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Proper 14 • Ephesians 4:17–5:2

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Homiletical Helps on LSB Series B—Epistles

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: *ἔσκοτωμένοι*: 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” (*εἶμι*) 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-

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Let 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*.

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