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“ It has become almost a cliché to assert that being a disciple means being a ‘disciple-maker’, but most people in most churches don’t really buy it. It’s not something that features in their vision of the normal Christian life. ”

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# Exposing the darkness

SAMUEL FRENEY<sup>1</sup>

*When we become Christians, it is like a transfer from darkness to light. Continuing to walk in that light means not only shining out as a positive example of the transformative power of Christ; it also involves shining the light into some dark corners. Samuel Freney takes a close look at some intriguing verses in Ephesians 5 to understand how Christians should expose “the unfruitful works of darkness”.*

**M**Y WIFE BECAME a Christian in high school, through the testimony of other students. What made an impression on her was both the way they lived their lives as well as the things they said—they treated her differently than other people did because of what they thought about Jesus, which was profoundly influential. This kind of story isn’t uncommon, of course; Christians’ patterns of life and speech are obvious, and make a difference.

There are two sides to this influence, though, aren’t there? The lives of these girls and the way they treated my wife were positive examples of what she now recognizes as the fruit of the Spirit. But they also exposed the lack of charity in the way others treated her, and in various

ways the shortcomings of her own life as well. Light isn’t just bright in itself, it also shows up what was previously hidden. I’m sure you can think of a dozen different examples of how this plays out in other areas of life, where positive examples and encouragements to gospel living are not only praiseworthy in themselves, but also make us realize our own greed, anger, improper desires, lack of self control, and so on. Light exposes what was in darkness.

Knowing that, however, sometimes makes being the positive example harder. Once we realize that speaking about Jesus or obviously following his example might cause relational difficulty or discomfort, it is sometimes easier just to blend in. We back down. For me, this is due to a combination of self-imposed lack of opportunity, fear of rejection and ridicule, and a degree of tongue-tiedness due to simple lack of practice in being explicit about the gospel. Your reasons might be

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different. Whatever our particular reasons or issues, the solution is the same for all of us: to turn again humbly to God and his Word, praying that he would change us by his Spirit. And that's what we're going to do in this essay, by taking a close and careful look at a small portion in chapter

of the name of Christ (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15).

The switch to 'light and dark' imagery comes in chapter 5:

*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,*

*“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”  
(Eph 5:6-14)*

Paul's use of 'light and dark' language helps us see the renewal of Christians' lives more clearly. In particular, by walking as "children of light" believers ought to "expose" the "unfruitful works of darkness" (5:11).<sup>3</sup> But precisely which works or deeds are we meant to expose?

One of the more useful debates about this passage is over who is doing these unfruitful deeds—is it back-sliding Christians, or the wider world outside of Christ?—and therefore what it means to expose them. In other words, is this passage about what happens inside the church (rebuking stumbling Christians) or is it about mission (exposing the sinfulness

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5 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It's a section that on first read almost feels like it's been lifted out of John's Gospel, with all its imagery of light and darkness to describe the new life to which believers have been called, and in which they now walk. What I want

us to do together is mine this section for encouragement in living bold Christian lives in a dark and hostile world.<sup>2</sup>

### Insider or outsider?

It's pretty well known that Ephesians falls roughly into two major sections. The second section is the 'ethical' portion of the letter, where the magnificent truths of the cosmic plan of God (the first section) are worked out in some of the details of believers' everyday lives. God's plan from before time began has been brought to fulfilment in our Lord Jesus Christ: to bring everything under his headship (Eph 1:9-10). We have been included in that plan and included in Jesus' kingdom, entirely by grace, and are reconciled not only to God, but to one another too, Jew and Gentile alike. And so Paul says repeatedly in the second half of the letter that we should walk in a manner worthy

2 This is something we hope to do on a regular basis in this journal: take a Bible passage and do some close reading of it, including, where relevant, some of the scholarly discussion. The aim is both to understand it better and see how it plays out in life and ministry.

3 Καὶ μὴ συγκοινωνεῖτε τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς ἀκάροισι τοῦ σκότους, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἐλέγγετε. I'll refer to the Greek in footnotes throughout, which you can safely skip if you don't know it. If you've learned Greek but are a bit rusty, here's your chance to brush up a bit.

of the world)? If it's the former, then this paragraph or two is mainly about the personal and collective holiness of the church. If it's the latter, then we *also* need to be concerned about the darkness of the world around us, and how we ought to think about, interact with, and counter it.

