



Research article

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PUTTING OFF THE OLD MAN AND PUTTING ON THE NEW MAN (EPHESIANS 4:20–24)

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ABSTRACT

This article is an exegetical study of Ephesians 4:20–24, which argues that the author of Ephesians exhorts his readers to be renewed in the way they lived their life. He conveys his message using the metaphor of putting off the old man and putting on the new man. This entails an abandonment of the old way of life in which one walked before receiving Christ and an embrace of a new way of life. This putting off and on is not a one-time event nor is it merely a past event, but it is a lifelong process that begins at the conversion and continues until one leaves this earth.



1. Introduction

The gift of salvation is not merely an escape from hell and a ticket to heaven. Neither is it related to the otherworld alone. Christian life should be lived here on earth before the afterlife becomes a reality. This life in Christ requires not simply a makeover but a complete change. The author of Ephesians (AE)¹ introduces the idea in terms of putting off the old man and putting on the new man. He is interested in his readers' ethical life and admonishes them to live a life that is different from the Gentiles outside (or the non-Christians). Our text (4:20–24) is a significant passage because much of what AE says in chapters 4–6 (commonly considered the ethical section), which is connected to what precedes in chapters 1–3 (commonly considered the doctrinal section), can be summed up in the concept found in this text. Gerhard Bode agrees: “Putting off the old and putting on the new summarizes what the apostle says in all these admonition.”² This passage is also very important today because the moral standards even among Christians are being increasingly redefined or compromised. AE wrote the epistle to probably the new Gentile converts in Asia Minor. However, the teachings are highly relevant to our day as well.

This article will attempt to prove that putting off the old man and putting on the new man

is neither a past event alone nor is it momentary or a one-time action. Rather it is a continuous process covering the past (beginning at conversion), present, and future of a Christian's life until their life on earth ends. The study will also argue that “old man” and “new man” here refer to individual Christians before and after their conversion respectively. Let it be noted at the outset that the use of “man” in the old/new man here is gender inclusive.

2. Literary Context

AE begins the ethical section in chapter 4 running through to the end of the epistle for which he prepares his readers in chapters 1–3. His appeal is for them to “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called” (4:1). The following verses (vv. 2–16), except for a few exhortations, are comprised of doctrinal matters rather than ethical. The latter begins fully from v. 17. (AE regularly mixes the doctrinal with the ethical throughout the epistle.) He begins his practical exhortations properly in v. 17 by repeating what he already said in v. 1—this time negatively—not to walk as the Gentiles do. These two verses (v. 1 and v. 17) are parallel (antithetical): note the theme of περιπατέω. I reckon at least v. 17 to v. 24 should be taken as a unit; of course, the verses preceding v. 17 and those following v. 24 are directly connected to vv. 17–24. However, the shortest possible unit, which includes our text, is vv. 17–24. Nevertheless, this article will focus on a narrower text of vv. 20–24.

¹ Paul's or anyone else's authorship will not be presumed in this article. Therefore, the author of the epistle will be identified as AE (I am indebted to Ernest Best for this designation).

² Gerhard Bode, “Tenth Sunday after Trinity: Ephesians 4:17–24,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (Jan 1982): 66.



3. Critical Exposition

After mentioning briefly the manner in which the (non-Christian) Gentiles walk (vv. 17–19), AE changes the course of his discussion, drawing a contrast between non-Christians and his readers (Christians)—“But you did not so learn Christ” (v. 20). The learning of AE’s readers is different from the rest of the Gentiles who have not learned Christ. Learning Christ is a difficult concept to understand. Many take it to mean learning *about* Christ through the preaching of the gospel. However, the meaning seems deeper than mere learning *about* him. Ernest Best is probably correct that the idea here is “[t]he readers have been brought into a relation with the living Christ.”³ There is therefore a kind of knowing Christ, which is personal and intimate.

γε (v. 21) is an “intensive” or “emphatic” particle whose origin is uncertain; it is used primarily to strengthen the force or the emphasis of the word with which it is associated without its own distinct impulse.⁴ Therefore, since it comes here with εἰ, the words are better translated as “if indeed.” εἰ γε is used to address a “more definite assumption.”⁵ Therefore, the idea here is like this: “assuming that you surely heard him and were taught in him” We know that AE’s readers had not heard Christ personally. So, what does it mean by “if you

heard him”? AE is probably saying that the teachings that they received (or heard) from the apostles and ministers are equivalent to hearing the Lord himself. This is supported by the next phrase, i.e., “were taught in him.” Moreover, the apostles and prophets often claimed that they taught and wrote to the churches what they received directly from the Lord himself (e.g., Paul’s claim in 1 Corinthians 7:10), implying that hearing them meant hearing Christ. Alternatively, following Blass, Debrunner, and Funk (BDF), Andrew Lincoln argues that hearing him means hearing *about* him.⁶ Nevertheless, BDF make it clear that this is the “classical rule,”⁷ which is not always followed by the NT writers. Therefore, I find Lincoln’s position unconvincing. I think George Winer is more correct here in that the accusative implies the object when it comes with ἀκούω; hence, “one hears Christ when one hears the Gospel in which he speaks”⁸

Verse 21b is a little difficult, and hence, has been translated in various ways.⁹ It seems best to take ἀλήθεια as the subject and translate the clause as “(just) as the truth is in Jesus.” Most scholars agree that the “truth” here refers to the gospel, comparing particularly with 1:13 and Col. 1:5. The use of “Jesus” has invited multiple interpretations too. Lincoln sees it as a stylistic variation¹⁰ and Best sees an

³ Ernest Best, *Essays on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 141.

