schools, see the classic work of Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Oxford Paperbacks; No. 30; (London: New York, 1961). Also see David Sedley, “Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, ed. Miriam T. Griffin and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford Clarendon Press: New York, 1989).

failed, my tongue stammered, and at last I was reduced to tears (Lucian of Samosata, *Nigrinus*).

Philosophers then seek to help their adherents make progress through teaching and encouragement, advice and reproof. They develop a close relationship in which they are able to employ frank speech in order to correct destructive behavior and ways of thinking.

Often philosophers use medical imagery to describe the practice of philosophy as a therapy for the ailments of the soul.¹² Philosophers used a variety of methods or exercises of spiritual discipline. These include thoughtful meditation, memorization of precepts, visualization, speaking to oneself, practice of moderation both physical and emotional, the study of logic and rhetoric to persuade oneself and others to the philosophical life, reading of poets and philosophers, and the imitation of examples.

It's also important to say a few things about the social location of philosophers and philosophical groups. Although some major centers of study existed, many philosophers practiced their art of living in other contexts. Some philosophers were known to work at a trade and teach people as they came by.¹³ Houses often had store-front shops that faced the street. It was actually rare to find a philosopher speaking out in the public like the marketplace. Cynics were known to do that, specifically the type that would harangue the public and make offensive displays to deride the values of the populace. A good number of philosophers were connected to households and functioned as advisors.¹⁴ The Roman stoic philosopher Seneca had been the advisor to Nero. Philodemus, the Epicurean poet and philosopher, lived under the patronage of Lucius Calpurnius Piso in his villa at Herculaneum. Others formed a school within their own house, such as the Stoic philosopher Epictetus. Some of these philosophers wrote treatises on philosophy, and some wrote letters to personally encourage people to maintain their progress and

¹² Abraham J. Malherbe, "Medical Imagery in the Pastoral Epistles," in *Texts and Testaments* (San Antonio: Trinity Univ Pr, 1980). Martha Nussbaum, "Therapeutic Arguments: Epicurus and Aristotle," in *The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*.

¹³ See Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). More recently is Stanley K. Stowers, "Social Status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activity," *Novum Testamentum* 26 (1984).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Rawson, "Roman Rulers and the Philosophic Advisor," in *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, ed. Miriam T. Griffin and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford Clarendon Press: New York, 1989).

development. Here I want to quote one of the briefer letters of Seneca to his pupil Lucilius to illustrate how philosophy was practiced and how much it sounds like what we read in the letters of Paul.

I grow in spirit and leap for joy and shake off my years and my blood runs warm again, whenever I understand, from your actions and your letters, how far you have outdone yourself; for as to the ordinary man, you left him in the rear long ago. If the farmer is pleased when his tree develops so that it bears fruit, if the shepherd takes pleasure in the increase of his flocks, if every man regards his pupil as though he discerned in him his own early manhood, - what, then, do you think are the feelings of those who have trained a mind and moulded a young idea, when they see it suddenly grown to maturity?

I claim you for myself; you are my handiwork. When I saw your abilities, I laid my hand upon you./a I exhorted you, I applied the goad and did not permit you to march lazily, but roused you continually. And now I do the same; but by this time I am cheering on one who is in the race and so in turn cheers me on

“What else do you want of me, then?” you ask; “the will is still mine.” Well, the will in this case is almost everything, and not merely the half, as in the proverb “A task once begun is half done.” It is more than half, for the matter of which we speak is determined by the soul./a Hence it is that the larger part of goodness is the will to become good. You know what I mean by a good man? One who is complete, finished, - whom no constraint or need can render bad. I see such a person in you, if only you go steadily on and bend to your task, and see to it that all your actions and words harmonize and correspond with each other and are stamped in the same mould. If a man’s acts are out of harmony, his soul is crooked. Farewell

How does it help us to understand Paul?