Working out this issue (along with closely related ones, such as how the "Awake, O sleeper" quote in verse 14 fits with the point Paul is making) requires more than looking up a word in a lexicon. We need to read the passage carefully, and look at the flow of its thought.

## A new kingdom

Paul loves to remind us that we've been transferred from one kingdom to another in Christ. Thus far in this letter, he has spoken of his readers as having once been dead in their transgressions and sins, in the way they previously *walked*<sup>4</sup> under the domain of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, now saved by God in Christ (2:1-6). Christ has brought the Gentiles near, despite them being once far off and alienated from God's people and the Messiah (2:13). They have taken off their former way of life and put on the new self (4:22-24), imitating Christ in their new life (5:1-2).

Now, in this section, a contrast is drawn once more between what the Christians once were ("for at one time you were darkness") and what they are now ("but now you are light in the Lord").<sup>5</sup> The life of those in darkness, characterized in the opening verses of chapter 5 by sexual immorality, impurity, and the idolatry of greed, has no place amongst those who are light.

This contrast leads to the primary command of the paragraph: "walk as children of light".<sup>6</sup> Skipping over the side-line comment of verse 9, there are three related clauses after this imperative: "try to discern..." (v. 10), "take no part..." (v. 11), and "but instead expose them" (v. 11).<sup>7</sup>

*Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Eph 5:8-11)*

The "try to discern" clause, although usually translated as an imperative, is what the Greek nerds among us call an adverbial participle. That means it tells us *how* we go about this task of walking as children of light: "walk ... discerning what is pleasing". This language of 'discerning' or 'approving' what is pleasing to the Lord echoes the kind of radical life-change that Paul has been talking about in the preceding verses (e.g. "Be imitators of God... but sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you" Eph 5:1, 3). This is the only fitting way to live for those who now belong to Christ.

In light of this single-minded commitment to God, the parallel commands of verse 11 ("take no part", "expose them") outline the negative aspect of what is demanded. The lifestyle of ungodliness ("unfruitful works") is something that Christians cannot take part in. Note, however, that the objects of exposure are the unfruitful

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4 'Walking' is a key term throughout the letter. In this case: περιπατέω, 2:2.

5 ἦτε γὰρ ποτε σκότος, νῦν δὲ φῶς ἐν κυρίῳ, 5:8.

6 ὡς τέκνα φωτὸς περιπατεῖτε, 5:8.

7 δοκιμάζοντες...; καὶ μὴ συγκοινωνεῖτε...; μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἐλέγχετε.

works or deeds, rather the people who do them. This leads us to our question: whose deeds are they—Christians or the ungodly?

As an aside, I recommend two in-depth commentaries on Ephesians. Harold Hoehner’s massive work gives you lots of detail on the Greek text, and works that up to theological and practical integration with the passage and book as a whole.<sup>8</sup> (This is a nice feature for those of us whose Greek is now a little rusty.) Peter O’Brien’s commentary in the Pillar series is excellent, with astute textual and theological work throughout.<sup>9</sup> These two are well worth having on the shelf—but they take opposite lines on this question. Hoehner argues that the context is about believers. He says that it is clear some believers were not acting as they should, and that Christians don’t have the prerogative to judge the world—and so therefore the command is about rebuking a brother or sister. O’Brien thinks that Paul is urging them to live

have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (v. 5):

*But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. (Eph 5:3-5)*

That is, the actions that are too shameful to mention in verse 12 sound very similar to what characterizes people outside of God’s kingdom in verses 3-5. In fact, there are several contrasts being made in these verses that reflect the fundamental opposition of light and darkness: the sons of disobedience vs. the children of light; the unfruitful works of darkness vs. the fruit of light; the wrath of God vs. pleasing the Lord.

It seems we should identify these “deeds of darkness” with a lifestyle that ought to now be utterly foreign to the people of God. They are what people do when they’re aliens and strangers to the covenants of promise, hopeless, and without God in the world (Eph 2:12).