⁴ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 1144–48.

⁵ F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk [BDF] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 237.

⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard et al. (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 280.

⁷ BDF, 95.

⁸ George Benedict Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament*, 7th ed., rev. Gottlieb Lünemann (Andover: W. F. Draper, 1892), 199.

⁹ For a good overview on this, see Lincoln, 280f.

¹⁰ Lincoln, 281–82.



emphasis on the incarnate Jesus.¹¹ Whatever way vv. 20–21 is interpreted, it is clear that Christ is the focal point in everything these verses purport. Markus Barth puts it well: “The answer of 4:20–21 is this: when Jesus Christ is the headmaster, the teaching matter, the method, the curriculum, and the academy, then the gift of new life takes the place of a diploma.”¹²

The infinitives used to convey “putting off” and “putting on” has also created a variety of interpretations. For example, Rudolf Schnackenburg believes it to be imperatival.¹³ Lincoln and Best, among others, take it to be exegetical, extending the content of the teaching (ἐδιδάχθητε) of v. 21. Nevertheless, both Lincoln and Best admit that the infinitives have some imperatival connotation.¹⁴ In addition, owing to the use of the aorist, many believe the putting off and putting on to be a one-time past event especially at one’s baptism/conversion.¹⁵ However, the fact is that the aorist does not necessarily refer to a one-time past action. The words punctiliar, durative, and perfected are often used to denote the significance of the aorist, present,

and perfect tenses respectively.¹⁶ This means that the aorist refers to the action at a point of time (but not necessarily past), the present denotes a continuous action, and the perfect means that some action has already taken place but the effect continues. This is the common understanding of the Greek tenses. However, this is an incomplete understanding. Our interest here is in the aorist. The above view unnecessarily over-reads the aorist. Frank Stagg makes it clear that “the aorist refrains from description but that what is covered by the aorist may be any kind of action. One cannot assume that the action itself is necessarily a single one. The aorist can cover action which in itself is progressive.”¹⁷ In the words of A. T. Robertson, “The aorist stem presents action in its simplest form (ἄ-οριστος, ‘undefined’). ... This action is timeless.”¹⁸ Therefore, to conclude that the putting off and on is a one-time past event because of the use of the aorist is erroneous.

The incomplete nature of the change is clear also from the imperatival impulse of the infinitives as discussed earlier. Besides, note the present tense used in v. 23 (ἀνανεοῦσθαι) in between the two aorist in v. 22 and v. 24. It too clearly implies that putting off and on is a continuous process. Moreover, the long paraenesis written to the readers who were Christians suggests that the new man is not completely realized. While it may be true theoretically that the old man died and the Christian became the new man at the conversion (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17), the sinful nature

¹¹ Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary, ed. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 429–30.

¹² Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, Anchor Bible, ed. W. F. Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1974), 530.

¹³ See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary*, trans. Helen Heron (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 199–200.

¹⁴ See Lincoln, 283–84; Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 430–31.

¹⁵ See John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 180–81.

¹⁶ See Robertson, 824.

¹⁷ Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 2 (June 1972): 225.

¹⁸ Robertson, 824.



of the old man does not die completely in the believer at their conversion. Therefore, the idea of a believer becoming the new man should be seen in the already and not yet tension as is the case of the believers' position in Christ described in the epistle. Thus, putting off the old man and putting on the new man is, in fact, a process and that a lifelong one. No Christian living at any stage of their life on earth can claim to have completely gotten rid of their sinful nature, namely, the old way of life. Therefore, AE realized the need for ethical exhortation to Christians. The old and new man in this text should be viewed in terms of ethical behavior (as indicated by the paraenesis) and not just given a spiritual interpretation. Barth is right in this regard: "The date of the change expected in Eph 4:22–24 is therefore every hour of man's life."¹⁹ Hence, I argue that this putting off and on is neither a past event nor is it a one-time event. It is a continuous process covering a person's past, present, and future.

