



The Greek Polis and American Individualism

by Chris Swanson

This fall at Gutenberg we have been studying the ancient Greeks. Every two years when we revisit this period, I learn something new. This year, the difference between the Greeks and us regarding expectations of personal freedoms struck me. The Greeks regarded a complete subjugation of personal freedom to the needs of the state the highest form of honor. In modern America, we tend to elevate the importance of personal freedoms. Juxtaposing the two cultures helped me see our own cultural commitments in a new way, highlighting both the value of personal freedom and some of our excesses.

Much of our understanding of the world is derived from Greek innovations and perspectives. Literature, history, mathematics, ethics, rhetoric, politics, democracy—it all originates with the Greeks. The Greek gods, Socrates, tragic theater, and democracy are the most well-known aspects of Greek civilization—and these things did play formative roles in ancient Greek thought and culture—but the backdrop of Greek culture, that which defined them and differentiated them from other cultures, was their love and devotion to the *polis*.

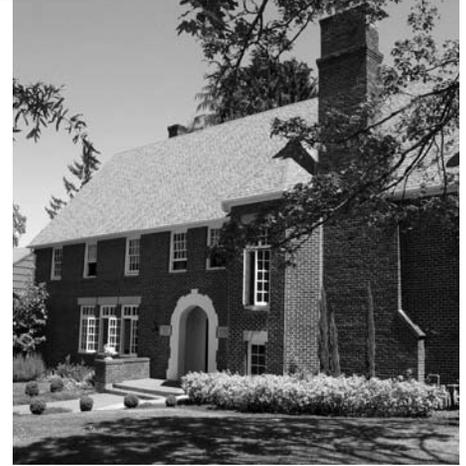
Greek society was structured into independent city-states. The city-state, or polis, was the primary affiliation for every member of the society. These poleis were typically surrounded by some amount of arable land and separated from each other by natural boundaries, such as rivers, seas, and mountain ranges. While they did form leagues and alliances, each polis was self-governed. Any sort

of domination or tribute was, in the mind of the Greek, slavery.

These poleis lived in perpetual threat of domination or destruction: some came from outside Greece (the Persians, for instance) others were internal. Poleis often clashed militarily because of their proximity and their conflicting interests and aristocratic loyalties. Those that developed a strong military survived and prospered. Those with weak militaries were subjugated, enslaved, or destroyed. The ever-present fear of conflict between poleis contributed to a strong sense of loyalty to one's own polis as a source of security.

Few Americans identify strongly with a local city. Instead, most of us identify with our country. I was born in Pasadena, California, but I am no Pasadenian in the way that Greeks were Athenians or Spartans. My allegiance is not to Eugene or to Oregon, though I have lived here thirty years. To the extent that I have any patriotic spirit, it is directed toward the nation. In Greece, though, individuals identified themselves with their polis. Spartans provide the most extreme example. Sparta was a powerful polis in the southwest portion of the Greek peninsula. Known for their fierceness in battle, the Spartans' livelihood was entwined with military training. They gave everything to the polis to a degree that we find unfathomable. Let us look at some examples.

Education and military training. At the age of seven, Spartan boys were removed from their families and trained in small cadres with other boys. The rigorous training was designed



to develop a strong bond between the boys and men. Discipline was harsh, and the boys suffered a great deal to make them good and loyal soldiers of the polis. Plutarch (45 AD-120 AD) tells the story of a Spartan youth who had stolen a fox (highly encouraged) and was in danger of being caught (highly disgraceful). He hid the fox under his garment, and despite the fox biting into his side, the boy made no sound or movement so that he might avoid detection. By the time the coast was clear, the boy was so badly wounded that he eventually died. When the others chastised him, the boy was reported to have said, "better to die without yielding to the pain than through being detected because of weakness of spirit to gain a life to be lived in disgrace."

At the age of eighteen, Spartan youths underwent a grueling set of tests. If they failed (but survived), they lived the rest of their lives disgraced and branded as cowards. Those that succeeded served in the military until the age of forty. They lived and ate with a small, close-knit group of men that formed the basis of the Spartan fighting unit. The relationships that developed created a strong motive for bravery on the field of battle.

