

# Nonconformist Transformation: An Exegetical Study of Ephesians 5:7–14<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Ephesians 5:7–14 is an enigmatic pericope fraught with interpretive challenges that have generated much scholarly debate. The appeal in verse 11, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but rather expose them,” is contested in terms of what is to be exposed, and how it is to be exposed. The text is usually interpreted in one of two ways. Some scholars interpret the text as Paul instructing Christians to expose sinful behavior of other Christians. Others hold that the behavior of non-Christians are to be exposed. While the interpretation requires some nuance, this study argues in favor of the second interpretation. The significance of the article is to demonstrate the missional value of non-verbal gospel communication—Paul urges Christians to live missional lives, though not through proclamation, but rather through a nonconformist lifestyle

that rejects secular norms. The research demonstrates this by employing an exegetical, literary study of verses 7–14. This methodology includes 1) a lexical study of ἐλέγχω (expose), 2) a discourse analysis of verses 3–14, 3) an investigation of the concepts, *sons of disobedience* (v. 6), and *children of the light* (v. 7), and also the imagery of *light and darkness* (v. 8), and (4) an exposition of the pericope (vv. 11–14).

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## Conspectus

### Keywords

Ephesians 5:7–14, sons of disobedience, children of the light, light and darkness, light of Christ

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

## 1. Introduction

The appeal in Ephesians 5:11, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but rather expose them”<sup>2</sup> is fraught with interpretive challenges and the object of much scholarly debate. Part of what sparked this debate is that the term ἐλέγχω (expose) has a wide semantic range. Engberg-Pedersen (1989, 89), citing Gnllka, remarks that Ephesians 5:12–14 are among the most enigmatic verses in the letter and that commentators disagree strongly about the interpretation of the three verses. The pronoun *they* (v. 12) points back to the sons of disobedience in verse 6. There are two questions. First, who were the sons of disobedience? Second, how was Paul’s audience to expose those who committed deeds of darkness (v. 11a) without mentioning specifics that were too shameful to mention (v. 12)? The allusion to the children of the light (v. 7) as well as the imagery of light and darkness (v. 8) are of interpretive interest.

Some scholars (Hoehner 2002, Merkle 2016, Barth 2014, Osborne 2017) interpret the text to mean that Paul instructs Christians to expose other Christians’ sinful behaviors, thus bringing them to repentance. Others (Thielman 2010, Cohick 2013, Talbert 2007, Engberg-Pedersen 1989) favor the interpretation that the sinful behavior of non-Christians is to be exposed. This study will demonstrate that although the interpretation is nuanced, the passage calls for the sinful behavior of non-Christians to be exposed. It will further argue that Paul stresses that Christians’ godly character—their *light*—exposes the *darkness* (i.e., evil deeds), thereby drawing people to the light of Christ and new life.

This article’s position demonstrates that the interpretation that calls Christians to reprimand unbelievers will violate the discourse flow (Eph

5:7–14) and Pauline theology (1 Cor 5:12–13). The development of the argument advances the significance of the study. Paul urges Christians to represent their new identity in Christ through a nonconformist lifestyle that rejects secular norms. The significance of this article is that it demonstrates the missional importance of non-verbal gospel communication, which is often underestimated and neglected.

Considering what sparked the debate, at least in part, is the meaning of ἐλέγχω the first step in the literary analysis is, therefore, an in-depth lexical study of this Greek verb. The lexical study reveals that the word contains a wide semantic range. Therefore, a careful study of Ephesians 5:7–14 will help us determine the meaning of ἐλέγχω in its literary context. Next, the study performs a discourse analysis to trace the inner coherence of Paul’s flow of thought (vv. 3–14). Embedded in this section is a discussion of the concepts *sons of disobedience* (v. 2), *children of the light* (v. 7), and the imagery of *light* and *darkness* (v. 8). These expressions, in their theological and situational context, provide a critical guide to the literal meaning of the passage. This analysis reveals that Paul’s rhetorical style presents an antithesis between the sons of disobedience and the children of the light and that the allusion to the sons of disobedience and the imagery of darkness refer to those outside the Christian community. The last step in the exegetical analysis is to conduct a verse-by-verse exposition of the immediate context of this enigmatic passage (vv. 11–14) to ascertain Paul’s communicative intent. After verse 11 the nature and the reason for exposing the sons of disobedience is disclosed. The full force of the exposure only becomes apparent by the concluding quotation in verse 14, emphasizing the agency of Christ’s light in the redemptive process.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated Scripture quotations emanate from the NET Bible.

## 2. Lexical Study of ἐλέγχω

The present imperative ἐλέγχετε (Eph 5:11b) is derived from ἐλέγχω. It simply means to expose, rebuke or convict, referring to rebuking or correcting an error or exposing something (Robertson 2014, s.v. ἐλέγχω).