Likewise, scholars hold varied opinions concerning what "old man" and "new man" refer to. Three interpretations are dominant as is shown by Barth. The first is an individualistic interpretation: a person before salvation is old man who becomes new man after receiving Christ. The second is corporate: the old man is the sinful humanity and the new man is the Church—the new humanity brought about by the work of Christ. The third interpretation sees the old man as the "first Adam," while Christ is the new man also called the "second Adam."²⁰ I believe that the old and new man here refers

to individuals (although I believe the new man in 2:15 is corporate). The old man is the state of a person's existence without Christ according to the sinful ways and the new man is the state after having received the new life by grace through faith in Christ Jesus (cf. 2:8). This view is best suited here in light of the long paraenesis in the epistle, which instructs the way a Christian ("new man") should live their life on this earth. This view is also supported by the clause "according to your former conduct." What the former conduct entails has been outlined briefly by AE in vv. 17–19 with further clarification in v. 22—"according to (because of) the lusts of deceit"—and more to follow in vv. 25f. Hence, the old man is a person who lived according to the lusts of deceit, i.e., in a sinful manner, which is the former conduct. AE says that this old man is being corrupted due to the "lusts of deceit." I reckon the expression "lusts of deceit" is parallel to what he said earlier in 2:3, namely, the "lusts of (our) flesh." Hence, the reference is again to the former sinful way of life. "Deceit" here is in opposition to "truth" in v. 24.

AE says that the new man is τὸν κατὰ θεὸν κτισθέντα. Because of the high flexibility of κατὰ in its usages and meanings, this phrase has been translated in various ways. According to BDAG, one of the usages of κατὰ, when it comes with the accusative, is "as a periphrasis to express equality, similarity, or example"; and this is how κατὰ is used in 4:24.²¹ Thus, the idea is that of a creation not in equality but similarity or

¹⁹ Barth, 545.

²⁰ Barth, 537–39.

²¹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [BDAG], s. v. "κατὰ."



likeness of God. Hence, a good translation would be “created in the likeness of God.” This reminds us of Gen 1:26–27 where God decided to make humans in his likeness.

God, their Creator. The verse teaches us that the new man is created by God but we have our part in putting it on.

Therefore, it implies that the new man is just the way God intended a human being to be—reflecting the very likeness (or image) of

In v. 24, many see “righteousness” in terms of our relationship with other people and “holiness” in terms of our relationship with God.²² Calvin also shares this view.²³ I reckon the two terms need not be differentiated as one having horizontal and the other having vertical implications; rather they should be taken together as a unit referring to the nature of the new man. As mentioned earlier, “truth” here is in opposition to “deceit” in v. 22. In fact, verses 22 and 24 are clearly in opposition to each other as depicted by the table below:

v. 22	v. 24	v. 22	v. 24
ἀποθέσθαι	ἐνδύσασθαι	Put off	Put on
τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον	τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον	Old man	New man
κατὰ τὴν προτέραν ἀναστροφὴν	τὸν κατὰ θεὸν	According to the former conduct	According to God (God’s likeness)
ἐπιθυμίας	δικαιοσύνη καὶ ὁσιότητι	Lusts	Righteousness & holiness
τῆς ἀπάτης	τῆς ἀληθείας	Deceit	Truth

²² E.g., Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, Crossway Classic Commentaries, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 158.

²³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 296.



Going back to v. 23, AE urges the readers to be renewed in the “spirit of your mind.” Some say the “spirit” here is the divine Spirit. For example, Schnackenburg takes it to mean “the Christian mind guided by the divine Spirit”²⁴; i.e., he sees *πνεῦμα* to be the Holy Spirit, and the two words “mind” and “spirit” having two distinct references. However, it is better to take them together as an expression referring to, as Best says, “the inner rather than the outer person.”²⁵ Verse 23 stands in contrast to vv. 17–19, where the expressions such as futility of mind, darkened understanding, hardness of heart, and insensitivity are used referring to the condition of the mind of the other Gentiles (or the non-Christians). Only a renewed mind can lead to a renewed lifestyle. This again shows that the call is to a transformed life once one receives Christ—a transformation into a new man.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that AE appeals to his readers—the Gentile believers—for a radical change; abandonment of the previous way of life, i.e., before they found Christ, and adherence to the new way of life as the new man. Although some see the putting off/on to be a past and/or one-time event, I have argued that it is, in fact, a lifelong process, which began when one accepted the gift of salvation and will continue until their physical death. The putting off/on metaphor should be viewed ethically and not simply spiritualized. Although existentially, putting off/on might have happened at one’s

conversion, its full realization does not take place at that time. Therefore, we should see it in the already and not yet tension. No living Christian can claim to have completely overcome the sinful nature of the old man. This also means every Christian has room for growth in the likeness of Christ.

The study has also shown that the reference to the old/new man here is neither corporate nor first/last Adam, but individual Christians before and after their conversion. Simply put, the message of the text of 4:20–24, i.e., putting off the old and putting on the new man, is, as M. G. Gutzke says, becoming “more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ”²⁶; nothing more and nothing less.

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²⁴ Schnackenburg, 200.

²⁵ Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 436.

²⁶ Manford George Gutzke, *Plain Talk on Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 126.



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