



alive together

Studies 5&6

EPHESIANS

STUDY FIVE | EPHESIANS 4:1-16

SHARE

When you think of a mature, grown-up church, what comes to mind?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read v1-16

1. What is the unity we are called to keep? (v1-6)
2. What is the unity/maturity we are called to reach? (v13)
3. What is the difference between 1 & 2?
4. How do we have confidence that we can reach that unity/maturity? v7-11
5. What do the particular 'gifts' listed in v11 have in common? Why do you think this is?
6. What is the purpose of these gifts? v12 What might this look like
7. What do you think are some ways that 'spiritual infancy' v14 manifests itself in our church community?

NEXT STEPS

When it comes to speaking the truth in love, do you find you are tempted to prioritise one at the expense of the other?

What might it look like for us to not compromise on speaking the truth and be committed to doing so in love?

A NOTE ABOUT EPHESIANS 4:7-10

from John Stott's commentary on Ephesians

The giver of spiritual gifts is the ascended Christ (verses 7–10)

According to verse 7 each gift is Christ's gift, and this truth is now enforced in the following verse by a quotation from Psalm 68:18: When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.

Psalm 68 is a call to God to come to the rescue of his people and vindicate them again, as in olden days. For he went in triumph before his people after the exodus (verse 7), so that Mount Sinai trembled (verse 8) and kings were scattered (verses 11–14). Then, desiring Mount Zion as his abode (verse 16), he came from Sinai to his holy place (verse 17) and ascended the high mount, leading captives in his train. It is all very vivid imagery. It seems that the transfer of the ark to Zion is likened to the triumphant march of Yahweh into his capital.

Paul applies this picture to Christ's ascension, not arbitrarily because he detected a vague analogy between the two, but justifiably because he saw in the exaltation of [Ephesians, Page 157] Jesus a further fulfilment of this description of the triumph of God. Christ ascended as conqueror to the Father's right hand, his train of captives being the principalities and powers he had defeated, dethroned and disarmed.⁷

In the application of Psalm 68:18 to Christ, however, there is a textual problem. For the Psalm reads that God ascended the mount, 'receiving gifts among men', whereas Paul's quotation is that Christ 'gave gifts to men'. Some commentators do not hesitate to say that Paul changed the wording to suit his purpose. For example, J. H. Houlden writes: 'There is no need to suppose that the alteration was other than deliberate.'⁸ Others think it was 'an unintentional misquotation'.⁹ Because of the apostle's known regard for Scripture both these explanations seem a priori unlikely.

The place to begin an explanation is surely to see that the two renderings are only formally but not substantially contradictory. Words cannot be interpreted by themselves, but only in context. So we need to remember that after every conquest in the ancient world there was invariably both a receiving of tribute and a distributing of largesse. What conquerors took from their captives, they gave away to their own people. The spoils were divided, the booty was shared.¹ It seems possible that the Hebrew text itself may imply this, since the verb could be translated 'brought' rather than 'received', and it is not without significance that two ancient versions or translations, one Aramaic and the other Syriac, render it 'gave'. So evidently this was already a traditional interpretation.

One other interesting point needs to be made. Liturgical custom in the synagogues associated Psalm 68 with Pentecost, the Jewish feast commemorating the giving of the law. Paul's use of it in reference to the Christian Pentecost then makes a remarkable analogy. As Moses received the law and gave it to Israel, so Christ received the Spirit and gave him to his people in order to write God's law in their hearts and through the pastors he appointed (verse 11) to teach them the truth. This whole argument that 'receiving' and 'giving' belong

indissolubly [Ephesians, Page 158] to each other is aptly illustrated in Acts 2:33 where Peter on the day of Pentecost said: 'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit; he (sc. Jesus) has poured out this which you see and hear'. Christ could only give the gift he had received.

After the quotation from Psalm 68:18 Paul adds in parenthesis that Christ's having ascended into heaven implies that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth (verse 9). Because of the immediate context, which concerns the gifts of Christ to his church following his ascension, G. B. Caird makes the novel suggestion that his 'descent' was his 'return at Pentecost to give his Spirit to the church'.² But, ingenious as this is, the natural interpretation of the words suggests that his descent preceded his ascent rather than followed it. The early fathers understood this as a reference to his descent into hades.³ They associated it with 1 Peter 3:19 ('he went and preached to the spirits in prison') which they interpreted as his spoiling or 'harrowing' hell. But, whatever the 1 Peter text means, there is no obvious reference to hades or hell in Ephesians 4:9. Calvin (followed by Reformed commentators like Charles Hodge) argued from the 'ascended into heaven' of John 3:13 that 'the lower parts of the earth' is a genitive of apposition or definition, that what it means is simply 'the earth', and that Christ's descent refers to his incarnation. NEB takes it this way too, namely that he descended 'to the lowest level, down to the very earth'. Perhaps, however, the reference is more general still, namely that Christ descended to the depths of humiliation when he came to earth. Or possibly the allusion is to the cross, and 'to the experience of the nethermost depths, the very agonies of hell'⁴ which Christ endured there.