Among the forms of Judaism during the time of Paul was an expression of Jewish life and teaching that had been acculturated to Hellenism and which was often presented in the philosophical language of the Greeks.¹⁵ Examples of this are the writings of Philo of Alexandria or texts like the Wisdom of Solomon and Fourth Maccabees. Fourth Maccabees, for instance, is

¹⁵ For recent literature see Loveday Alexander, "Foolishness to the Greeks': Jews and Christians in the Public Life of the Empire," in *Philosophy and Power in the Graeco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Miriam Griffin*, ed. Miriam T. Griffin, Gillian Clark, and Tessa Rajak (Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties, Hellenistic Culture and Society; 31*; the *S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies*; (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 1st ed., *Library of Early Christianity; 7*; (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), John Joseph Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, 2nd ed., *The Biblical Resource Series*; (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2000), Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition, Hellenistic Culture and Society; 30*; (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

an eloquent speech that seeks to prove the hypothesis that reason is supreme over the passions.¹⁶ Eleazar, a mother and her seven sons heroically withstand the agony of torture and death for the sake of the law. Their martyrdom is described in terms similar to that of Greeks who died for the benefit of their city.¹⁷

8 Indeed it would be proper to inscribe upon their tomb these words as a reminder to the people of our nation: 9 “Here lie buried an aged priest and an aged woman and seven sons, because of the violence of the tyrant who wished to destroy the way of life of the Hebrews. 10 They vindicated their nation, looking to God and enduring torture even to death.” 11 Truly the contest in which they were engaged was divine, 12 for on that day virtue gave the awards and tested them for their endurance. The prize was immortality in endless life. 17 The tyrant himself and all his council marveled at their endurance, 18 because of which they now stand before the divine throne and live through blessed eternity. 20 These, then, who have been consecrated for the sake of God, are honored, not only with this honor, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, 21 the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified -- they having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. 22 And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an expiation, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been afflicted (4 Macc 17:8-22).

The point I want to make here initially is that the form of Judaism Paul adopts is one already acculturated to the Greco-Roman world.¹⁸ Among this group are people who write in Greek, exhibit features in their writing of education in grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy, as well as move about in society as a “hellenized Jew.” Although they seem to depend on a Greek translation of the Bible, they adhere to the Torah, attend synagogue, observe festivals, and certainly remain true to the worship of the one God. Jews among the Diaspora were sometimes admired for their strict form of life that achieved the goals of popular Greco-Roman

¹⁶ For a concise commentary on Fourth Maccabees, see Stanley K. Stowers, "4 Maccabees," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988).

¹⁷ Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), Sam K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept, Harvard Dissertations in Religion; No. 2*; (Missoula, Mont.: Published by Scholars Press for Harvard Theological Review, 1975).

¹⁸ Earlier attempts to describe the Greco-Roman context of early Christianity tended to relate the early Christian movement with a practice of syncretism with such Hellenistic and Roman religious practices as mystery religions and gnosticism.

philosophy.¹⁹ Some gentiles attached themselves to the synagogue in order to follow the Jewish law and live the philosophical life more rigorously.²⁰

We come to Paul, who defines himself as the apostle to these gentiles. His message is that gentiles are made righteous before God apart from the works of the law.²¹ He travels from city to city and often takes up residence within a household and plies his trade as a leather worker.²² According to Acts, Paul even spends time “dialoguing” in the *schole*, the hall or school, of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). After Paul forms these household groups into a community of Jesus followers, he moves on. But he writes letters back to them in which he uses the same language as the philosophical schools to encourage his brothers and sisters to remain faithful.²³ He wants them to continue to imitate him as he imitates Christ, to make progress toward virtue, to become *teleios*, perfect/mature/complete. He gives advice, reproof, examples, lists of virtues and vices. Paul even uses the dialogical language of the philosophical school in the form of the diatribe in Romans.²⁴ A number of times in Romans Paul switches to the singular address and briefly carries on a dialogue with an imaginary discussion partner, just like Epictetus does. Paul would not describe himself as a philosopher, yet he acts like one in the way he forms

¹⁹ Stanley Kent Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 58-65.

²⁰ Margaret Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 161-79.

²¹ The larger issue about Paul’s attitude about the Law and Gentiles – often referred to in recent years as the New Perspective on Paul – is summarized in John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: New York, 2000).

²² The study of the role of the household in early Christianity is extensive. See especially Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd, enl. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).; Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, 1st ed., *The Family, Religion, and Culture*; (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).; Carolyn; Margaret Y. MacDonald; Janet H. Tulloch Osiek, ed., *A Women's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005). For a recent article supporting the view that a household would have enough room for a large gathering of people, see David L. Balch, "Rich Pompeiian Houses, Shops for Rent, and the Huge Apartment Building in Herculaneum as Typical Spaces for Pauline House Churches," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 1 (2004).

