

“You Did Not Learn Christ in this Way . . .”

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November 1, 2009

Read Ephesians 4:17-32

The intent of this article is to show how what we once were **in Adam** we no longer are, but still have. Paul's point from the beginning of the letter all the way through chapter 3 is to note how those who were once in sin's debt and alienated from God are now redeemed from sin and adopted into God's family. He is their Father and they are His children.

Paul is clear in verses 17 through 22 as to what this **in Adam** condition looks like both as a state and as a function. I would like us to consider the graphic nature of Paul's language in describing those apart from Christ. There are several descriptive phrases that help us mark the unbelieving state and practice.

First, there is the futility of their mind (v. 17). The word “futility” speaks to vanity, emptiness. “The word contains the idea of aimlessness, the leading to no object or end.”¹ It is the same word used in Romans 8:20 (“For the creation was subjected to **futility**. . .”) and in 2 Peter 2:18 (“For speaking out arrogant words of vanity. . .”). There is emptiness to the conclusion drawn by those who do not and will not acknowledge God. Because there is no fear of God within their thinking, they have no wisdom (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). This is the manner of life that characterizes the unbelieving.

Second, they are darkened in their understanding (v. 18a). The emphasis is on the continuing condition. This is the stated condition of all those who are without Christ. Notice the following verses in their depiction of the state of the unbelieving.

“to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:18).

“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and **their foolish heart was darkened**” (Rom. 1:21).

Apart from Christ their understanding is without light.

Third, they are excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them (v. 18b). Like their darkness, so also their alienation. Emphasis is placed on the continuing state or existence. “It does not imply that they had at one time enjoyed that life; it means simply being aliens from it.”² It is the same word used in Ephesians 1:12 (“remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, **excluded from** the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”) and in Colossians 1:21 (“And although you were formerly **alienated** and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds”).

Fourth, there is the hardness of their heart (v. 18c). The hardening of heart is used throughout the New Testament to describe those who insensitive toward God. The imagery is that of a callous. “[It] signifies a thickening of the outward skin of any particular part, especially on the hands and feet, by repeated exercise or use, through which such parts are rendered insensible.”³

Fifth, they are calloused (v. 19a). Here the idea of insensitivity is heightened. This is the consequence of the hardness noted in verse 18. Like the darkness and the alienation so also the insensitivity. It is habitual and marks the state of the unbelieving. “The translation ‘past feeling’ expresses the sense accurately. The lack of moral feeling and discernment means that inability to exercise any restraint.”⁴ This is why the following thought is true.

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Sixth, they have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness (v. 19b). This is the outcome of their calloused existence. Their existence is marked by an “insatiable craving greed, consuming ambition, giving reign to appetites and desires which are against the laws of God and man.”⁵ This idea finds fuller exposure in Romans 1. They are neither master nor lord, but mere pawns to their fleshly appetites. Theirs is a tragic existence whose end is marked by an eternal alienation from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Finally, they are being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit (v. 22). Again, this statement marks the ongoing state of those who are apart from Christ. “The whole character representing the former self was not only corrupt but growing ever more and more corrupt. Every trait of the old man’s behavior is putrid, crumbling, or inflated like rotting waste or cadavers, stinking, ripe for being disposed of and forgotten.”⁶

The fruit produced by the unbelieving is a natural consequence of their **in Adam** standing. They can do nothing less than this. Yet those who are **in Christ** still sin. This sin is a result of the old in Adam self. But it is no longer the tree that it once was. This tree has been given a fatal blow at Calvary. It is no longer capable of producing, in quantity or kind, the toxic fruit of sin. There is a new tree growing in the believing from the seed of God, and it is this tree of life that now produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit (1 John 3:9).

This is what the unbelieving are **in Adam**. Paul is not describing the believing. Friend, what great cause we have to celebrate all God as a Trinity did for His people. Yet I believe we mishandle this idea significantly. Herein is my struggle. I cannot state it any more emphatically, no Christian can be described in the manner Paul describes the unbelieving. There is a struggle against the old self because you still have what you once were, but this old self and its vices do not identify the Christian. It isn’t that we cannot; we simply do not. This is not what we are.

It is said, “If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck and waddles like a duck, chances are it’s a duck.” Even if the duck behaves like a squirrel or a dog, it is still a duck. Christians can never be anything other than what they are in Christ. Because of their old self, the flesh, they still sin, but this sin does not make them anything more or less than what they are **in Christ**. The reason why the unbelieving behave like unbelievers is because they are unbelievers. This is what the Ephesian Gentiles once were but they no longer are.

Paul does note how we are to put off those expressions of our old self whether it is falsehood, anger, stealing, corrupt speech and all the rest (vv. 25-32). But none of these acts can ever undo what God has done. They cannot cause us to be hardened or insensitive to the Spirit’s work. Such things as these do grieve the Holy Spirit because they will ultimately divide relationships within the body of Christ. But they cannot alienate us from God for His people are **in Christ**. This does not lessen the seriousness of the call to holiness, but it must put it in perspective.

For you and me to behave in a manner that is reflective of the old self is complete unbecoming of our identity in Christ. We should and must flee from these things. Let us not fear the outcome of our struggle against sin knowing that God has already won the victory. The struggle against our old self is real, but so is the victory that is ours **in Christ**. May this open our eyes to what we already have **in Christ**, and may we not waver in our pursuit of Him and our struggle against the old self.

¹ *Rogers and Rogers*, 441.

² *Rogers and Rogers*, 441.

³ *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* on Ephesians 4:18.

⁴ *Rogers and Rogers*, 441.

⁵ *Rogers and Rogers*, 442.

⁶ *Rogers and Rogers*, 442.