St. Paul Pays Homage to Plato

Chapter 10

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The remaining eleven disciples surely saw that those choosing Paul's Gospel over Jesus' teachings were embracing the version of ideality created by the Greek philosopher Plato (427? –347? BC) rather than the spiritual wisdom of the Hebrew prophets and the Messiah. Had the eleven read the Greek philosopher's writings? Probably not, since they had their own wisdom literature. However, obviously Paul had.

Paul used the Greek philosopher's ideas when he described the church as Christ's body, the gifts of the spirit as one talent or occupation per citizen, ecstatic utterances in worship and the need for interpreters, putting on righteousness as a garment, the good or well-doing, conscience as a guide to what is right in life, the upper and lower natures of human beings, and love as a god. These are the major Platonist topics Paul, who seems to have studied all of Plato's works, broadcast as his own revelations from God. As a result, under Christianity, many of the subjects Plato used in his discourses have become tenets of the Christian church.

In the last half of the first century AD, Paul said, "For just as in a single human body there are many limbs and organs, all with different functions, so all of us, united with Christ, form one body, serving individually as limbs and organs to one another."[1] Members of early churches claiming Christ as their savior adopted these words as those

[1] Rom. 12:4-5 NEB.

of Yahweh. The passage is still quoted by church members in the twenty-first century as God-given wisdom expressed through Paul of Tarsus. Indeed, many church members confidently refer to their congregations as "the body of Christ." But look at the similarity between Paul and Plato when the Greek philosopher has Socrates say the best-governed city is one "whose state is most like that of an individual man. For example, if the finger of one of us is wounded, the entire community of bodily connections stretching to the soul for 'integration' with the dominant part is made aware, and all of it feels the pain as a whole."[2] In Plato's Laws, the Athenian iterated, "Why manifestly the city at large is the trunk of the body."[3] Plato composed these words at least 350 years before Paul dictated his letter to the Romans.

Since Paul's audiences were mostly Greco-Romans, many of them were familiar with these Platonist discourses. In First Corinthians 12:14-19, Paul explained, "A body is not one single organ, but many … Suppose the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', it does still belong to the body. If the body were all eye, how could it hear? If the body were all ear, how could it smell? But, in fact, God appointed each limb and organ to its own place in the body, as he chose."

Who would dispute this marvelously enlightening metaphor? It ranges out to bring understanding to all who read it, but when we put it to the test of Hebrew or Greek origin, the piece surely belongs in the Attic column. Plato also used these same organs when he put Socrates and Protagoras in a discussion about virtue, hundreds of years before Paul developed his Gospel. Socrates asked Protagoras, "Is virtue a single whole, and are justice and self-control and holiness parts of it? … As

[2] Plato, Republic, trans. Paul Shorey, 5.462c,d. Also see 464b.
[3] Plato, Laws, trans. A. E. Taylor, 12.964e.

the parts of a face are parts—mouth, nose, eyes and ears."[4] Socrates then probed into the metaphor further by asking Protagoras if they agreed each part serves a different purpose, just as the features of a face do, and the parts make the whole, but each serves a different purpose—"the eye is not like the ear nor has it the same function."[5]

When we read Paul's proclamation, "He is, moreover, the head of the body, the church," we are once again treated to one of Plato's figurative descriptions.[6] Taking on this subject, Paul used ideas from the Timaeus, and although it reads like awe and veneration of and for Jesus of Nazareth, in reality, Paul was once again paying tribute to the principles of Plato. Here is the original:

> First, then, the gods, imitating the spherical shape of the universe, enclosed the two divine courses in a spherical body, that, namely, which we now term the head, being the most divine part of us and the lord of all that is in us; to this the gods, when they put together the body, gave all the other members to be servants.[7]

Paul paraphrased Plato's concept in his letter to the Ephesians when he said, "He put everything in subjection beneath his feet, and appointed him as supreme head of the church, which is His body."[8] Paul uses this symbolism again when he addresses the Colossians: "For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied … Every power and authority in the universe is subject to him as Head."[9]