²³ The tradition of Greco-Roman letter-writing, frequently practiced among philosophers, and how it relates to letter-writing among early Christians is thoroughly examined in Stanley Kent Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 1st ed., *Library of Early Christianity*; 5; (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

²⁴ Stanley Kent Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, *Dissertation Series / Society of Biblical Literature*; No. 57; *Variation: Dissertation Series (Society of Biblical Literature)*; No. 57. (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981).

community.²⁵ In typical fashion he emphasizes that he is not like the charlatan or sophist who charges money for instruction and uses guile, deceit and flattery. Instead, Paul depicts himself as the sage who endures great afflictions and difficulties, the *agōn* language of toils and labors being reminiscent of the models of Odysseus and Heracles.²⁶ Paul is gentle with them and doesn't use harsh criticism like some Cynics.²⁷ Yet he uses frank speech as a friend would, rather than be a flatterer.²⁸

Paul even uses the technical language of the philosophical schools. We find in Paul's letters words like passion (*pathos* Rom 1:26; 7:5; Gal 5:24; 1Thess 4:5), desire (*epithumia* Rom. 1:24; 6:12; 13:14; 1 Co. 10:6; Gal. 5:16f, 24; 1 Thess. 4:5), appetite (*orexis* Rom 1:27), duties (ta *kathēkonta* Rom 1:28), prudence (*sōfroneō* Rom 12:3), self-indulgence (*akrasia* 1Cor 7:4), self-control (*egkrateia* Gal 5:23; *egkrateuomai* 1Cor 7:9; 9:25), virtue (*aretē* Phil 4:8), self-sufficiency (*autarkeia* 2Cor 9:8; Phil 4:11; cf. 1Thess 4:12), "the things that make a difference" (related to the Stoic class of "indifferent": *ta diapheronta* Rom 2:8; Phil 1:10), progress (*prokopē* Phil 1:25), goal (*telos* Rom 6:22; Phil 3:19; *skopos* Phil 3:14), and perception (*aisthēsis* Phil 1:9). Some vocabulary of Paul seems to derive from his use of the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, but the language is also a part of Greek philosophy and at times Paul uses it that way. The word "righteousness" (*dikaïosunē*) is always translated as "justice" in Greek philosophical texts and is one of the primary virtues. Our word "sin" (*hamartia*) is commonly used to refer to moral faults. Other terms in the New Testament like soul, flesh, and body are also important terms in philosophy.

One of the most important words in Christian literature is also a word found frequently in philosophical texts. It is the word salvation (*sōtēria*; verb *sōzō*). It also occurs often with its opposite, destruction (*apōleia*; verb *apollumi*). In literature from Plato to Epictetus,

²⁵ Loveday Alexander, "Paul and the Hellenistic Schools: The Evidence of Galen," in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr, 1995).

²⁶ John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence, Dissertation Series / Society of Biblical Literature; No. 99; Variation: Dissertation Series (Society of Biblical Literature); No. 99.* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988).

²⁷ Abraham J. Malherbe, "Gentle as a Nurse: The Cynic Background to 1 Thess 2," *Novum testamentum* 12, no. 2 (1970).

²⁸ Clarence E. Glad, "Frank Speech, Flattery, and Friendship in Philodemus," in *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1996), Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*.

salvation/destruction language is used to describe the salutary effects of progress in virtue and the degradation of progress through the commission of moral error.²⁹ Epictetus is reported to have said in his Discourses 4.1 about the death of Socrates, “Did he consider the power of escape as an unexpected gain? By no means: he considered what was fit and proper; but the rest he did not even look at or take into the reckoning. For he did not choose, he said, to save his poor body, but to save that which is increased and saved by doing what is just, and is impaired and destroyed by doing what is unjust.”

An interesting text that frequently uses the salvation/destruction language in the context of moral progress is *The Tabula of Cebes*. This Cynic/Stoic allegory of life reads like Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress and may have even influenced Bunyan’s writing. An old man describes to visitors to a temple in Thebes a tablet portraying multiple enclosures with gates through which people pass. He compares learning about the meaning of the tablet with the riddle of the Sphinx.