According to Greeks of the time, the Spartan training produced literate, self-reliant, clever, self-disciplined, and independent-minded citizens who were able to take initiative on and off the battle field. The Spartans valued these virtues, which they achieved to some extent, but they were gained at a high cost to the health and well-being of the individual.

(continued)



Polis and Individualism, continued

Family and social relationships. Men could marry at twenty, but they did not live with their wives until age thirty. Marriage was viewed as a means to produce future warriors rather than as a fundamental basis of society. Thus, a close emotional relationship between husband and wife or between fathers and children was severely restricted. When Spartan men turned thirty, they set up a household with their wives but continued to take daily meals with their band of men.

In Spartan parent-child relationships, even the love and devotion between mother and child were sacrificed to the needs of the polis. Not only were seven-year-old children separated from their mothers, but, if the stories be true, Spartan newborns were presented to the leaders of the city for inspection, and the babies were killed by exposure if the leaders found any physical deformity or abnormality. The practice was not unknown in other cities, but in Sparta, the leaders, not the families, decided. Apparently, if a baby could not contribute to Sparta as a warrior, the city could not spare the resources.

In addition to the breakdown of immediate-family relationships, Spartan culture weakened broad family and tribal affiliations. Extended family bonds were not encouraged; one's sense of self or identity did not derive from family but from the community of other warriors. Other cultures of the time had tribal affiliations in which groups of families formed allegiances, and many other Greek poleis were made up of tribes like those of ancient Israel, but in Sparta local tribes were largely nonexistent.

Nor were Spartans given to wealth or ostentation which could encourage personal freedom and identity. Plutarch remarks that Lycurgus, the Spartan lawgiver, replaced gold and silver coins with iron coins to discourage the purchase of luxuries from other poleis. Thus, while it is true that the Spartans retained a great deal of freedom from conquest as a polis, their individual freedoms were strictly limited and regulated.

Religion. Like other Greek poleis of the day, Spartans worshipped the traditional Greek gods. However, their worship was distinctive in two ways. First, they practiced a form of hero worship, giving heroes of the

past great honor in religious festivals for their mighty acts of bravery. Some heroes were from much earlier times, such as the Trojan War, and others were recent past kings of Sparta. The kings themselves, current heroes holding both political and religious authority, led these festivals. Second, the Spartans were especially religious in their sacrifices and rites surrounding decisions to go to battle. Military gods like Ares and Apollo were of primary importance. Even religious activity, it seems, had lower priority to the interests of the state.

Identity and purpose. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly compared to our time, an individual Spartan's identity and purpose was bound up in the polis. It was clearly better to die than to be disgraced as a coward or someone who could not contribute to the polis. Spartan soldiers were told to return from battle with their shield or upon it; if a Spartan left a shield on the field of battle, it meant he abandoned the fight and was a coward. Interestingly, the only instance when a woman could have an epitaph carved on her gravestone was when she died in childbirth, since she gave her life for the state.

These are striking examples of the Spartan devotion to the military. All their activity was oriented around it because such a military could provide safety and security for the polis. Sparta had the only standing army in Greece, and they maintained their independence and the freedom of their city for hundreds of years—longer than any of the other Greek poleis—which was a great source of pride for them. Plutarch remarks that as Philip of Macedon was invading Greece, he said to a Spartan, “‘What shall you do now, men of Sparta?’ And the other said, ‘What else than die like men? For we alone of all the Greeks have learned to be free, and not to be subject to others.’”

Spartan society, which elevated the military needs of the state over the personal needs of the individual, was extreme and wildly out of balance. One can only imagine the human toll that such a society took on individuals. Marriage and family relationships, which are so important for our growth and self-understanding, were severely interrupted. Variations

in personality and talents were squashed. Pride and military elitism were encouraged at the expense of those not part of the citizenry, including a large group of slaves taken from nearby cities who performed all productive economic activity.

Attitudes toward the military most clearly expose the wide gulf that lies between Sparta and America. In Sparta, a man's entire life was *for the military* and, thus, for the polis. In America, the military is marketed as a service *to the individual*. “Be all you can be” runs the Army slogan: enlist and gain the skills and confidence to achieve self-fulfillment. American culture elevates personal individualism over public, martial spirit. We believe that every person has a fundamental right to self-determination and self-definition. Spartans had no such rights. This emphasis on individualism shows up in our social structures, where it plays the same role that the Spartan political spirit played in their social structures. So now let us look at some examples of how American culture—and particularly contemporary culture—reinforces this value.