Since Paul's church is modeled after Plato's ideal city/state, it is no surprise to find that the congregation must be made up of individuals

[4] Plato, Protagoras, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie,. 329c, d.
[5] Ibid., 330a.
[6] Col. 1:18, NEB. Also, see Eph. 1:22–23; 4:15–16 & Col. 2: 18–19 NEB.
[7] Plato, Timaeus, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 44d.
[8] Eph. 1:22–23 NEB.
[9] Col. 2:9–10 NEB.

whose work is specialized just as Plato defines it. Plato's dialogist, in a discussion involving "manifold forms of variation," deemed it is best to maintain the rule of "no twofold or manifold man among us, since every man does one thing."[10] Indeed, the theory is that the ideal social structure is best served without the multi-talented, therefore, "we shall find the cobbler a cobbler and not a pilot in addition to his cobbling, and the farmer a farmer and not a judge added to his farming, and the soldier a soldier and not a money-maker in addition to his soldiery, and so of all the rest."[11]

Man's nature is the reason for such tight but necessary control, according to Socrates. He explained, "To begin with, our several natures are not all alike but different. One man is naturally fitted for one task, and another for another." [12] Apparently agreeing wholeheartedly with Plato's ideas on this point, Paul adopts this principle also and names it "the gifts of the spirit" (Rom. 12:6–8 and 1 Cor. 12:1 NEB). His rules concerning the use of these gifts match those in the Greek dialogues. The Tarsian did not even attempt to shape this idea in a different form, but told the Romans:

> The gifts we possess differ as they are allotted to us by God's grace, and must be exercised accordingly: the gift of inspired utterance, for example, in proportion to a man's faith; or the gift of administration, in administration. A teacher should employ his gift in teaching, and one who has the gift of stirring speech should use it to stir his hearers.[13]

[10] Rep. 3. 397c, e.
[11] Ibid., e.
[12] Ibid., 2.370b, also see Laws 8.846e, 847a.
[13] Rom. 12:6–8 NEB.

The Corinthians received a parallel rule from Paul: "I should like you all to be as I am myself; but everyone has the gift God has granted him, one has this gift and another that."[14]

Paul's further instructions to the Corinthians are: "In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose" (1 Cor. 12:7). Many of Paul's promises deal with "miraculous powers," especially concerning "ecstatic utterance of different kinds," and those persons able to interpret such sounds.[15]

In addition, in this same chapter of First Corinthians, Paul again used the human body and its several parts as a model for the church. He explained the ear, eye, nose, foot, and hand each have distinctive functions as part of a body and are not interchangeable. Just so, the distinctive talents of church members, especially those persons able to understand the esoteric features of religion, must be esteemed. Envying the person with those unique powers was a sin, of course.

A tendril of the growth nurtured in early Greek religion wound its way into Roman acceptance and flowered into the belief that gods had a language all their own. Deities did not communicate in the mundane speech of mortals, however. In his hymn to the gods, Hesiod, who lived in the eighth century BC, described the multi-headed monster, Typhoeus, who besides bellowing, roaring, barking, and hissing, could also speak in a "'normal' voice … [making] the same kind of noise as a human larynx does … though the language he speaks is of course that of the gods."[16]

By the time Plato developed his philosophy, it seems the concept was unchanged. He too believed the gods spoke a language man could not possibly comprehend. But a way had been provided for humans to understand their speech. Men from any linguistic background could

[14] 1 Cor. 7:7 NEB.
[15] Ibid., 12:10–11 NEB.
[16] Hesiod, Theogony, M. L. West, ed. (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1966), 386–387.

speak the language of deities if only their minds were unhinged by the gods. Indeed, incoherent speech was viewed as a gift from the gods. Socrates explains, "The greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent." [17] Plato reiterated this concept in the Timaeus 71e. In sound and reason, if the speaker was understood by his whole audience, it was proof he did not possess the gift of the gods.