Thus, if anyone does not understand these things he is destroyed by her [Foolishness], not all at once, as a person devoured by the Sphinx died. Rather, he is destroyed (*apollumi*) little by little, throughout his entire life, just like those who are handed over for retribution. But if one does understand, Foolishness is in turn destroyed (*apollumi*), and he himself is saved (*sōzō*) and is blessed (*makarios*) and happy (*eudaimōn*) in his whole life (3.3-4).³⁰

As people are guided on their way into the first enclosure, they are met by female figures who personify Opinion, Desire and Pleasure. The old man explains, “Some of these women lead to salvation (*sōzō*), while others by deception lead to destruction (*apollumi*)” (6.2).³¹ Salvation language continues through this description of how people are able to avoid deception and vice so that they may experience the best sort of life. Although the *Tabula* clearly relates *eudaimonia* with the present life, at one point that life is described in terms reminiscent of the realm of the gods (17.1-3). It is “beautiful, grassy, and brilliantly lit” and the name of the place is “the dwelling place of the happy. For all the Virtues and Happiness spend their time here.”³²

²⁹ For a further description about how this functions in moral philosophy, see Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*, 78-81.

³⁰ John T. Fitzgerald and L. Michael White, *The Tabula of Cebes, Texts and Translations 24; Graeco-Roman Religion 7* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³² *Ibid.*, 89. Note 58 discusses the view of some who take this to be a description of the Islands of the Blessed and Elysian Fields, while others take it to refer to this life (pg. 149).

What these philosophers have in common is the practice of guiding adherents toward the goal of completeness characteristic of the divine life. I. Hadot summarizes the philosopher's role as spiritual guide (psychagogue).

All Hellenistic and Imperial schools of philosophy, including the Cynics and Skeptics, regarded guidance toward a happy life as the most important goal of their philosophy. What was understood by happy life could vary considerably in theory, but in all cases it had the practical end of strengthening the individual inwardly against all the vicissitudes of fate and, as far as possible, of making the person self-sufficient. Ancient philosophy was, above all, help with life's problems and spiritual guidance, and the ancient philosopher was, above all, a spiritual guide.³³

Paul's practices in guiding and forming people within communities of faithfulness is like that of many of the philosophers of his day. His rhetoric and vocabulary reflect an acquaintance with philosophical literature and teaching, even though it probably came to him through the practice of other Jewish thinkers who had adopted Greek culture. Locating Paul within this context is helping us to understand Paul's message better.

What Difference Does It Make?

First of all, it helps me to understand Paul's convictions about Jesus. With this way of reading Paul's letters, I find him viewing Jesus as the ultimate example of endurance and faithfulness to God to the point of death.³⁴ Others could talk about their sages, heroes, or even emperors who have been raised to immortality, but Paul was convinced that Jesus was the one who actually had been resurrected and exalted to heaven. That must mean then that Jesus achieved that perfection of life.

³³ Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide," 444.

³⁴ I take Paul's phrase, traditionally read as "faith in Christ," to be properly understood as "faithfulness of Christ." Not only am I convinced of the arguments based on grammar, I am particularly swayed by Paul's use of the same expression regarding Abraham in Romans 4:16. No translations translate this verse consistently with the way they do the references to Christ. It is not "faith in Abraham" but the "faith/faithfulness of Abraham." Likewise, Paul refers to the suffering and endurance of Christ with the expression "faithfulness of Christ." The literature on the *pistis christou* debate is extensive. See the seminal work Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, *Dissertation Series / Society of Biblical Literature*; No. 56; *Variation: Dissertation Series (Society of Biblical Literature)*; No. 56. (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983). An opposing view can be found in Arland J. Hultgren, "The Pistis Christou Formulation in Paul," *Novum testamentum* 22 (1980). For a recent discussion of views, see the section "Looking Back, Pressing On" of Julette M. Bassler, David M. Hay, and E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). A recent work from an evangelical point of view supports this reading in the chapter "The Faith(fulness) of Christ in Pauline Literature," John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 352-59.

Paul describes Jesus in these terms in Romans 1:4, that Jesus was “designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” In Philippians 2 Paul describes the way of thinking his followers should have with the example of Christ.

