

*Building Biblical*  
COMMUNITY in CHRIST

A Change of Clothes for the Church  
Ephesians 4:17-24

*17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. 20 You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. 21 Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:17-24 NIV*

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C. S. Lewis tells of a young boy named Eustace who steals a gold armband and puts it on, only to find that his greed turns him into a dragon. To make matters worse, the armband is excruciatingly tight on his dragon foot.

One night, in the midst of his pain and frustration, Eustace encounters a huge lion who offers a solution to his predicament. The lion tells the boy to follow him to a high mountain well. Eustace longs to bathe his aching foot in the cool water, but the lion tells him he must undress first. It seems silly to Eustace; after all, dragons don't wear clothes. But then he remembers that dragons, like snakes, cast their skins.

So Eustace scratches his skin, and the scales begin falling off—and soon his whole skin peels away. However, when he puts his foot in the water, he sees that it is just as rough and scaly as before. He continues scratching at the second dragon skin and realizes there is yet another skin underneath that one.

Finally the lion says, “You will have to let me undress you.” Eustace is afraid of the lion's claws but desperate to get in the water. The first tear is painfully deep as the lion begins to peel away the skin. Surely death will

follow, Eustace believes. But finally, with the gnarled mess of dragon skin now cut away, the lion holds Eustace and throws him into the water. Initially, the water stings, but soon it is perfectly delicious. Eustace swims without pain, for he's a boy again.<sup>1</sup>

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When I got up this morning, I put on my clothes. And so did you, I notice! I put them on with the intention that I would wear them throughout the day. Where I go, they go and do what I do. They cover me and make me somewhat presentable to others. Now clothes don't make the man or woman, but a man (or woman or child) may be to a certain degree reflected in their clothes.

As it is with what we wear, so also with who we are and how we live. In these verses, Paul describes our old life as clothes that need to be put off and our new life as clothes that need to be put on. But we discover that, just as for Eustace, we can't do it ourselves. And so we submit ourselves to the surgery of the soul that only the Lion of God can perform. But it is painful. God's surgery goes deep; it is never superficial.

Christianity has nothing to do with outer reformation, and everything to do with inner transformation. This is what we see as we move into the next section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The emphasis is upon "newness" of life (chart). The old has gone, the new has come. But the question is: Do our lives reflect that newness?

Remember the "analytical balance" we mentioned several weeks ago? On one plate you place a known value and on the other an unknown value. The objective is to bring the two into equilibrium. The known value in this case is our calling as outlined for us in Ephesians chapters 1-3. This is our real identity. This is a description of who we really are! The unknown value is our conduct – your conduct as a Christian – as outlined in chapters 4-6. And the challenge for you and me is very simple: Is my conduct in keeping with my calling?

Paul applies this question to two specific areas of our lives: our unity and our purity. Verses 1-16 focus on our unity. But now in verses 17-24 the focus turns to the question of purity. In both areas there must be – just as for Eustace – a change of clothes in our lives. The "old man" is to be undressed; the "new man" is to be dressed. The old is to be put off; the new

is to be put on. But as for Eustace we'll discover that we can't do it on our own.

### Undressing the Old Man (4:17-19)

Notice how Paul begins – “*So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord*” (v 17). What follows is not simply some good advice. Paul is not giving here merely his personal opinion. What he is about to say is not a nice recommendation, but comes with all the authority of divine revelation. This is not man speaking, but God speaking – as in all of Scripture. And as God speaks to us in these verses, he shines his moral searchlight on the depths of the human heart.

First, as is so typical with Paul, we have a general statement that Paul then breaks down into successive stages. The general command is found in the next phrase of verse 17 – “*that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do...*” Paul is not trying to distinguish here between Jew and Gentile, but rather between believer in Christ and unbeliever outside of Christ. “Gentiles” here means simply “the nations,” referring to all who are unbelievers. He is telling you and me that we are to no longer live the way unbelievers live.

But now, after this general statement, we begin what we might call “the surgeon’s report on the human heart.”<sup>ii</sup> When you visit the doctor, you want him to cut to the chase and hold back nothing. You don’t want a quick fix! And that is what the divine doctor of our soul gives us in these verses. And as we read the “because of’s” and the “so as to’s” of these verse, we see that there are basically four stages in the downward spiral of evil in the human heart.

The “heart of the matter” is found right in the heart of these verses (verse 18): “*due to the hardening of their hearts.*” This is where all sin begins...in the *hardness of our heart*. Paul selects his words very carefully, choosing a word used by medical doctors of his day to refer to a callus or a bony formation on the joints. The word also described what had become petrified.<sup>iii</sup>

The human heart tainted by sin is naturally this way. The believer’s heart infused with God’s righteousness is unnaturally this way. God promised his people in the Old Testament that their hearts of stone would be replaced by

hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). The heart of stone is spiritually petrified; the heart of flesh is spiritually pliable. In Mark 3:5 Jesus looks around at the religious crowd and is grieved by the hardness of their heart. I wonder what he sees this morning as He looks at you and me.

*Hardness of heart* leads quite naturally to *darkness of mind*. The problem of sin is first moral, then intellectual and not the other way around. Whether I am a college professor or an illiterate native – or anything in between – the problem of sin is first and for mostly a problem of hardness, not ignorance...a problem of the heart, not of the head. In verses 17 and 18 Paul describes this as the “futility of thinking” and the “darkness of understanding.” Futile thinking is empty thinking, void of any content worthy of consideration. I can know a million things, but apart from the light of Christ, I won’t know the true meaning of anything.