Government. Personal freedom and liberty were built into the foundations of our country. Many of those who settled in America came to escape political and religious restriction and persecution. The Constitution's driving concern is to prevent any person or group of people from impinging on the freedoms of others. The Bill of Rights makes into law what were seen as God-given freedoms. The preamble of the Constitution says it all: The state exists “for the people,” not the other way around.

Education. Our educational system focuses on helping each student find his or her own path. In the past century, the number of college elective courses and majors has grown beyond measure because we assume many different individuals require many different courses of study. This proliferation differs from college curricula of the past. In 1885, Harvard's president, Charles Eliot, debated Princeton's president, James McCosh, over the nature of higher education in America. Eliot claimed that the student was in the best position to determine his own educational path. McCosh, on the other hand, argued that the university would be remiss were it to fail to guide every student through certain core skills and knowledge; to do less was to

abandon the duty of the university. Ultimately, in another nod to individualism, Harvard's model dominated.

Family and Marriage. Individualism has made deep inroads into America's family structure. A child is taught to make his own choices at a very young age. In some cases, the will of the child is allowed to vie with that of the parents, but even if it does not, an independent spirit is still encouraged. Family loyalty has decreased in strength and scope. Large, close, extended families that live together are rare. By contrast, in most traditional cultures, one's duty to family was nearly as important, or more important, than one's duty to oneself.

Even marriage is moving toward a model of cohabiting rather than conjoining. Movies, for example, often portray marriage as a loss of freedom and individuality. Humor can be part of this characterization, but it also reflects serious cultural assumptions—for example, that unmarried individuals have sexual freedom or that marriage is only valuable if it serves the individual's needs. The biblical idea that it is good to submit one's desires for the sake of another strikes most of the culture as absurd. And the Spartan idea that marriage is primarily for the sake of producing children who will become strong warriors is inconceivable.

Commerce and digital media. Individualism strikes our consciousness most forcefully here. Marketing celebrates the individual by promulgating the myth of uniqueness. Advertising claims that purchasing a company's mass-marketed product will allow one to express personal identity. Technology has made possible a plethora of products that cater to our individualistic tendencies. Social media encourage us to preserve a personal record of our activities. We can blog about our lives or interests on personal webpages and express ourselves via a variety of social-media accounts. The "selfie" gives the individual the power to define how and when his photograph is taken. Even product names reveal the emphasis on individualism: iPhone, YouTube, Facebook.

Religion. Traditionally, religion has encouraged uniformity of thought and culture rather than individual preference or taste since religious claims are universal. Historically, religious traditions in America have been strong;

Lutherans remained Lutherans through many generations. More recently, however, individual choice and preference have impacted the conservative nature of religious culture and thought. Rarely do Americans remain in the same denomination for life. Nor do children follow their parents' lead. Instead, we seek a religious community that meets our individual needs. The relative decrease in importance of doctrine or tradition as compared to the relative increase in importance of social and personal factors indicates the rising significance of individual choice.

I could point out many other examples of our culture's commitment to individualism. Personal choice, for instance, has become the hallmark of our culture to the extent that even gender has become a personal choice among some. Clearly individualism plays a dominant role in our self-conception, much as the dedication to the polis did in the Spartans' self-conception. But what are we to make of the difference? We prefer individualism, while the Spartans preferred corporate militarism. There are inherent problems with corporate militarism. Are there dangers inherent in individualism? How can we step outside of ourselves and our culture to judge between the two?

The Bible stands above cultural preferences and differences, and it can provide a measure of discernment. I would argue that individualism has its roots in Christianity. The gospel is not good news for a city or nation. It is good news for an individual. God's admonition to righteousness is not to nations or groups but to each and every individual. The wisdom of Proverbs talks about right behavior of an individual interacting with God and his fellow men. Yes, God entered history by calling to Himself a people and a nation, and in that sense, of course, He worked with a particular nation and will fulfill his purposes through that nation. But we are still, Jew and Gentile, *individually* responsible for our actions. On the day of judgment, I, not my city or country or family, will stand before my Creator.