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:6-11).

Because of the kind of obedience Jesus demonstrated, God exalted Jesus and gave him the name of Lord. This is an example for the Philippians to follow. Paul immediately follows by saying, you have obeyed and I want you to “work out your own salvation.”³⁵ Paul contrasts their progress with that of the opponents, who are characterized by the vices of envy and rivalry (Phil 1:14). The actions of the vicious opponents “is a clear omen to them of their destruction (*apōleia*),” but the progress marked by the Philippians will be an indication “of your salvation (*sōtēria*), and that from God” (Phil 1:28). The context is not one of eschatological judgment but of progress in character.³⁶

In Philippians 3 Paul describes his imitation of Christ. He says he endures suffering “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11). He says he has not obtained or is “perfect” yet, but he “presses on.” He is “straining forward” to what lies ahead. In 3:14, “I press on toward the goal (*skopos*) for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul then encourages those who are “mature” to think this way and to “join in imitating me.” Together they will have a citizenship in heaven when Jesus comes, “who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body.”

³⁵ This same expression is used by Euripides, “Why then do you hesitate if you can secure safety for the city and for your descendants” (*Heraclidae* 1045-46).

³⁶ These terms occur also in 1 Corinthians. On the one hand, Paul says the weak person is destroyed, “And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died” (1 Cor 8:11). Paul then says, “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). For further discussion on these texts, consult the detailed argument in Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*, 276-77.

Paul has discovered the true path on the scale of nature. Christ achieved the ultimate place, but Paul and those who follow him as he imitates Christ can be certain that the kind of life they live as Christ followers will culminate in their own resurrection and immortality with an existence like his.

In Paul's letters he gives instructions about how to live life. Phil 4, I Thess 4, Rom 12-15, for instance, give advice and encouragement about the kinds of things people are to do within the community. This language describes how they are to think, how not to be anxious, how to be self-sufficient, how to live in moderation, what it means to be at peace and to be in fellowship and harmony with others. Often these sections of Paul's letters are treated as an afterthought to Paul's theological exposition, but these are the central part of Paul's development of people who make progress, so that by the time Christ returns they will be perfect/mature.³⁷ His language often expresses the progressive nature of their salvation.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2 Corinthians 2:15).

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, 2 by which you are saved, if you hold it fast -- unless you believed in vain (1 Corinthians 15:1-2).

I. Hadot concluded her article by referring to the way in which the practice of psychology and spirituality has not progressed much beyond the ancient practice. These disciplines should recognize their heritage in philosophical practice. Cognitive behavioral psychology and the Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy of Albert Ellis both claim its roots in the philosophical literature. Christian spirituality places its roots in the practices of monastic Christians, who developed much of their spiritual exercises from philosophers like the Stoic Marcus Aurelius. This heritage is part and parcel of Pauline Christianity and was intended to guide Christian communities to achieve the best kind of human life, the kind that is in itself a divine existence.

³⁷ Paul expects the progress toward completeness to have been achieved by the time Christ returns. The RSV translates Phil 1:10 accurately, "so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for (*eis*) the day of Christ."

Conclusion

The type of language used in the philosophical schools is so close to what we find in Paul, and his methods of guiding and forming early Christian communities so closely parallels that of the philosophical groups. We can read a text from the end of the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus and apply it to the art of Christian living as taught by Paul.

You are no longer a youth, but already a full grown man. If then you are negligent and slothful, and are continually making procrastination after procrastination, and proposal (intention) after proposal, and fixing day after day, after which you will attend to yourself, you will not know that you are not making improvement, but you will continue ignorant (uninstructed) both while you live and till you die. Immediately then think it right to live as a full-grown man, and one who is making proficiency,... And if anything laborious, or pleasant or glorious or inglorious be presented to you, remember that now is the contest, now are the Olympic games, and they cannot be deferred; and that it depends on one defeat and one giving way that progress is either lost (*apollumi*) or maintained ("saved" *sōzō*). Socrates in this way became perfect, on all things improving himself, attending to nothing except to reason. But you, though you are not yet Socrates, ought to live as one who wishes to be a Socrates. (Ench 51.3)

Paul could equally say, "But you, though you are not yet Jesus, ought to live as one who wishes to be Jesus."

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