



Old Self *vs* New Self

A CONTRAST

ISTOCK PHOTO

By Cecil R. Taylor

“OLD SELF” AND “NEW SELF” (Eph 4:22,24)¹ refer not to parts of a person or natures within him but to the whole person and his lifestyle.² The “old” is what he was before conversion. The “new” is what he has become in Christ. What was life like for the “old”? How about for the “new”? Ephesians offers glimpses of both old and the new.

The “Old”

In the past (2:1-3) the “old” was spiritually *dead* in sin, meaning separated from God, the source of life, and helpless to get back with Him. His life

was shaped by this worldly age, which some refer to as “the spirit of the times.”³ Also, he was *disobedient*, ruled not by Christ but Satan. Jew as well as Gentile satisfied the cravings of the “flesh,” the sinful human nature. Then he was *depraved*, “by nature...under wrath.” He was born with a moral handicap—so inclined to evil that he lived a life of wickedness that was deserving of God’s wrath.⁴

“At one time” the “old,” here a Gentile, stood completely outside of God’s purpose (vv. 11-12). Jews, the “circumcised,” scorned him as the “uncircumcised.” But more serious were his spiritual disabilities. “Without Christ,” which was the opposite of being “in Christ.” “Excluded from the citizenship

of Israel,” meaning outside the circle of God’s chosen people. “Foreigners to the covenants of promise,” which was the promise of Christ, the Messiah.⁵ “Without hope”—the hopeless in the first century said that not being born was best and dying young was second best! “Without God in the world.” He worshiped many gods but was altogether without the true and living God, alone in the universe!

In 4:17-19, Paul described living “as the Gentiles,” meaning the “old” first-century pagan life. First Paul spoke of “the futility of their thoughts.” *Futility* means emptiness and purposelessness, living with no meaning or goal. All the “old” can do is to create “game plans”⁶ to give purpose to pointless life. To be

“darkened in...understanding” is to live in moral darkness, unable to tell right from wrong. Such is the life of the “old.” Formerly he was “excluded from the life of God,” held in the grip of spiritual death through ignorance and callousness about spiritual things. Having lost all sensitivity, he gave himself over to immorality and impurity (v. 19). “Promiscuity” indicates lewd conduct that shocks public decency. The promiscuous individual no longer cares to hide sin. He does not care who sees his shame as long as he can satisfy his lust. “Impurity” is moral uncleanness. “Desire” means wanting “more and more,” having the ruthless disposition that steps on others in order to fill its insatiable longing for sin.⁷

The rags of the “old” Paul set out in the form of five classes of sin

(vv. 25-32). First, put away “lying.” The tense (present) of the imperative verb forbids a current action, thus, “Stop lying!” Deception must stop! Second, put off unjustified anger and deal quickly with righteous indignation. Third, stealing must stop. Again the present tense imperative calls for ending an action currently in progress. Fourth, “foul language,” or “rotten talk” must yield to language that benefits the hearers. Fifth, lay aside the sins of a bad temper, which Paul gathers into one sentence (v. 31).

Obscenity, foolish talk, and crude joking are part of the old life (5:4). Immorality and covetousness are works of darkness, not light (vv. 5-11).

The “New”

Salvation consists of redemption and the forgiveness of sins (1:7). “Redemption” suggests setting free a man powerless to liberate himself and the payment of a price to do it—the sacrificial death of Christ. The central feature of this redemption is the “forgiveness of our trespasses.” The “new” walks in freedom and forgiveness.

The “new” has confidence that God’s plan for history has a cosmic

scope. Ultimately God intends to reunite this fragmented universe under the lordship of Christ (v. 10). God has already begun this work by joining the two hostile parts of humanity, Jews and Gentiles, into one body, the church. Life changes for the “new”! Instead of splintering the congregation along racial, cultural, or socioeconomic lines, the “new” works toward internal unity.

“But now in Christ Jesus” God reconciled the “new” with Himself and with all other believers (2:13-18). Jesus has “made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility.” This wall was racial hostility separating Jew and Gentile. The issue is that “through him [Christ] we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father” (v. 18). That both peoples get to the Father in the same way actually serves as a sign of peace between them. Perhaps this takes aim at division within the church. The “new” knows he belongs to God and also to the church and adjusts his lifestyle to reflect those belongings.