Now, it is not as if Christians will never fall into these sins, or that if they do they are then barred from the kingdom of God—the very reason Paul is warning them not to do such things is evidence that they are real temptations. However, in the broader context, this is a lesser issue bound up in a greater one. Repenting of individual instances or patterns of coarse joking, for example, is an entailment of being convinced that a Christian cannot be ‘one who jokes coarsely’.

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the kind of changed life that an outsider will see and be rebuked by. So as children of light, do we look outwards or inwards at this point?

The context helps us tease this out. Verse 12 says these things done

in secret are shameful even to mention, which sounds very similar to the deeds that are out of place and should not even be named among the saints (vv. 3-4). Paul’s earlier command to not walk in this way is tied to the dire warning that those who are characterized by such sins will

8 HW Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2002.

9 PT O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999.

The important aspect here is the focus on *others* and their lifestyle, and of not being characterized by or identifying oneself with such immorality. The language of partnership and participation is important, just as it has been in Ephesians more broadly:<sup>10</sup> believers have been united to Christ, raised with him (2:6) and seated with him (2:6), are fellow citizens in God's household (2:19), and are joined together as one dwelling for him (2:22). They are now urged not to partner (5:7) with the sons of disobedience, and not to participate (5:11) in the unfruitful works of darkness. Just as death and life were the metaphors for two realms of existence in chapter 2, light and dark are the same dichotomy here. Exposure of such deeds is therefore not so much about calling to repentance Christians who err and sin (although it can certainly include that); the emphasis is more on distinguishing the new self from the old, and exposing the latter for what it really is. Walking as children of light, and considering what is pleasing to the Lord, involves identifying with one realm and not the other.

The body of believers, the church, are to demonstrate that evil is evil by living godly lives, having been enlightened by the Spirit of God (1:18), shining as a beacon in the surrounding darkness.<sup>11</sup>

This is familiar territory for the church. At least part of the role of Israel in the ancient world was to be a holy nation and kingdom of priests (Exod 19:5-6), to demonstrate to the nations that Yahweh was God. This is also part of

the function of the church in Ephesians: as Christ's body, God declares through the church his wisdom to the heavenly rulers and authorities (1:21-23, 2:7, 3:10). That is, by the church simply being the church, it demonstrates to the surrounding darkness the glory of having been transformed into light in the Lord, and God's wisdom and grace in doing so. The unity of the body shows the wisdom of God in making one new man out of two (2:15). The godliness and unity of the church exposes the darkness for what it is: disobedience, idolatry, estrangement, and opposition to God.

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## Word and deed

The context of the letter, however, pushes us to say something more here. We're not just talking about actions, as if they were divorced from speaking. As we look through the ways that Paul calls us to live as children of light, walking in the way of the Messiah, we keep seeing *both* action and speech. As a church we declare by our existence to the powers and authorities that Christ is the summation of all history. The way the gospel came to each of us is that we "learned Christ", as we heard and were taught the gospel and its transforming power (Eph 4:20ff.). Individually, we're to speak the truth to one another in love, saying what is good for building one another up (4:15, 25, 29). We're to get rid of bad speech, and speak to one another in thanksgiving, and in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (4:29, 5:4, 19-20). (As an Australian living in the US Midwest, I'm even more acutely aware of my habitually unhelpful speech, which I've unwittingly soaked up as part of Australian culture.) Part of our armour

<sup>10</sup> In particular, the *συν*— vocabulary throughout: *συνεγείρω*, 2:6; *συγκαθίζω*, 2:6; *συμπολίτης*, 2:19; *συναρμολογέω*, 2:23; *συμμέτοχος*, 5:7; *συγκοινωνέω*, 5:11.

<sup>11</sup> JM Lunde & JA Dunne, 'Paul's Creative and Contextual Use of Isaiah in Ephesians 5:14', *JETS*, vol. 55, 2012, pp. 87-110, 102.

in our fight is the word of God, the sword of the Spirit (6:17). To be sure, it's not the only thing that we do as disciples, and the primary focus of all of this is the building up of one another for the benefit of the whole church. But when it comes to

to indicate conversion, especially (given the language of death/life in chapter 2) the phrase "arise from the dead". Hearing this, we remember the power of God in Christ that saved us—and if that miracle is true, then he has the power to do the same for others.

