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## A Greek Legacy

**A** FEW YEARS AFTER my conversion, when the spiritual side of my life took on new depth and meaning, I began to discover how uniquely the Bible applies to the day-to-day. But I also discovered how alien a biblical view was to much of what I had come to accept through my education and experiences.

In Western culture, the lens through which we view the world has been colored by nearly three thousand years of Greek thought. You know the names. Homer. Thales. Socrates. Plato. Aristotle. What they thought and taught has had a profound impact on how we think.

From these Greek thinkers came much that is good, including mathematics, the scientific method, the beautiful language of the New Testament, and the Hippocratic Oath, which medical practitioners have followed verbatim until the last few decades.

But our inheritance from the Greeks also came with some

serious baggage. The Greek thinkers, shunning the God of the Hebrews, came up with man-centered and mystical notions to define the world around them.

Some have been largely discarded, like Homer's gods of fire and thunder, living on mountain peaks. Four hundred years after Homer, and four hundred years before Christ, Aristotle departed from mythology to describe "God" as an infinite but impersonal "energizing form," a self-developing energy source—the very root of modern New Age philosophy.

Without the God of the Bible, human beings are left with only themselves. Protagoras, in the fifth century B.C., put it crisply when he offered his famous maxim, "Man is the measure of all things."

Such ideas, even when wrong, don't die easily. Much of what we see in society extols Greek thought—whether it's the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games, news periodicals, radio and TV programs, movies, business seminars or educational curricula at our colleges and public high schools. Adoration for the Greek system is everywhere.

### **Absolute or Relative?**

Moral relativism, for example, didn't start at Harvard or other universities. Socrates, using his famous "dialectic method," had his students arrive at their own ideas of the meanings of such things as goodness and justice. They formed personal notions of right and wrong. Thus, they justified living within their own opinions. Socrates couldn't teach absolutes he hadn't embraced. Nor can we.

Greek thinking affects our culture in other ways, and it has had a significant impact on the way we feel about business in general and our work in particular. To understand the impact we must follow the logical progression.

The Greeks couldn't get away from the concept of "dualism"—the idea of higher and lower planes of ideas and activities. Plato was the clearest on this. He sought to identify unchanging universal truths, placing them in the higher of two distinct realms. This upper level he called "form," consisting of eternal ideas. The lower level he called "matter." This lower realm was temporal and physical. Plato's primary interest lay in the higher form. He deemed it superior to the temporary and imperfect world of matter.

The rub comes when we see where Plato placed work and occupations. Where, indeed? In the lower realm.

### **Dualism in the Christian Era**

Nearly a thousand years later, in the fifth century A.D., Augustine sought to merge Platonic thought into a Christian framework. This approach resulted in a distinction between "contemplative life" and "active life"—the same distinction between higher and lower, but with different names. The higher of these realms came to be equated with church-related concerns that were considered sacred, such as Bible study, preaching and evangelism. Other things were secular, common, lacking in nobility.

Where did Augustine place work and occupations? As with Plato before him, in the lower realm.

Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, furthered this

derogatory notion of work as he perpetuated the dualism of Greek thinking. He also categorized life into two realms, which he called Grace and Nature. Revelation, which gave understanding to theology and church matters, operated in the upper realm of Grace. In the lower realm of Nature, man's "natural" intellect stood squarely on its own.

Business and occupations, operating in the lower realm, didn't require revelation. According to Aquinas, they survived quite well on a diet of human intellect and reasoned judgment.

### **Lower or Higher?**

Now we bring this dichotomy up to the present.

Francis Schaeffer, one of the modern era's greatest thinkers, wrote on the more recent impact of dualistic thinking. In *A Christian Manifesto*, he speaks of the flawed view of Christianity advanced through the Pietist movement in the seventeenth century.

Pietism began as a healthy protest against formalism and a too abstract Christianity. But it had a deficient, 'platonic' spirituality. It was platonic in the sense that Pietism made a sharp division between the 'spiritual' and the 'material' world—giving little, or no, importance to the 'material' world. The totality of human existence was not afforded a proper place. Christianity and spirituality were shut up to a small, isolated part of life.

The result of such a view is that the activity of work is removed from the sacred realm and placed squarely in the secular—making it "impossible" to serve God by being a man or woman in business. To me, this is a startling revelation!

Now here's a question for you. Has this view affected you, as it has me?

### **Second-Class?**

I can now see that the perspective of the Greeks, established so many years ago, continues alive and well to the present day, influencing and distorting our perception of work. For years, I thought my involvement in business was a second-class endeavor—necessary to put bread on the table, but somehow less noble than more sacred pursuits like being a minister or a missionary. The clear impression was that to truly serve God, one must leave business and go into “full-time Christian service.” Over the years, I have met countless other business people who feel the same way.

The reason is clear: Our culture is thoroughly saturated with dualism. In this view, business and most occupations are relegated to the lower, the worldly, the material realm. As such they are perceived to lack dignity, spirituality, intrinsic worth, and the nobility of purpose they deserve.

Schaeffer, looking back over the legacy of nearly three millennia of Greek thought, proposes this radically different view of true spirituality:

It is not only that true spirituality covers all of life, but it covers all parts of the spectrum of life equally. In this sense there is nothing concerning reality that is not spiritual.

Indeed, there is a dramatically different way to view the world and our work—a view that liberated me to see business as a high calling.

But to find this view, I had to look through a different window.