But every good from God can be twisted into depravity. Clearly, when individual responsibility before God is turned into individual freedom *from* God, it has swung too far. Individualism taken to an extreme can become self-centeredness. An individualist can strive

for freedom from authority or government or restriction. But the freedom we most need is freedom from our own sin.

Our individuality is not an invitation to live free from all. We are not alone or free. We are bound as creatures created by God—bound by our commitment to love and honor and serve God and our neighbor. Our individuality works itself out in relationship with others through love and kindness. In marriage, we strive toward becoming one, not remaining two. We should not refuse to submit when submission is appropriate. We should accept our limitations as the creatures that God has made us rather than rebel against them. We should strive to channel our God-given talents rather than bemoan our creaturely weaknesses.

To see that the Spartans went too far in their desire for military security is easy. Given their cultural context, it is perhaps understandable. What they sacrificed, however, was precious: the opportunity and encouragement for each person to freely work out his or her salvation before God. Spartans were not given that freedom. They were told instead that their lives existed for the Polis.

In our day, our cultural context is completely different from that of the Spartans. We do not feel the threat of extinction by neighboring cities. Our needs for food, shelter, security, and even luxury are mostly met; military strength is not a paramount concern. Consequently, the pendulum has swung from utter submission and a lack of personal freedoms to an unbounded celebration of freedom. Instead of adopting the Spartan admonition that "I am for the state," we have all become our own personal kings, encouraged to say, like Louis XIV, "The State is me."

There is a balance. Individuality and personhood are a treasured gift from our Creator. We should rightly celebrate that. But I find for myself, at least, that I need to be reminded that the gift of personhood is not an invitation to focus all my energies on myself. I am not a free-agent but rather, as the Apostle Paul says, a bondservant of God.

Chris Swanson is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College, where he teaches science and leads discussions in *Microexegesis*, *Western Civilization*, and *the Great Conversation*. He has a Ph.D. in physics.

Welcome Back, Nancy!



Gutenberg College is pleased to welcome back Nancy Scott, a Marriage and Family

Therapist in private practice. Nancy was a tutor at Gutenberg for many years and served as the College's Director of Community Life Services from 2001-2009. She has graciously volunteered to serve as an advisor to Gutenberg's Residence Program, to provide support and guidance for the house managers, as well as to make herself available to the students and residents of Gutenberg.

Nancy wrote many articles for this newsletter when she was a tutor at Gutenberg. You can find them, along with recordings of classes and conferences in which Nancy participated, on our website, www.gutenberg.edu.

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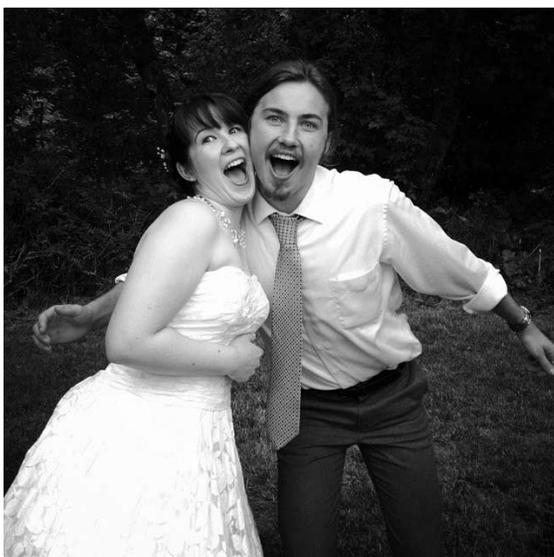
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Gutenberg Welcomes New House Managers to Its Team

This summer, Nigel and Sally Makela joined resident house managers Toby and Larissa Swanson as part of the Residence Program. Nigel and Sally met at Gutenberg in 2011. Sally graduated from the University of Oregon in 2013, and Nigel graduated from Gutenberg in 2014. They got married two weeks later and moved to Boise, Idaho, the next day. After two years in Idaho, they moved back to Eugene to be with friends and family and to be house managers at Gutenberg College. Together, the Swansons, the Makelas, and Nancy Scott (see above) make a great Residence Program team.

Nigel and Sally Makela

Toby and Larissa Swanson