The commands are best understood as referring to a non-Christian: 'sleeper', 'wake up', and 'rise from the dead'. Again, the internal view of repentance in the church has some merit—this fragment could be about awaking from spiritual sleep and rising from the path of death—but the outward-oriented view appears to better fit the original and present context. Although heavily edited and not matching neatly to the Old Testament, the original content of these lines derives from Isaiah 26:19 and 60:1-2 (regardless of whether it came by way of a pre-Pauline hymn or Paul's own construction):

*Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. (Isa 26:19)*

*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. (Isa 60:1-2)*

Looking at the context of these prophetic passages, they dovetail neatly with Paul's concerns in Ephesians. Despite the failure of Israel to mediate God's blessing to the nations, God himself will bring life through resurrection from the dead (Isa 26); Israel was to be transformed into a shining light to the nations, redeemed by God from sin and his approaching wrath

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how we witness to those outside the church, why are we so quick to remove the speaking element, and focus exclusively on the good deeds? Being light in the darkness is about living authentically Christian lives, walking as Jesus would have us walk, which includes

both reformed action *and* reformed speech. That's certainly Paul's outlook as he asks for prayer in proclaiming the gospel, "that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak" (6:20).

The quotation at the end of this short passage helps us see the power behind such a view of Christian living, encompassing both actions and words. Witnessing to and exposing the darkness is all about the power of Christ in the gospel, and the hope we have in it bearing fruit all over the world.

*Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." (Eph 5:14)*

Once again, there's debate about where exactly this material comes from—whether it's from Isaiah, elsewhere in the Old Testament, an early Christian baptismal hymn, or some combination.<sup>12</sup> In the end it doesn't matter all that much, because we want to know how it's used *here*. The force of these lines seems

12 If you're interested in an overview of the arguments for source, see Lunde & Dunne, p. 89ff.

(Isa 60).<sup>13</sup> Christ mediates God's blessings to all people, whether Jew or Gentile, and transforms what was darkness into light in the Lord. Both the Isaiah and Ephesians contexts push us to see the realm of darkness, death, and sleep as being separate from Christ, and the light of the Messiah shining as the reversal of that pre-Christian state by virtue of union with him in his resurrection.

The inclusion of this fragment of a hymn here in chapter 5 therefore makes us remember our own conversion, and the power of God to effect this monumental change of allegiance. Given the way that Paul has been talking, this power is directed towards those beyond the church—the ones who practise the sorts of things it will not do even to speak about—who could yet be transformed from darkness into light.<sup>14</sup>

The ethical commands in these verses, therefore, ought to be understood in their broadest perspective. Paul is painting a broad contrast between light and dark, and the realms they represent. Believers used to be part of the latter, but now through union with Christ they are not only *in* the light, but *they are light themselves*, having the Spirit of Christ working within them to enlighten the eyes of their hearts. As Paul puts it in Colossians, they have

been transferred from one kingdom to another (Col 1:13). This is the fundamental reason why these works of darkness are to have no place among them: they are characteristic of a realm that is diametrically opposed to Christ.

Furthermore, as believers put on the new self and live in unity with one another, imitating their Lord Jesus as dearly beloved children, they highlight this basic contrast between light and darkness. Pursuing the fruit of light and repudiating evil demonstrates the transformative power of the light of the Messiah, and exposes the darkness for what it is. Christians have the conviction that even those who practise these unfruitful works of darkness can, like the Gentile Christians themselves, also be enlightened and included in the kingdom of Christ.

This is the power behind speaking and living as Christians in the midst of a world that does not know Christ. Walking as followers of Christ includes changed actions and reformed speech, both demonstrating the power of the gospel. You never know which quiet 14-year-old girl will be watching and listening, and by the Spirit be convicted and raised to life by the Messiah's power. ▣

<sup>13</sup> For more on this background, see Lunde & Dunne, pp. 94-99.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, p. 377.