The eleven disciples must have been mystified by Paul's use of glossolalia in his doctrine. Jesus certainly never took up the subject. Yet Paul taught, "When a man is using the language of ecstasy he is talking with God, not with men, for no man understands him; he is no doubt inspired, but he speaks mysteries."[18] Farther on in this chapter, Paul declared, "Thank God, I am more gifted in ecstatic utterance than any of you" (v. 18). Being the clever man that he was, however, Paul understood the ramifications of what he was teaching and attempted to control this branch of his Gospel by pruning some of its wild growth. Therefore, he warned his followers it is better to "speak five intelligible words … than thousands of words in the language of ecstasy."[19]

Even so, the precept remains a part of Paul's creed, and he goes on to follow Plato's pattern by insisting interpreters be present when ecstatic utterances are part of a meeting. Here are Paul's instructions: "To sum up, my friends: when you meet to worship, each of you contributes a hymn, some instruction, a revelation, an ecstatic utterance, or the interpretation of such utterance." [20] After unintelligible sounds were produced by a human voice, another person was called on to explain them to an audience of believers who had faith God was using these noises to communicate with them.

[17] Plato, Phaedrus, trans. R. Hackforth, 244a. Also, see 245a, b, c.
[18] 1 Cor. 14:2 NEB.
[19] Ibid., v.18.
[20] Ibid., v. 26.

Apparently, this idea too comes from the Timaeus, where Plato gave these directions: "But, while [the enthralled one] continues demented, he cannot judge of the visions which he sees or the words which he utters; … And for this reason it is customary to appoint interpreters to be judges of the true inspiration." [21] Surely, Paul's rules in First Corinthians are too similar to Plato's directions in the Timaeus to be accidental. Yet whether a stand is being taken for or against glossolalia in Christianity, Paul's advice on the subject is used to support the argument.

A good example of what can happen in worship when the element of ecstasy takes over is described in First Samuel 19:18–24. It was during the time when Saul was hunting David to kill him. He ordered his soldiers to find and apprehend the former shepherd. While searching for David, the men came upon Samuel's School of Prophets in Naioth in Ramah, and found them enjoying a rapturous state. The king's men also "fell into prophetic rapture" (1 Sam. 19:20 NEB), and left off their search to join the prophets in their activities. When Saul's men failed to return with David, he sent two other bands of men to search for him, but they too fell into the spiritual abandonment led by Samuel. Despairing at the failure of his men, Saul himself set out in pursuit of his former harp player. Upon arriving at Naioth, however, Saul also became possessed. He took off his clothes, and naked and prone on the ground, "fell into a rapture before Samuel and lay" in that state the rest of the day and all that night. Samuel Sandmel calls this group of Samuel's "loathsome whirling dervishes." [22]

What Samuel incited his prophets to do was in direct disobedience to Yahve, according to passages in Exodus. Encouraging his priests to spare him the sight of their private parts, and themselves their lives,

[21] Tim. 72a. Also, see 1 Cor. 12:10 & 14:27

[22] Sandmel, The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to Their Literature and Religious Ideas, 448.

God instructed them to wear linen drawers.[23] Surely, this rule of covering oneself before God extends to prophets, since shedding one's sense of speech apparently leads to casting off other considerate social items as well.

Interestingly, we find Plato and Paul putting the terms shedding and donning to metaphysical use. One can put on spiritual attributes, they say. The Tarsian scolds the Colossians by saying, "Now that you have discarded the old nature … and put on the new nature," stop lying to one another.[24]

Just so, many years earlier, while Plato was setting out the role of women in the ideal city, and after agreeing in their dialogue there is nothing "practiced by mankind in which the masculine sex does not surpass the female," the rule was tendered that "the women of the guardians" must disrobe to perform their duties "since they will be clothed with virtue as a garment."[25] Paul drew from Plato's language and practiced it on the Ephesians by instructing them to "lay aside that old human nature … and put on the new nature of God's creating" (4:22–24 NEB). Since under Paul, righteousness and immortality are items of dress, he tells the Corinthians, "What is mortal must be clothed with immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53 NEB).

