

NO LONGER LIVING AS THE GENTILES:
DIFFERENTIATION AND SHARED ETHICAL VALUES IN
EPHESIANS 4:17–6:9¹

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The starting point of this work is an observed tension in recent scholarly discussion of the ethical content of Ephesians 4:17–6:9. On the one hand, Ephesians 4:17–5:21 has been interpreted as drawing a social or ethical contrast between the addressees and the outside world, and even as encouraging or legitimating social withdrawal or separation from outsiders. On the other hand, the household code in Ephesians 5:21–6:9 has been read as encouraging integration into the wider society in an attempt to curb accusations of social disruptiveness. These social goals seem to be at odds, but rarely are these reflected on or addressed in scholarship—hence this investigative task.

In the course of this work, I utilise traditional exegetical methods, comparative analysis and social identity theory to show that Ephesians 4:17–6:9 has a consistent social and moral strategy: to promote ingroup distinctiveness while utilising Graeco-Roman ethical traditions to foster internal cohesion.

The first chapter reviews Ephesians 4:17–6:9 in recent interpretation, focusing particularly on views of the author's moral and social aims. I show that the contrastive patterns in 4:17–5:21 have tended to be understood as encouraging or supporting some sort of social or moral separation. Some argue that the textual unit calls for physical separation (an introversionist stance), others that it sets out a pattern of morality that is radically different from what is known and prevalent in the wider society. Such conclusions are reached on the basis of the old-new, darkness-light and fool-wise antitheses in 4:17–5:21. Conversely, my review of 5:21–6:9 demonstrates a widely held opinion that the passage adopts the Graeco-Roman topos of household

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management, which reflects and reinforces the patriarchal structures of the time. It seems to be assumed that the community somehow lacked these patriarchal structures, leaving it susceptible to public accusations of disrupting the social order. The Ephesians' *Haustafel* is thus understood to have an apologetic function, and to be aimed at integrating the believing community into the larger society.

In chapter two, I analyse the rhetoric of differentiation (old-new, darkness-light, fool-wise antitheses) in 4:17–5:21. My analysis shows that the author does not call for withdrawal from the outside world. Nor does he make a realistic social comparison between ingroup and outgroup. Rather, he employs a rhetorical strategy designed to promote positive group identity and moral standards that are compatible with their new status in Christ. The negative depiction of outsiders in 4:17–21 is part of that strategy. More so, the moral values being extolled in 4:17–5:21 are not at odds with what one finds in Graeco-Roman moral literature, but overlap to a significant degree with Graeco-Roman moral ideals. The author wants his readers to have a better grasp of their privileged status in Christ vis-à-vis outsiders and to abstain from behavioural patterns that are incompatible with their new identity, but in many respects he echoes the moral teaching of the time.

Chapter three focuses on the virtues and vices of 4:25–5:5. The list of virtue and vices, I argue, should be interpreted within the context of 4:17–5:21. The author uses this form of ethical instruction to meet a group-specific aim, not to make a realistic social comparison between ingroup and outgroup. The form itself was conventional; ethical lists like this were commonplace. In terms of substance, there is little that is 'counter-cultural' in the virtues he commends and the vices he denounced. The virtue-vice antithesis was part of a standard moral discourse, which served to promote moral excellence (not to separate insiders and outsiders). In Ephesians, this conventional moral code is used in a theological framework that limits the scope to the readership, namely the church. The virtue-vice duality is therefore designed to impart ingroup solidarity and not to establish the terms of social engagement with or disengagement from outsiders. The author draws upon a conventional morality but places it within a Christological and ecclesiological framework and uses it to define the moral identity of his readers.

In chapter four, I argue against the popular view that the structure of the household code in Ephesians was adopted from the Graeco-Roman

topos of household management to integrate the church into society. I observe that the *Haustafel* is not a separate unit with different social function from the previous admonitions in 4:17–5:21. It is apparent that it is rather grammatically and conceptually linked to the previous exhortation in 4:17–5:21. Moreover, there is a consistent pattern of differentiation running through 4:17–6:9 in so far as the household code is a continuation of the wisdom-folly contrast, alongside a consistent use of shared ethical values in the paraenesis. In other words, the *Haustafel* (5:21–6:9) does not adopt hierarchical or patriarchal structure for apologetic purposes but espouses mutuality in the household of believers who are supposed to live and function within a society that deems patriarchal structures as the norm. Ephesians does not alter these ideals but reinforces the necessity for moral integrity in the household, some of which would have served as a meeting place for the house churches. There is no hint of social engagement of any form with outsiders in this household code. The author rather promotes mutuality in the household in a manner that corresponds to fictive kinship language in the letter. The Christ-church analogy and the Christocentric nature of the *Haustafel* further underpin the author's intra-church focus. Moreover, I provide theological and social-scientific explanation, in chapter five, to show how these conclusions clarify coherence and consistency in the overall ethical framework of the author.

The thesis makes a marked contribution by resolving the tension in prevailing scholarship and showing that the contrastive patterns (old-new, darkness-light, fool-wise and virtue-vice antitheses) in the paraenesis are not akin to realistic historical reconstruction or social comparison of how the early church distanced itself from outsiders while seeking to integrate into society simultaneously. It is not a call for social separation or realistic comparison of behaviour patterns between believers and unbelievers. It is not a contrast between a perfect church and an imperfect world or else the moral imperatives for believers will have no relevance. Conversely, these are part of the strategy to promote positive group identity, internal cohesion and clarify the moral boundaries of the ingroup. In other words, the readers are set apart by virtue of their new identity in Christ and all that it entails theologically, morally and socially in terms of a new community, but they are not being urged to withdraw from the rest of society, as previously held.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to New Testament scholarship lies in the findings from the study on the social function of the household code in Ephesians. Here, major flaws in over two decades of interpretation of Ephesians 5:21–6:9, arguing that it has apologetic function to integrate the church into the wider society, are brought to light. I demonstrate that 5:21–6:9 is grammatically linked to the previous admonitions and cannot be separated to meet a different social aim. It becomes evident in the analysis that the *Haustafel* seeks to promote mutuality in the household of believers as an extension of the wise-fool antithesis with no overt indication of apologetic aims. I found no hint of ingroup–outgroup social engagement as subject matter in any form in the pericope. The author does not indicate a departure from a previous household structure to adopt the patriarchal one as an integrative mechanism; neither did I find evidence of an isolated church being urged to negotiate its way into society. Thus, I reach the conclusion that the *Haustafel* in Ephesians does not have apologetic function.

Moreover, this is the most extensive discussion on ethics in Ephesians in English in modern scholarship. The comparison of virtues and vices in Ephesians to that of Graeco-Roman moralists particularly distinguishes it from other works accessible to us on ethics in Ephesians. More so, the methodology that focuses mainly on the Greek text of Ephesians clearly shows the dangers and unhelpful presuppositions that are imported into the text by those who read it with Colossians as though one is the appendix of the other.

Finally, this study shows that Ephesians urges its readership to be set apart in ideological terms from outsiders and exhibit the moral image of God in holiness and righteousness. However, the substance of ethical aspirations for them consists of shared ethical values, not a counter-cultural ethic. They are admonished to live up to the highest moral standards, which are akin to the behaviour that befits their ‘calling’ (4:1-3). The author calls for ideological differentiation consistently in the paraenesis while also utilising these shared ethical values consistently and creatively to promote *modus vivendi* that befits their current standing in Christ. Thus, the readers are encouraged neither to separate from society nor to integrate further into it, but to live and function within it.