With peace the Spirit binds all the redeemed into one (4:3). But the “new” maintains unity by living out



Above: Terra-cotta base that would have held an image of Dioskouroi—the Greek gods of horsemanship; 4th cent. BC; from Ephesus. The term translated “gentleness” (Eph. 4:2) conveys the idea of strength under control, as in a horse with a bit and bridle.

Right: Architectural fragments, statues, and reliefs gathered from the ruins of Ephesus. Most prominent is the statue of Artemis, the primary goddess of the city; also included are other gods and political leaders. Worshipping multiple gods and even emperors was common in the Roman world.





Far left: At the Forum in Rome, statue and house of the Vestal Virgins; some citizens opposed the Vestal Virgins because they considered their behavior lewd and immoral. Paul spoke of those who were sexually immoral or impure (Eph. 5:5).

Left: Fresco depicting the apostle John in the apse of the chapel of St. John at Ephesus; dated to the 11th or 12th cent. Early church tradition holds that John lived and ministered in Ephesus before being sent to Patmos and resettled there after his release. John recorded Jesus' prayer that His followers would "be one" (John 17:21); Paul taught that the Spirit binds Jesus' followers into one (Eph. 4:3).

ILLUSTRATION PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS (5/47)

the Christian virtues listed in 4:2. "Humility" involves someone having a modest opinion of himself and being willing to play a role lower than he is capable of playing without complaint. Used in the first century of trained animals, "gentleness" speaks of strength under control. "Patience" means "longsuffering," but "bearing with one another in love" adds active endurance to passive longsuffering. Lack of these graces leads to conflict that will destroy a church. The "new" protects the unity of Christ's church.

Overall, the theme of 4:7-16 is that Christ distributes to the "new" various spiritual gifts as He pleases. He intends those gifts to build up the body (v. 16). Again Paul sounds the theme of the church. The "new" knows how important the church is to Jesus, so he serves the church with every gift he has.

Paul next identifies the marks of

the "new" (vv. 20-24). Paul defined the truth they had learned with three infinitive ("to be") clauses: "to take off" (v. 22), "to be renewed" (v. 23), and "to put on" (v. 24). The first and last described putting clothes on and off. The Greek verb tense for putting on and putting off indicates a completed act.⁸ For the middle term the verb tense (present) indicates continuous action and the passive voice suggests believers must let themselves be renewed in mind. Conversion gives a man a new mental outlook as well as new moral habits.

- Kindness, compassion and forgiveness mark the "new" (v. 32).
- To imitate God, the "new" must walk in self-sacrificial love like Christ's (5:1-2).
- To imitate God, the "new" must walk in light (vv. 3-14), not moral darkness.

- To imitate God, the "new" must walk in wisdom (vv. 15-20)—demonstrated in making the most of opportunity (v. 16); understanding the will of God (v. 17); and being ruled, governed, and controlled by the Holy Spirit (vv. 18-20).

The "new" finds new obligations at home (5:21-6:9). A wife is to submit to her own husband just as she does to the Lord. A husband must love his wife in a self-sacrificial way as Jesus did the church (5:25-27). Instead of abandoning unwanted children, a father must encourage his children and bring them up in the "training and instruction of the Lord" (6:4). A slave must serve as unto the Lord, and a master must treat his slaves with the same regard as one would have for the will of God and the authority of Christ.⁹

The "new" no longer cowers before dark powers and cosmic spirits.¹⁰ Instead, he wrestles against them in prayer (vv. 11-12).

Paul wrote to believers whose lives had been radically changed by Christ. The contrast between "old" and "new" could not be sharper in Ephesians! 📖

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. David S. Dockery, "New Nature and Old Nature," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* [DPL], ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 628-29. This article uses masculine pronouns to describe the old and new man. The same attributes, though, apply to males and females.

3. Ray Summers, *Ephesians: Pattern for Christian Living* (Nashville: Broadman 1969), 32.

4. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 496-97.

5. Curtis Vaughan, *Ephesians, Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 59.

6. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Then Should We Live in Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1982), 5:194.

7. Vaughan, 100.

8. Ibid., 102; the Greek verb tense is aorist.

9. Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 441.

10. Clinton E. Arnold, "Ephesians, Letter to," in DPL, 247.

Cecil R. Taylor is emeritus professor of Christian studies at the University of Mobile, Mobile, Alabama.