Years earlier, Plato wrote a similar passage where he had Diotima explaining to Socrates that the man who seeks and finds the soul of beauty "shall be called the friend of god, and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him."[26]

It appears after Paul put aside the laws of God, he felt a need to replace them with a creed that at least had a moral tone to it. Thus, we have

[23] Exod. 28:42– 43 NEB.
[24] Col. 3:9–10 NEB.
[25] Rep. 5.455c,457a.
[26] Plato, Symposium, trans. Michael Joyce, 212a.

the precepts of the good and well doing. These malleable words, of course, can mean whatever the person using them says they mean.

Ethics in Plato's writing are always a matter of discussion and debate, and more discussion and more debate. Indeed, both Plato and Paul's flexible rules are good examples of situational ethics. Here are a few rules Paul put together for his followers:

> Throw off falsehood … do not let anger lead you into sin … The thief must give up stealing … No bad language must pass your lips … Have done with spite and passion, all angry shouting and cursing, and bad feeling of every kind. Be generous to one another … Fornication and indecency of any kind, or ruthless greed, must not so much as be mentioned among you … No coarse, stupid, or flippant talk; these things are out of place.[27]

Paul also tells the Romans, "I … wish you to be experts in goodness," and he encourages the Galatians to "never tire of doing good."[28] Women in Paul's church must not dress in costly jewels and high-priced clothes, "but with good deeds, as befits women who claim to be religious."[29] And just as Plato's women mentioned above, if their actions are good and true, virtue will be their real dress.

Plato said the good are easy to identify. They are the "rightly educated," and those "who can command themselves."[30] In the Symposium, Plato explained "that the action itself, as such, is neither good or bad."[31] Performance decides an action's merit in his view, and he explained, "If it is done rightly and finely, the action will be good; if it is done basely, bad."[32] Plato enforced this precept by instructing through

[27] Eph. 4:25–29,31–32; 5:3–4 NEB.
[28] Rom. 16:19 & Gal. 6:9 NEB.
[29] 1 Tim. 2:9–10 NEB.
[30] Laws 1.644a,b.
[31] Symp. 180e.
[32] Ibid., 181a.

Pausanias, “Remember that the moral value of the act is not what one might call a constant.”[33] And echoing down through the years of time, we find this passage in Romans where Paul made his declaration about eating food offered to Roman gods: “I am absolutely convinced, as a Christian, that nothing is impure in itself; only, if a man considers a particular thing impure, then to him it is impure.”[34]

Paul’s goal in his religion seems to be self-approval. Self-approval in Paul’s vocabulary, however, appears to be simply another name for conscience. There is no need to examine whether an act is good or evil, and no need for winnowing the chaff from the grain. If one’s mind is satisfied, then all is well. Luke tells us Paul spent considerable time on this self-instruction, and quotes him as saying, “I … train myself to keep at all times a clear conscience before God and man.”[35] Yet too often, heeding one’s own conscience is simply proceeding with what one has already justified in one’s mind to do anyway. Obviously, Paul judged his own conscience to be a better behavior guide than the laws of a Hebrew God. Hence, in those choices that trouble the soul, Paul assured both the Romans and Corinthians that conscience would guide them correctly. When he addressed both groups, Paul encouraged people at table with pagans, and dinner is food previously offered to Roman gods, to put aside the first three of the Ten Commandments and let their conscience guide them. Paul’s lesson this time is that the only reason a person would refuse pagan hospitality in the first place is because of a conscience that makes him feel polluted while eating such food. Conversely, a strong conscience would make the eater feel unpolluted. Therefore, it is not the act that pollutes, but, more precisely, the person’s feeling about the act that defiles, according to Paul.

[33] Ibid., 183d.
[34] Rom.14:14 NEB.
[35] Acts 24:16 NEB.