The term ἐλέγχω can mean to uncover something, such as the source of the Jordan River (Josephus, *J. W.* 3.512). It was most commonly used to refer to the exposure of something evil (Josephus, *Life* 339), deceptive (Aristotle, *Eccl.* 485), ugly (Philo, *Names* 198), or illegal (Josephus, *Ant.* 4.219.281), that the offender wanted to keep hidden, but which through a mistake (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.4, 253, 303), or evidence provided by another (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.4), was revealed (Thielman 2010, 343).

In the LXX the term appears sixty-five times, of which forty-nine occurrences are in the canonical books. It translates five Hebrew words. Forty-one times it is used for נָדָן, meaning “to decide, adjudge, prove.” It is used with such meanings as to decide, or judge (Gen 31:37), to convict (Gen 31:42; Job 32:12; Psalm 50:21 [LXX 49:8]), to rebuke (Ps 50:8 [LXX 49:8]), and to expose, or reprove (Job 22:4; Ps 105:14 [LXX 104:14]; Hosea 4:4; Habakkuk 1:12; Hoehner 2002, 678).

The term ἐλέγχω can also take on a positive context by emphasizing the error that requires correction. The LXX uses the word this way to refer to God’s fatherly discipline (2 Sam 7:14; Prov 3:11–12; Wis 12:2; Sir 18:13; Philo, *Prelim. Studies* 177; Thielman 2010, 343).

Four meanings are stressed: 1) to scrutinize or examine carefully; bring to light, expose, set forth, 2) to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing; convict, convince, 3) to express strong disapproval of someone’s action; reprove and correct, 4) to penalize for wrongdoing; punish or discipline (Danker 2000, 315).

In the SBL Greek New Testament (Holmes 2013) ἐλέγχω is used eighteen times with four basic meanings: 1) expose (John 3:20; Eph 5:11,

13), 2) reprove, (Luke 3:19; 1 Tim 5:20; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15; Rev 3:19), 3) convict (John 8:9, 46; 16:8; 1 Cor 14:24; Jas 2:9; Jude 15), and 4) correct (Matt 18:15; Heb 12:5). It is used in confronting either, 1) the Christian community (Matt 18:15; 1 Tim 5:20; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15; Jas 2:9), or 2) those outside it (John 3:20; 1 Cor 14:24; Luke 3:19). It is used in an eschatological context (John 16:8; Jude 15), and in a single case it does not fit well into any of the above-mentioned categories (John 8:46).

The use of ἐλέγχω in the NT is limited, making it challenging to settle its meaning.

In the NT the use is restricted. With the accusative of person it means ‘to show people their sins and summon them to repentance,’ either privately (Mt. 18:15) or congregationally (1 Tim. 5:20). The Holy Spirit does this (Jn. 16:8), as Christ also does both now (Rev. 3:19) and at the parousia (Jude 15). (Buschel 1985, 222)

The term is used in the following four senses: 1) to be sternly admonished, 2) to sternly admonish, 3) to be convicted, 4) to convict. Concerning sinful persons or acts, passive forms (e.g., ἐλέγχεται) describe the experience of the sinner when faced with the demand for repentance (Luke 3:19; 1 Cor 14:24), by their conscience (John 8:9) or by the self-revelation of light (John 3:20; Eph 5:13). In connection with the Ephesians passage (5:11b), the darkness-light theme suggests exposure, with an implied censure (Danker 2000, 315), and if darkness serves as a cloak for the deception, then light can expose it (John 3:30; Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.2.6; Thielman 2010, 343).

Engberg-Pedersen (1989, 97), in his comprehensive study, compares BDAG’s list of meanings with the one given in LSJ—1) cross-examine,

question, 2) test, bring to the proof, 3) prove, 4) refute, confute, 5) get the better of, 6) expose, 7) decide a dispute (Liddell et al. 1940, 532)—which is based on a vastly greater amount of material and points out that the two lists are quite different. He criticizes BDAG’s first meaning (bring to light) because it lacks classical and LXX support, as well as the juridical and disciplinary overtones of “convict,” “punish,” and “discipline,” which is not found in LSJ. Engberg-Pedersen (1989, 97) concludes that the binding together of the various meanings is “confronting somebody or something with the aim of showing him or it to be, in some determinate respect, at fault.”

Barth (1960, 570–571) discusses three different ways of exerting censure that may be expressed: 1) by a word spoken in privacy, 2) by public scolding, or 3) by conduct. Accordingly, the confrontation may be verbal or non-verbal (1 Pet 2:12; Matt 5:16)—the reprobation may concern a set of beliefs or a way of life (Engberg-Pedersen 1989, 97).