We cannot reason our way to God, but we can easily reason our way into sin. We rationalize. We compromise. We might reinterpret the Bible to make it more palatable to our personal taste. But every attempt will only lead us down a futile, dark pathway to devastating consequences. Why? Because we never find in sin that which we enter sin to find.

When we take that path, hardness that leads to darkness now turns to *deadness*. Paul describes it in verse 18 as being “*separated from the life of God*.” How contradictory for a believer, we who have the very life of God infused into our being, to live as if we were separated from the life of God. Anyone who is in Christ is dead to sin, alive to God (Romans 6). But some of us are living as if we are alive to sin, and dead to Christ. And Paul says in his native language *megenito* “May it never be!”

Spiritual hardness, darkness, and deadness inevitably result in moral *recklessness*. Notice verse 18:

*Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

Paul has taken us from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. We finally arrive here at the outward “clothes” that mark those who are outside of Christ, and unfortunately also worn by some who claim to be in Christ.

I know of no better description of our present day society than this. Within an 8 mile radius of where we are sitting today there per capita more strip bars and houses of prostitution than any place in the United States. The problem is, it's not just out there, it's also in here. Everyone of us, regardless of age, gender or background, have, are, or will face a titanic struggle in the area of moral purity in our personal lives.

The man you are looking at is no exception, nor are any of the elders, pastors or leaders in this church. Listen, I am a Christian, but I am also a red-blooded man with hormones that race as fast as Mario Andretti at the Indianapolis 500! And as I look back over my life, with my failures, weaknesses and transparency before my wife (which at times has been hard!), I say, "Thank you, God. Only by your grace!"

#### Dressing the New Man (4:20-24)

It is precisely that grace that Paul speaks of in verses 20-24. Notice again what he says in verses 20-21 –

*You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard [of] him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.*

What is the solution to the hardness, darkness, deadness and recklessness that flow out of sin in the heart? It is to know Christ, to hear Christ, to be taught in Christ. Why? Because truth is in Jesus (v 21). Jesus said, "*You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free!*" He is the only one who can penetrate the heart, shine his moral light, strip off the calloused outer skin of sin and impurity, and wash us in his refreshing water that deeply satisfies.

We move here from the surgery room to the classroom. We move from the image of the patient to the image of the pupil. Paul is describing our conversion to Christ and what we were taught – or should have been taught – at that moment. He is saying, "Look, all that I have just described to you – the hardness, darkness, deadness and recklessness of sin – is not at all what you know of Christ or the way you were taught to live when you believed in Christ."

But here is what you were taught. *“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self [man], which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self [man], created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”* Ephesians 4:22-24.

There are three senses in which the “old man” is put off and the “new man” is put on. First, this took place historically when Jesus died. Paul gives us the details in Romans chapter 6. When Christ was crucified, our old man was there! Someone said, I’m not afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens!” But as a believer you were there when it happened! When Jesus died, you died. That is, your relation to Adam, sin and death with all of its power was definitively broken. That is what Paul means in Galatians 2:20 when he says, “I am crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” For this reason we are never told in Scripture to “crucify the old man.”<sup>iv</sup> And to the degree that we try we will be ineffective in our battle against sin. Why? Because it is something that has already and definitively been accomplished for the believer.

But second, we “put on the new man” and “put off the old man” at the point of conversion. In fact, the First Century baptismal practice reflects the truth of these verses. The candidate would approach the water wearing an old suit of clothes. These were stripped off as he entered the waters of baptism and upon coming up, he would put on a new suit of clothes...just like that Dragon in the story of Eustace. The old suit represents the old life; the new suit represents the new life. At conversion, we die to the old life, we are raised to a new life.

As believers in this great “put off – put on” took place historically at the cross, personally at conversion, but now must also take place *daily* in life’s circumstances and temptations. No wonder Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “When Christ calls an individual, he bids him to come and die.”

Identification with the cross of Christ is not simply a decision of the moment, but the program of a lifetime. That’s why Paul can say “I die every day” (1 Cor. 15:31) and elsewhere “I am always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10-11). Everyday we face the same question: “Will I follow Him today?”

As you and I understand and live according to the divine surgery that has already taken place in our hearts because of the cross of Christ, we can and must be ruthlessly uncompromising with sin in our lives. It must be put off

with all of its corruption and deceitful desires and the new life can and must be put on with all its righteousness and holiness.

The place to start in “undressing the old man” and “dressing the new man” is to recognize that in Christ – and only by God’s grace – you are different from those who are not in Christ. You *must* embrace your new identity, because a radical, divine surgery has taken place in your soul. *“Therefore, if any man is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation. The old is gone, look the new has come!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christ, the moral clothes of the past have been put off and the new moral clothes of unity and purity have been put on! And this must be seen in our lifestyle.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from submitted illustration to Preaching Today by Bill White, Paramount, California.

<sup>ii</sup> John Piper.

<sup>iii</sup> John Stott, *God's New Society* p 176.

<sup>iv</sup> Compare Galatians 5:24 where in the NIV "sinful nature" is best translated "flesh".