However, in the history of men and women, evidence shows that conscience as a guide to righteousness often fails. Misuse of children by their own parents, as well as strangers and religious leaders, continues. Obviously, conscience does little to protect those children or the sick or the starving poor from people who claim they love God. In AD 313, Constantine put the church under governmental control, thereby endowing church leaders with power over the souls and bodies of believers. The world has not always benefited from the conscience of church leaders.

James Hastings, who edited the Dictionary of the Bible, said Paul took the idea of conscience from the Stoics. That appears likely since Paul's conception of conscience does seem to agree with what was current thought; the Stoic religion was renewed during his lifetime.

Obviously, Paul favored Stoic beliefs as well as those of Plato since he quotes the Stoic poet Aratus, of Soli in Cilicia (born ca. 315 BC), in Acts 17:28. When the Tarsian says, "We are also his off-spring," he is using a line from Aratus' poem Phaenomena. The god his Aratus lauds is the incestuous Zeus. The Stoics claimed him as their chief god: they did not revere the God of the Hebrew people.

Yet even Plato saw conscience resulting from an attitude "instilled by subjection to pre-existing laws" (Laws 3.699c). Conscience, of course, is not a moral principle of the Old Testament. In fact, the writer of Proverbs sharply warned, "A man's whole conduct may be pure in his own eyes, but the Lord fixes a standard for the Spirit of man." [36] Further on in this chapter, the Old Testament penman warns, "A road may seem straightforward to a man, yet may end as the way of death."[37]

[36] Prov. 16:2 NEB.
[37] Ibid., v. 25.

Paul, nevertheless, assigned conscience the task of helping us control these unruly bodies of ours, which he described as being dichotomized. Our lower natures separate us from God, according to Paul, and combined with a law that has failed to save us from ourselves, humanity is headed for spiritual death.[38]

Paul repeatedly warned his followers about the unbearable evil at home in their lower natures.[39] This idea too belongs to Plato. In the Timaeus, Plato wrote, "The authors of our race" understood how little self-discipline human beings exercise, and placed the appetitive drives in the "lower belly."[40] Plato explained his sundered humanity this way:

> Wherefore, fearing to pollute the divine any more than was absolutely unavoidable, they (the gods), gave to the mortal nature a separate habitation in another part of the body, placing the neck between them to be the isthmus and boundary, which they constructed between the head and breast, to keep them apart.[41]

The newly discovered appetites of the lower nature, according to both Plato and Paul, are elements neither the gods nor God can possibly view as beneficial to human beings. Paul disagrees with God on this point, for when God spoke of his creation, including Adam and Eve, he described "all that he had made, and it was very good."[42]

Actually, Paul seemed embarrassed by the longings that drive human beings. He told his followers the urges of the body are our animal natures and warned they are at "enmity to God," and, moreover, this nature can never be controlled by the laws of God.[43] In Paul's doctrine,

[38] Rom. 7:5; Eph. 4:22–24 NEB.
[39] Rom. 8:7; 1 Cor. 3:3; Gal. 5:13,16,19; 6:8; & Col. 2:11 NEB.
[40] Plato, Tim. 72e, 73a.
[41] Ibid., 69d, e.
[42] Gen. 1:27, 31 NEB.
[43] Rom. 8:7 NEB.

therefore, it is up to us to beat down our lower natures while spoon-feeding our upper natures.

It was Plato's theory that humans cannot know God until they die and the soul is completely free from its fleshly prison. Also, the Clementine writings have Simon/Paul say, "It is truly very difficult for man to know him, as long as he is in the flesh; for blacker than all darkness, and heavier than all clay, is this body with which the soul is surrounded."[44]

Paul's instructions on the passions of the flesh as well as the discussions by Plato's dialogist are a rehashing of a problem God had already addressed thousands of years earlier. When God brought Moses to Mount Sinai, it was to instruct him in the morality expected of those claiming to follow Yahweh. And Jesus gave fullness to those instructions during his lifetime.

