



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Teaching for Renewal

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Three decades ago, I read a speech by William Barr to the 1992 law school graduates at the Catholic University of America; it was presented during the presidency of George H. W. Bush under whom Barr served as Attorney General from 1991–1993. In his remarks, he referenced societal problems including drugs, crime, gangs, broken families, disconnected youth, battered spouses, and abused children. He told the graduates that government and laws could not solve those problems because they were symptoms of a deeper problem, which he identified as “the disintegration of the moral consensus which should undergird the law.” He then said this: “Moral consensus has given way to moral relativism—a *doctrine* which makes each individual the sole judge of his own action and which is designed to give full leeway to the pursuit of individual appetites” (Barr 1992, 730–731; emphasis added).

Notice his use of the word, “doctrine,” defined as follows: “(1) a particular principle, position, or policy taught or advocated, as of a religion or government; (2) something that is taught, teachings collectively; (3) a body or system of teachings relating to a particular subject” (*Dictionary* 2025). Barr’s use of the word serves as a reminder that, while we often focus on outcomes and symptoms rather than causes, behaviors are always rooted in ideas, whether or not we formally state or are even fully cognizant of them. The earliest believers understood that, stressed it multiple times, and assumed it by putting so much emphasis on *teaching*—first the teaching of Jesus and then the teaching of the church. No text better illustrates this than Ephesians 4.17–24.

Before examining the passage, we should review the cultural circumstances of the people to whom it was written. Ephesus, the principal city in western Asia Minor, was ethnically diverse, materialistic, and pluralistic in its worldviews. The cult of Artemis was centered there, along with as many as fifty other deity allegiances, including Zeus, Aphrodite, and Dionysius. Magic and the occult arts, the emperor cult, and various household rites also had a presence. Both Judaism and the new Christian faith were minority entities, actively resisted by many (cf. Arnold 2002, 301–305; McRay 1991, 250–261; I previously presented a more detailed summary in [vol. 2, 4](#)). As relates to the application of Paul’s teaching in Ephesians, two points are worth noting. First, while not identical, our cultural circumstances are similar to those of the Ephesian believers. Second, the tone of Paul’s instruction assumes that he thought they could live holy lives and make a positive difference, even in Ephesus (cf. Eph 4.25–6.9).

Before Paul turns to specific moral issues, he reviews the nature of the Christians’ new life. They were to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do, *in the futility of their minds*” (v. 17). “Futility”

(ματαιότης, *mataiotēs*) is a “state of being without use or value, *emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness* (Bauer 2000, 621). The word is used thirty-seven times in the LXX version of Ecclesiastes to translate the Hebrew word for “vanity” (הֶבֶל, *hebel*) (Eccl 1.2, 14; etc.).

What Paul means by the “futility of their minds” is explained by the participles in verses 18–19. Using the perfect tense, he says the “Gentiles” had been and were “darkened in their understanding” and “alienated from the life of God.” This was “due to their hardness of heart” “that is [present tense] in them.” Returning to the perfect tense, he says they had been and were “calloused,” having “give[n] themselves over to [aorist] indecency.” That was leading them to (εἰς, *eis*) be “greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”

The Christians were different because their thinking was different, the point Paul makes in verses 21–24. They had “put off” their “old man” (παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον, *palaiōn anthrōpon*) that had characterized their “former manner of life” (v. 22), replacing it with a “new man” (καινὸν ἄνθρωπον, *kainon anthrōpon*), “created after [κατά, *kata*] the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

The change happened because of teaching: teaching of the truth that is ultimately found in Jesus (v. 21); teaching that leads to being “renewed in the spirit of your minds” (v. 23); teaching that in turn leads to replacing corrupt desires with good desires (v. 22). Or, to sum it up as Paul does in verse 20 ahead of the elaboration in verses 21–24, they were different people because they had “learned Christ” (μανθάνω, *manthanō*, the verb from which the noun “disciple” [μαθητής, *mathētēs*] is formed; v. 20; cf. Matt 11.29) (Müller 1975, 483).

As we reflect on verses 17–24, we should consider the significance of the fact that Paul writes that paragraph before turning to the practical ethics about which he teaches in 4.25–6.9. That he intends the latter to flow from the former is evident in his use of the word “therefore” (διό, *dio*) to begin 4.25. His teaching on matters ranging from honesty and anger to family relations and slave-master interactions is the “now what” that follows the premise elaborated in 4.17–24.

Doctrine matters, and behaviors will not change and transformation continue until ideas do.

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