2015

Proper 14 • Ephesians 4:17–5:2

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Proper 14 • Ephesians 4:17–5:2 • August 9, 2015

This pericope is typical of the latter portion of Paul’s letters, that is, it deals with everyday matters of the Christian life (cf. 2 Thes 3). As is the case in most of Paul’s letters the first portion of Ephesians focuses upon more overtly doctrinal matters, the second on more practical concerns. In this study, I will discuss several grammatical matters first, and then turn to a more general discussion of apostolic paraenesis, that is, exhortations from the apostle to believers in the addressed congregation concerning Christian living.

Grammar

4:17: μηκέτι περιπατεῖν: Note the use of the present/first principal part infinitive, in apposition to τοῦτο at the beginning of the verse. This indirect discourse construction after a verb of speaking represents an imperative mood verb. With μηκέτι, it indicates that people should “sever the connection,” that is, stop doing what they are doing. ὑμᾶς is the accusative subject of the infinitive.

4:18: ἐσκοτωμένοι: A fine perfect passive participle, denoting the condition of the nations/Gentiles. (ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι functions in the same way.) Note the construction ad sensum: while ἔθνη is neuter, the sense is multiple people, so the participle is masculine (rather than neuter) plural.

4:22: ἀποθέσθαι ὑμᾶς: The pronoun is the subject of this infinitive, not its object. Note that the infinitive is middle voice, not active, indicating that this is something important and something about which the subject is concerned.

4:23: ἀνανεοῦσθαι: this infinitive continues the construction of v. 22, but notice that it is first principal part/present, not aorist. This stem indicates some sort of connection, for example, that the “you” actually be renewed or continually be renewed.

4:24: ἐνδύσασθαι: Verbs of dressing and personal hygiene normally take the middle voice.

4:25: Note the appeal to being members of one another (μέλη). See the parallel in Romans 12:5.

4:26, 28, 29, 31: In each of these verses there is a third person singular imperative. These are normally translated “let . . .” (or “do not let . . .”), but this must not be understood as indicating giving or withholding permission. (To convey permission, Greek uses another construction.) This is a command to someone who/something which is not present or unknown. Thus, it conveys the idea of “ought”: “The sun ought never go down on your wrath” (v. 26); “The thief ought no longer steal” (v. 27).

4:32, 5:1: γίνεσθε: This is a present/first principal part middle imperative, second person plural. Why isn’t the verb “to be” (εἰμί) used instead? Oddly, there are no occurrences of the second person plural imperative of the verb “to be” in all of Greek literature!
Larger Considerations

Generally speaking, passages such as this are a challenge for Lutherans. They are extremely directive concerning conduct and appear to be law rather than gospel. Certainly there is little explicit articulation of the good news of salvation in the cross and resurrection of Christ (probably why 5:1–2 are included in the pericope!). How are we to approach this text?

This section is one of many of the NT that takes an everyday, experiential, phenomenological approach to the Christian life. It details how Christians should act, and it assumes that believers can so act. Similar is Romans 6:12: “Let sin [= sin ought] never reign in your mortal bodies so as to obey its desires.” Also similar is the response of Paul to the question of the jailer of Philippi, “What must I actually/try to do in order to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). Answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, and your house!” (v. 31). (Note that Paul does not say that you can do nothing in order to be saved.) In taking this approach, both our text and the two examples here cited are quite unlike other passages that take a “real/deeper explanation”/fuller understanding approach. In contrast to Romans 6:12 stands Romans 7:19, 24: “Not the good that I desire do I do, but the bad that I do not desire, this is what I do. . . . I am a most wretched man! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Or, Psalm 51:10: “(You) create in me a clean heart, O God!” Indeed, we can see these two approaches sitting with one another, cheek by jowl, as it were, in Philippians 2:12b–13: “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for God it is who works in you both actually to will and to do, on behalf of his good pleasure.” To give an analogy to what we are here contending, these two approaches can be compared to the relationship between classical physics (e.g., that of Isaac Newton) used for everyday understandings of our world, with its predictability and “normalcy,” on the one hand, and quantum mechanics and relativity theory (e.g., the theories of Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein), used for more foundational investigation and understanding, with its seeming randomness, abnormality, and absurdity. Our present text is a Newtonian passage, so to speak, and it should not be understood, therefore, as a deep theological assertion that the “old Adam” no longer has power in the Christian’s life (cf. 4:22 [also 4:17–19, 27, 31]).

Also observe that Paul does not, in his appeals and argumentation, invoke the law of God, understood in its most basic sense of the Ten Commandments and OT regulations. Otherwise expressed, Paul does not admonish the thief no longer to steal (4:28) because stealing breaks the seventh commandment, and he does not proscribe wrath and blasphemy (4:31) because these actions break the fifth and second commandments, respectively. What does Paul do? He appeals to the presence of the Holy Spirit (4:30) and to God’s action in Christ (4:32; 5:2). We are in the new covenant (1 Cor 11:25). The purpose of the new covenant is not the establishment of the contours of the old covenant. On the contrary, the new covenant brings a new reality characterized by Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11). Indeed, the Holy Spirit is a critical component of this new covenant, as envisioned by the OT prophets (see Ez 36:26; Jl 3:1–2 [ET 2:28–9]). The Spirit’s fruit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23), and all of these are actions that paral-
lel the admonitions of Ephesians 4:17–5:2, either positively or negatively (see especially 4:19, 31, 32; 5:1, 2). Paul, with his admonitions, gives guidance to people whose lives are under the reign and rule of God, guided by the Holy Spirit. For an in-depth consideration of this matter, see my comments on pages 469–474 of the Concordia Commentary *Mark 1:1–8:26*.

James Voelz

Editor’s note: The following homiletical help is adapted from Concordia Journal, April 2008.

Proper 15 • Ephesians 5:6–21 • August 16, 2015

This epistle reading turns our attention toward living the Christian life. It builds off the foundation that St. Paul laid earlier in Ephesians, namely 2:8–9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Now we can freely do the works that we are created in Christ Jesus to do.

Even though most of the text is exhortation to good works, notice that Paul’s appeal is not compulsion by the law. It is a gospel appeal: “At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord” (5:8). Also, Paul does not merely indicate that one is lost in darkness before conversion, even though that is certainly true. That person is darkness itself. One’s very essence and being is sin. The gospel enlightens darkness. It turns darkness into light. In the office of Evening Prayer we sing, “Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome.” He is the life and light of every man (Jn 1:4). To be light “in the Lord” implies relationship, a connection to Christ and his forgiveness. It is his light that produces light in the lives of God’s children. Therefore, even the works we do are not done by us, but by him.

For Christians, the temptation is always to revert to darkness. We live in the midst of those who cut themselves off from the light, who continually live in darkness. Darkness cannot produce fruit. Those who cut themselves off from Christ cannot produce good works. Even the works they do, what the world would call “good,” are sin. Association with darkness is clearly harmful, even detrimental to the Christian. How often do we take part in the unfruitful deeds of darkness? How often do we find ourselves doing shameful things when we cut ourselves off from the light, Jesus Christ, and from our fellow believers? In his first epistle, John says, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). Our fellowship with the Lord Jesus, and our fellowship with one another, is clearly important in our walk as children of the light.

Walking together as children of light is a critical witness to the light, Jesus Christ, in this world of darkness. In chapter 4 Paul rejoiced in the unity we have as believers in the body of Christ. Together we are strong, not easily tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, not easily pulled back into the darkness. First and foremost, in