

2. Embracing a new way of life

- A radical change

Paul is giving a **general** appeal for godliness. He has asked us to break free from our past way of living. Now he puts the matter positively. He has spoken of our past wickedness. Now he says, *'But you did not learn Christ in that way'* ^{☞1}. Paul abruptly reminds them of what happened to them at their conversion. This is the way in which we help ourselves to live a godly life: we recall and remind ourselves what happened when we first came to faith in Jesus Christ. A Christian is a person who has experienced a radical change in his life. It may perhaps have been a slow procedure in his own consciousness. It may have taken place when he was very young. Not everyone remembers the precise moment of their coming to faith in Jesus. But however it happened, a radical change has taken place in every true Christian.

^{☞1} 4:20

- Learning Christ

When we come to our first salvation we do so because we 'learn Christ'. We come to a definite knowledge that Christ is the Son of God and the Saviour. We know something about Him, but we also know Him as a person. We 'learn Christ'.

- A different way

This 'learning Christ' produces a radical change in our lives. It turns us away from the darkened understanding, the alienation from God, the ignorance that was in us on account our hardness of heart. All of that changes. You did not learn Christ in that way, says Paul. What you learned was altogether different.

- Truth in a person - Jesus

What happened was that we heard the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ. *'I assume that you heard Him and you were taught in Him, as the truth is in Jesus'* ^{☞1}, says Paul. We discover the truth. It is truth that revolves around 'Jesus', the person of the Lord Jesus Christ who came into this world as a man and was known as 'Jesus'. We learned about Him and His salvation.

^{☞1} 4:21

- The word preached

We also heard Him. Paul has already said: *'And He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near'* ^{☞1}. In the preaching of the gospel Jesus Himself draws near to us. Jesus is with the preacher so that the preacher's words become Christ's words. Christ is preaching through the preachers of the church. So it is the 'word of Christ' that is coming to us in the preaching.

^{☞1} 2:17

- Fellowship with Him

We were 'taught in Him'. As we hear Jesus, we are united to Him. We are in fellowship with Him. He Himself is teaching us by the Holy Spirit.

- Paul's appeal to face up to what has happened

All of this is what happens when a person comes to his or her first faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul asks us to face ourselves, to realise what has happened to us. 'Don't you know who you are and what has happened to you?' says Paul. You learned the Lord Jesus Christ. He came and spoke to you. You learned about the blindness of your heart and the folly of sin, and the hatred of God against sin. Don't live in the way you used to. The Lord Jesus Christ has taught you something entirely different.

• **What you were taught...**

The precise way of translating the next few lines has often been disputed. There are four possibilities.

(i) Are they speaking of result? 'You learned Christ *'with the result that'* you put off the old self...'. This, I believe, is mistaken, because it gives the impression that we **automatically** throw off 'old self' behaviour.

(ii) Are they speaking of obligation? 'You learned Christ; *'you ought to'* put off the old self...'. This view imposes an obligation on us but does not so much emphasise the connection between what happened at our conversion and what should be happening now.

(iii) Are the clauses speaking of purpose? 'You learned Christ *'in order to'* put off the old self...'. This fits the trend of thought much better. Yet I think a fourth view makes even better sense.

(iv) These verses are surely telling us the content of what was learned or taught when we were first saved. I translate: '*What you were taught was: to put off the old self according to the former way of life which is corrupted and dominated by passions and deceits* ^{☐¹}. *You were taught to be renewed in the spirit of your minds* ^{☐²}, *and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness*' ^{☐³}.

☐¹ 4:22

☐² 4:23

☐³ 4:24

• **Whereas Romans 6 taught what God does to us**

It will help us to understand if we notice the difference between Romans 6:1–11 (on the one hand) and Ephesians 4:22–24 and Colossians 3:9, 10 (on the other hand). Romans 6 deals with **what God does to us**. He places us in Christ by the Spirit such that the 'old self' has died. The person that we once were is gone. Romans 6 is dealing with something that has happened, something God does, not something that ought to happen, not something we do.

• **By contrast Ephesians 4 teaches what we do for God**

But Ephesians 4:22–24 and Colossians 3:9–10 are different. They are dealing not with what God does to us **but what we do for God**. Romans 6 says that the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and as a result the old self dies; he is dead and buried with Christ. But Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 say to us: if the actual 'old self' has gone, then the behaviour of the 'old self' should go as well. It has happened in your history and your position; you are a new man. So make sure it happens in your behaviour.

• **The new self is the person we now are in the Lord Jesus Christ**

It is totally wrong to think that 'the old self' is the same as 'the flesh' (the remaining 'pull' of sin). The 'old self' and 'the new self' are not different parts of our **present** identity. The 'old self' is the person we used to be under the dominion of sin. The 'new self' is the person we are now in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are never told to mortify the 'old self'. You don't kill someone who is already buried!

• **Romans 6 and Ephesians 4 combined**

When Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4 deal with our putting off the 'old self', it is not referring to our position; God has already dealt with that. Rather it is dealing with our behaviour. God buries the 'old self' by bringing us into His kingdom of grace. After that we are able to throw off the 'old self' with regard to behaviour.

(i) We are a new person;

(ii) so we should live like a new person.

Romans 6 deals with the first half of this combination; Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 deal with the second half.

A Summary

• **Put off the old style of life**

• **Think in a new way**

• **Put on the new self – live the life of love**

So there are three things we learned and ought to remember that we were taught in principle even at the point where we first heard the voice of Jesus.

(i) We learned: to put off the old self. Paul is thinking of the behaviour that was characteristic of the old life. It was corrupted, polluted, far removed from what God wants men and women to be. It was dominated by passions and deceits. We were taught to get rid of the remnants of that style of life.

(ii) We were taught to be 'renewed in the spirit of your minds'. Our very mentality must change. We are to constantly allow God to reshape our thinking. The 'spirit' of the mind is the attitude with which we use our mind; it is the principle that governs our thinking. We think in a new way. We bring God and His kingdom into our thinking.

(iii) We put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness. We are already new people! But we put on the new self. It means we put into practice what God has done. God has re-created us; we have become new people. A hunger for righteousness is already in our lives. We work out what we believe and turn it into practical living. We live the life of love. We follow the kind of things Paul is about to say in Ephesians 4:25–5:7 – which really is all about 'putting on the new self'.



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