Such an interpretation would fit well with Philippians 2:5-11, where 'even death on a cross' describes his deepest humiliation, which was followed by his supreme exaltation. This was 'far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named' according [Ephesians, Page 159] to 1:21, and here 'far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things' (verse 10), or 'so that he might fill the universe' (NEB). What is in Paul's mind, therefore, is not so much descent and ascent in spatial terms, but rather humiliation and exaltation, the latter bringing Christ universal authority and power, as a result of which he bestowed on the church he rules both, the Spirit himself to indwell it and the gifts of the Spirit to edify it or bring it to maturity.

In the light of this emphasis on Christ, ascended, exalted, filling the universe, ruling the church, bestowing gifts, it would clearly be a mistake to think of charismata as being exclusively 'gifts of the Spirit' and to associate them too closely with the Holy Spirit or with experiences of the Holy Spirit. For here they are the gifts of Christ, while in Romans 12 they are the gifts of God the Father. It is always misleading to separate the three Persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Together they are involved in every aspect of the church's wellbeing.

STUDY SIX | EPHESIANS 4:17-5:20

SHARE

What do you think is the purpose of biblical commands in the Christian life?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 4:17-19

1. Are we led by our heads or our hearts? Discuss, in the light of verses 17-19

Read 4:20-24

2. Paul here describes repentance in terms of a clothing analogy. What would happen if we only committed ourselves to 'putting off' and ignored the 'putting on' side of repentance?

3. Describe the characteristics of 'the new self'.

Read 4:25-5:2

4. In these verses, Paul gives us examples of what this 'putting off/on' way of life looks like. Pick one or two examples and discuss the harmful impacts of 'the old way' with the helpful impacts of 'the new way'.
5. How do you think the misuse of anger (v 26) is connected with giving the devil 'a foothold' (v 27)?

Read 5:3-7

6. What do you think it means for there not to be 'even a hint' of sexual immorality, impurity or greed among God's people?
7. What motivation does Paul give in vv 5-6?

8. Who do you think the 'them' is in v 7? Why do you think believers might be tempted to partner with such people?

Read 5:8-14

9. How does reading that we're 'children of light' make you feel (vv 8-9)?
10. What do you think it looks like to 'expose the fruitless deeds of darkness' (v11)?
11. 'True holiness is contagious.' Discuss, in the light of vv 13-14.

Read 5:15-20

12. How does a person exercise wise caution (v 15) while 'making the most of every opportunity' (v 16; cf. v 17)?
13. Why do you think Paul contrasts getting drunk on wine with being filled with the Spirit (vv 18-19)?
14. Thankfulness is twice given as the positive characteristic of holy and wise Christian character (vv 4, 20). Why do you think this is?

NEXT STEPS

Pick an example from Paul's list in 4:25-32 that you think applies especially to you. What progress have you seen God make in your life in this area? What might be your next step in ongoing progress?

Discuss what ways our formal and informal gatherings embody Paul's description of Christian holiness in these verses. What areas do we need to continue to grow as God's people in our collective holiness?

NOTES ON EPHESIANS 4:17-5:20

This passage continues Paul's instructive section, in view of God's global plan of redemption through the Son, now applied to believers, through the church, by the Holy Spirit (chs. 1-3). Paul has begun to show us more concretely what God's great redemptive plan looks like worked out in everyday life, since the start of chapter 4. He hones in on the pattern of repentance. According to these verses, repentance involves three distinct things: (1) Recognition of past sins (2) Replacing old ways with new ones; and (3) Recommitting to God's new ways.

Recognise past sins (4:17-19)

Paul describes what life is like for a person who hasn't experienced the life-transforming power of God. Their thinking is 'futile' (v 17), 'darkened' and 'separated from the life of God' (v 18). Unaware of the greater and deeper purpose of God, they cannot recognise the evil of their sin. But Paul is quick not simply to make it an intellectual issue, for the underlying cause to their futile thinking is 'the hardening of their hearts' (v 18). This hardening of heart leads a person to give 'themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity' (v 19). Sin is not liberating but a prison cell. From the heart to the head and out to life. This is the process at work in a person's lifestyle. The difference is God (2:4-5). Paul rebukes us, warning us not to go back to the prison cell of sin.

