

Ephesians 4:17-32

Questions

1. All churches, all small groups, all fellowships, want to develop a healthy culture and practices, which Paul describes in 4:25-32. One approach our Council has discussed is this four-part plan:

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| (a) get into the Word; | (c) get into small groups; |
| (b) get praying; | (d) look outwards via ministry and evangelism |

Paul gives this plan:

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| (a) make use of the four-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers/preachers (4:11); | (b) engage in ministry (4:15-16); |
| | (c) clothe ourselves with the new self (i.e. Christ; 4:24). |

How should we amend the first plan in light of Paul's? How could we adopt Paul's plan for our small group?

2. Putting on Christ¹ is a cognitive process: they are to be "renewed in the spirit of their minds" (23) and are told in Colossians, "set your minds on the things above" (Col 3:2) and "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom..." (Col 3:16). They are to do this so thoroughly that they can say with Paul, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

It is possible, even easy, to read the Bible and not fully appreciate who we are and what we have in Christ. How, on a daily basis, can we "put on Christ"?

3. Ephesians 4:17-20 parallels Romans 1-2 in describing the darkened mind of the Gentile. Their "deep-rooted ignorance" is the result of not "seeing fit to acknowledge God" (Rom 1:29), so they become "estranged and hostile in mind" (Col 1:21). As Paul argues in Romans 1:18-32, "wrong lines of conduct follow from wrong ideas about God" (Bruce, 355). What we allow ourselves to believe about God affects us spiritually. Untrue beliefs poison and stunt us, driving us to try to meet our needs other than from God, just as the Gentiles "abandoned themselves" to their lusts.

A couple I looked up to in my high-school home church (call them John and Marcy), have faced a long series of struggles. Marcy took care of her dad when he was dying and verbally abusing her, only to find that he cut her out of the will and left everything to a neighbor. Their daughters have experienced a variety of troubles, and her husband some health issues. When they were on the verge of stepping into home church leadership Marcy had a breakdown which included delusions,

¹ Paul is using an OT image: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isa 61:10; also Job 29:14).

running away and even a suicide attempt. John and Marcy have left the church and walked away from God.

With each struggle we face, God may seem to be a little more distant, a bit more aloof, until, without realizing it, we no longer really believe God cares. Yesterday it was the small thing that was beneath him; now it's the big thing, and we are on our own.

Have you ever felt this way, or seen others fall into this numbness?

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Fun fact: “The symbolism [of putting on Christ] was peculiarly apt for Christian baptism in apostolic times, since it normally took place by immersion, and apparently often in nakedness. (That was insisted on in Jewish proselyte baptism; when women were baptized the Rabbis turned their backs on them while the women entered the water to their neck, and the latter were questioned and gave answers; they had to have their hair loose, to ensure that no part of their bodies was untouched by the water.” (DPL, “New Nature and Old Nature”, p. 62.)

Leader's Intro:

- Eph 1-3 lays the theological foundation for the extended paraenesis of 4-6. In 4:1-16 Paul established a plea for unity and described at least two means by which God grows a healthy church. In Eph 4:17-32 we see first a plea regarding the importance of how we think (17-24), in the form of an old-self/new-self antithesis. This is followed by an extended antithetical list of unhealthy and healthy community behaviors.
- The focus, then, is community health and growth, though the engine for that is our thought lives. We can become the kind of Christian who cares and invests despite being hurt and wounded by fellow Christians—we can't become this until we see who we are in Christ.
- To do this passage justice we must recognize the context of community development, of unity. We must also take seriously Paul's admonition regarding putting on the new self.
- Questions you might ask during the inductive study phase:
 - What parallel structure do you see?
 - What echoes are there to creation?
 - What, in the wider context of Eph 4 and all of Eph, is the main focus of the passage? (Community)
 - What can we infer from this passage about the struggles Paul fears the churches in Asia Minor are facing?
 - The antitheses Paul uses paint a bleak picture of non-Christian culture. Does this match your experience? In what ways does not acknowledging God and trying to meet needs apart from him play itself out in the lives of unbelievers you know?