Paul's rejection of the human body and its longings seems to reveal an aversion to the human race. He could find compassion for his own human condition, but he appeared to abhor the rest of mankind in its sordid attempt at day-to-day existence. Plato shared this feeling and had Socrates say, "It seems that so long as we are alive, we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body … and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until [Zeus] himself gives us deliverance."[45]

Farther along in this discussion, Socrates reminds Simmias, "Purification … consists in separating the soul as much as possible from the body."[46] The true philosopher's lifetime should be devoted to this severance, he goes on to say.

[44] Recog. 2.58.
[45] Plato, Phaedo, trans. Hugh Tredennick, 67a.
[46] Ibid., 67c.

It was almost as if Paul had been part of this debate and took it a step farther by inventing a way to die and still live. He explained this process in his letter to the Romans. He asked his followers, "Have you forgotten that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death? By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead." [47] Evidently, this phenomenon was accomplished through some sort of metamorphosis. Transformation came about through drowning in baptismal waters, which made Paul and his disciples sanctified creatures. Paul lectured the Colossians by asking them, "Did you not die with Christ and pass beyond reach of the elemental spirits of the universe?"[48] However, when he addressed the Galatians, Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ."[49] Whether it was by drowning or by crucifixion that this miraculous change came about, Paul and his disciples believed they were free of their sinful lower natures and were now new creatures.

Killing the body, even metaphorically, to free the soul does not appear in either Matthew or John's record of Jesus' teaching. Jesus' explanation in John's Gospel for the need to be born again is at odds with the idea we were nailed on the cross with Jesus or that we died in the waters of baptism and then rose again as Jesus did. If the disciples had become embroiled in such philosophical ramblings, then Jesus' directives concerning the needs of people would have been lost in a morass of words. Evidently, their work with the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, and the imprisoned left little time for the eleven to record their deeds. Yet how helpful it would be if only a copy of the acts of the eleven were ever found. Jesus died alone, of course, for all mankind. There was no one else with him at that time, not even God.

[47] Rom. 6:3–4 NEB.
[48] Col. 2:20 NEB.
[49] Gal. 2:20 NEB.

Paul moved from metamorphosis to anthropomorphism. For his Corinthian congregations, Paul anthropomorphized Love just as Plato did in the Symposium. Again, the Greek philosopher used a group of men dinning together to help make his point. Eryximachus brings before the gathering a complaint from Phaedrus as a question. "Is it not … an extraordinary thing that, for all the hymns and anthems that have been addressed to the other deities, not one single poet has ever sung a song in praise of so ancient and so powerful a god as Love?"[50] And so those at table turn the discussion to praising Love. At first, Love is presented as not one deity but two: the popular one called Aphrodite "that governs the passions of the vulgar. For, first, they are as much attracted by women as by boys; … and, finally, they make a point of courting the shallowest people they can find."[51] The other Love is called heavenly because "those who are inspired by [it] turn rather to the male, preferring the more vigorous and intellectual bent."[52]

Tributes continue until it is finally Agathon's turn. He chides his companions, saying they "have been at such pains to congratulate mankind upon the blessings of Love that they have quite forgotten to extol the god himself, and have thrown no light at all upon the nature of our divine benefactor."[53]

Agathon begins his anthropomorphic hymn to Love by saying he "is the loveliest and the best" of the gods.[54] He goes on to say Love "makes the dispositions and the hearts of gods and men his dwelling place."[55] Examining Love's "moral excellence," the orator says, "he is never injured by, nor ever injures, either god or man."[56] Agathon then

[50] Symp. 177a, b.
[51] Ibid., 181b.
[52] Ibid., c.
[53] Ibid., 194e, 195a.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., e.
[56] Ibid., 196b.

explains, "Added to his righteousness is his entire temperance."[57] To the god's righteousness and temperance, Agathon adds valor, because it is claimed Love captured the god of war, Ares, which made him "mightier than all" the gods.[58] Besides all this, Love "banishes estrangement and ushers friendship in."[59] Love also spends time at gatherings "presiding at table, at the dance, and at the altar, cultivating courtesy and weeding out brutality, lavish of kindliness and sparing of malevolence, affable and gracious" and a god all men can look to as "our helmsman and helper, our pilot and preserver … [and] the noblest and the loveliest of leaders."[60]

Sitting at his loom, Paul spins from the same yarn using the same design.

> Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offense. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over other men's sins, but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance … In a word, there are three things that last forever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love.[61]

Seeming to answer what is known in Christianity as the Love Chapter, the writer of First John says with stark clarity, "God is love."[62] In this short missive, all these grand attributes belong to the creator, not to the anthropomorphic idol created by Plato and borrowed by Paul.

Some years ago, the British theologian Arthur Darby Nock said of Paul's work in First Corinthians, "In general [it] is one of the most strikingly

[57] Ibid., c.
[58] Ibid., d.
[59] Ibid., 197d.
[60] Ibid., d, e.
[61] 1 Cor. 13:4–7,13 NEB.
[62] 1 Jn. 4:16 NEB.

original things St. Paul ever wrote."[63] Surely, the only person who would call Paul's Love Chapter original is someone who never read this portion of Plato's work, or someone who enjoys self-delusion.

Paul's lack of compunction for his copious use of Plato's ideas allowed him to choose liberally from all the other motifs discussed in his works. Another borrowed theme is the promise of comfort in times of trouble: "In everything, as we know, he cooperates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose."[64] This is the twin sister of a passage from the Republic, book ten: "And shall we not agree that all things that come from the gods work together for the best for him that is dear to the gods."[65]

Paul, in his self-appointed position as overseer of his followers' private lives, used another Platonism: "To the unmarried and to widows I say this: it is a good thing if they stay as I am myself; but if they cannot control themselves, they should marry. Better be married than burn with vain desire."[66] Compare Plato's advice in his Laws where the Greek writer had the Athenian, who is the regulator of couples in the Ideal City, address how "they should set about procreation." In the discourse, he described sexual desire as that "blaze of wanton appetite."[67]

Paul also advised people in his church who are married, "Do not deny yourselves to one another, except when you agree upon a temporary abstinence in order to devote yourselves to prayer (1 Cor. 7:5 NEB)." Old Testament rules list other times for sexual abstinence as well, but since Paul's tenets are based on Greco-Roman ideas for soldiers and athletes, it is likely that this counsel also came from Plato.

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[63] Arthur Darby Nock, Early Gentile Christianity & Its Hellenistic Background (Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd., London, 1928; repr., Harper & Row, New York, 1964),96.
[64] Rom. 8:28 NEB.
[65] Rep. 10.612e, 613a.
[66] 1 Cor. 7:8–9 NEB.
[67] Laws 6.783d & a.

Plato's Athenian tells the story of Iccus of Tarentum, who was said "to have acted for the sake of distinction at Olympia and elsewhere."[68] During preparation for athletic events, Iccus practiced self-discipline and "never once came near a woman, or a boy either, all the time he was in training."[69]

Paul's use of Roman athletic terms as metaphors is well-known. He told the Corinthians of those running a foot race—only one can win, and his prize is a "fading wreath."[70] Moreover, he advised Timothy that no athlete can win a prize unless he follows the game's rules. Since sporting events, even in Palestine, were conducted according to Roman standards, the words Paul used surely came out of those Roman religious contests.

Paul also held himself up to the Corinthians as the example to follow by saying, "I bruise my own body and make it know its master, for fear that after preaching to others I should find myself rejected."[71] In this passage, Paul seems to identify with Plato's rulers:

> [They] must approve themselves lovers of the state when tested in pleasures and pains, and make it apparent that they do not abandon this fixed faith under stress of labors or fears or any other vicissitude, and that anyone who could not keep that faith must be rejected, while he who always issued from the test pure and intact … is to be established as ruler and receive honors in life and after death and prizes as well.[72]

Repeatedly, the echo answers back as Christian doctrine.

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[68] Ibid., 8.840a.
[69] Ibid.
[70] 1 Cor. 9:25 NEB.
[71] Ibid., v. 27.
[72] Rep. 6.503a.