Replace old ways with new ones (4:20-24)

A person who experiences the power and grace of God invariably experiences total life transformation. But there is no transformation without learning the truth 'that is in Jesus' (vv 20-21). This learning leads to conscious effort on our part. Paul describes this transformation in terms of a clothing analogy. Just like we put off old, dirty clothes in order to put on new, clean ones, so the Christian life consists in consciously putting off the old way of life 'corrupted by its deceitful desires' i.e., harmful not only to others but to ourselves (v 22). We trust our selfish desires way too easily. But it also consists in 'putting on' the new way of life Jesus teaches us i.e., to be 'like God' in his desire and ability to do what is right (vv 23-24). This inevitably sets one apart from the ways of this world.

We might tend more so to focus on the first step of 'putting off' the former ways. But biblical repentance not only involves removing sin but replacing it with desires and decisions that are aligned with what Jesus values and accord with his life-giving purposes. Our minds, our understanding, our perception of the world is key (v 23). It's a matter not only of knowing the right way but being convinced by its goodness and being compelled to follow it. This requires God's power to 'renew' our minds (cf. Romans 12:1-2).

Recommit to God's new ways (4:25-5:20)

The practise of changing clothes, so to speak, is an ongoing commitment and we all work through these things in accordance with the grace Christ has given us (4:7). Paul provides examples of this in key areas of life so we can see the pervasive effects of sin but also as a striking measure of the change and progress God brings: from lying to telling the truth (v 25). From rage to righteous anger (vv 26-27). From stealing to generosity (v 28). From hurtful speech to helpful speech (v 29-30). From a fundamental disposition of malice, to one of forgiveness and grace (vv 31-32). In summary: following Christ's example in 'the way of love' (5:1-2).

Having described the pattern of repentance in the Christian life (4:17-5:2), Paul continues to address particular ways the lives of God's redeemed people are 'holy' and how this works out in the ways they relate to one another ('among you', v 3; cf. vv 18-20).

'Do not be partners with them' (5:3-7)

Since Christ, the spotless lamb, has offered up himself on the cross for the sake of his people (5:2), they are in turn to live in accordance with their new status before God. This means not partaking in the sexually immoral ways of the world; not even a little (v 3). Not only in acts but in words (v 4). Thanksgiving is evidently the antidote for sexual immorality as it focusses a person on God's good gifts, rather than pervert them. Paul, surprisingly for us, motivates through concern for negative consequences, as opposed to anticipation of positive ones. He's deadly serious about the consequences of sexual immorality, whether in speech or lifestyle. In fact, a person who has been transformed by God won't continue participating in such things. These are matters in which we are easily led astray, so Paul warns us, 'Do not be deceived' (v 6).

'Now you are light in the Lord' (5:7-14)

A person's identity is the foundation for their way of life. Our actions do not make us Christian. So Paul reiterates the redemption God has brought about in the Ephesian Christians' lives, in terms of darkness to light (vv 8-9). The 'old way' is darkness (v 8), disobedience (v 12), and leads to death (2:1). The 'new way' is light (v 8b-10) and life-giving (v 14). In other words, a person who has been transformed by God has a fundamentally different approach to wickedness. Rather than participation and cover up, they disassociate and expose (vv 11-13). This evidently has an illuminating effect on others. Once darkness, now being made light, God's holy people are given the ability to shine this light onto the lives of others. This doesn't give believers permission to rebuke unbelievers, however, because Paul is talking about how the Ephesian believers are to relate to one another ('among you', v 3).

The way of wisdom (5:15-20)

This leads Paul to warn the Ephesian church to 'be very careful, then, how you live' (v 15). The way of wisdom is to exercise caution. 'Making the most of every opportunity' to do what, in v 16? To 'live as children of the light' (v 8), to 'find out what pleases the Lord' (v 10), to have 'nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather to expose them' (v 11). Why? 'Because the days are evil', that is, they are characterised by fruitless wickedness, we are easily led astray, and evil will one day give way to light, goodness and righteousness in the new creation. To 'understand what the Lord's will is', does not refer to working out God's plan for your life, but learning 'the way of love' and wisdom that is revealed in the person of Jesus throughout the pages of Scripture in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian seeks the ongoing filling of the Spirit, even though he has already been given (1:14), not because we are lacking in salvation (1:3), but because it shapes a life characterised by praise and thanksgiving, to the glory of God (5:18-20).