### 3. Discourse Analysis

The letter combines Christian doctrine and duty—Christian belief and practice. Ephesians 4:17–6:6 is one of the most extensive practical exhortations in the Bible on the correct behavior of Christians in the world. The pericope in inquiry belongs to the paraenetic section of the letter that began in Ephesians 4:1–3, which serves as the link between the doctrinal section delineating the Christian’s position in Christ (chs. 1–3) and the paraenetic section. It is also as a summative introduction to the instructions to follow because the phrase “[I] urge you to live worthily of the calling

with which you have been called” (4:1) is an excellent summary of Paul’s exhortations to follow.<sup>3</sup>

The major divisions in Ephesians 4–6 revolve around the verb περιπατέω (to walk, meaning to live) combined with the conjunction οὖν (therefore), which appears in 4:1, 17; 5:1–2, 7–8 and 15. Paul’s structural flow of thought is based on the Christian’s position in Christ (chs. 1–3). Believers are called to walk in unity (4:1–16) and holiness (4:17–32). Chapter 5:1–14<sup>4</sup> is an extension of 4:17–32 and continues to draw out the ethical consequences of belonging to the Christian community.

In Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul contrasts the audience’s former way of life in conformance with their natural identity as gentiles with their new identity as Christians recreated in the likeness of Christ. He states it both negatively (no longer live as the gentiles live) and positively (live as new

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware that due to the non-personal tone, distinctive literary features, and the letter’s advanced theological themes, many scholars have recently argued against the long-held view of Pauline authorship. I am also aware of the textual issues surrounding 1:1 that led to the circular theory. Although the arguments and evidence on both sides of the debate have persuasive elements, on balance, the arguments in favor of reading “in Ephesus” seem to outweigh those against it (Thielman 2010, 15).

<sup>4</sup> Keener (2014, 549), Lincoln (1990, 292) and Thielman (2010, 30) begin the section in 5:3, whereas Cohick (2010, 114) and Hoehner (2002, 667) begin it in verse 1. It is not difficult to see why commentators would include 5:1–2 with the previous section. After all, the last verse in chapter 4 encourages the audience to be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave them, followed in 5:1–2 by the resumptive phrase, “Therefore, be imitators of God as dearly loved children and live in love, just as Christ also loved us.”

creations in Christ), according to the truth that is in Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Paul presents this transformation using a three-step process: 1) “lay aside the old man” (v. 22), 2) “be renewed” (v. 23), and 3) “put on the new man” (v. 24).

In Ephesians 5:1–2, Paul continues the theme of living in the likeness of Christ. The immediate context refers to living a life characterized by sacrificial love (4:32–5:2).

In Ephesians 5:3–6, the ethical landscape is dominated by contrasting shameful and proper behavior. In verses 3 and 4, Paul shifts sharply from talking about the self-giving love of Christ to self-indulgence, warning against various sins. He uses two vice lists containing three sins each that the audience must avoid. He also provides two motivations for shunning such behavior: it is not fitting (v. 3b) and out of character for Christians (v. 4). Verse 5b warns that those characterized by such behavior do not have an “inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” In verse 6a, Paul concludes this section by cautioning not to believe deceptive teachings because those that accept these false teachings will suffer the consequences. The

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<sup>5</sup> This is not necessarily an insult on culture, but a literary device used by most Greek writers; it was common for Greek writers to develop moral exhortations by contrasting opposites (Keener 2014, 549). The notion that the people of God are to walk differently from the surrounding nations was central to Judaism (Lincoln 1990, 274).

The subject is the gentile way of life in comparison to the Jewish lifestyle and now Christian ethics. “The word ‘Gentiles’ (Gk. *ethnē*, ‘the nations’) represents a Jewish way of grouping all non-Jews together ethnically as ‘not us.’ But the chief characteristic of the nations, apart from ethnicity, was religious: polytheism. From a Jewish perspective, this was idolatry, which in turn led inevitably, so Jews generally thought, to immorality and injustice. Thus, the term ‘pagan,’ meaning ‘polytheist,’ but also connoting ‘immoral polytheist,’ is an important reminder of what the word ‘Gentiles’ would have meant to Paul. Nonetheless, for the pagans themselves, polytheism was not a problem; it was acknowledging the way things really are” (Gorman 2017, 36).

expression “because of these things God’s wrath comes on the sons of disobedience” (v. 6b) powerfully highlights the result of such behavior.<sup>6</sup>

In Ephesians 5:7–14, the ethical landscape is presented by a more general appeal dominated by contrasting darkness and light. The light metaphor is first used passively, defining its presence in the Christian community (vv. 8–11a), then actively, for exposing, illuminating, and transforming (vv. 11b–14). In verse 7, the inferential conjunction *οὖν* (therefore) forms the bridge to the new section and introduces a prohibition based on the warning in verse 6.<sup>7</sup> Given God’s impending wrath, Paul urges Christians to abstain from evil practices by the prohibitive imperative “Therefore do not be partakers with them.” This is a reference to the sons of disobedience. Consequently, by a contrasting schema, Paul emphasizes why his audience should not participate; such participation would be inconsistent with their new identity in Christ (v. 8a). In verse 8b, using conversion and ethical instruction language, Paul contrasts the radical difference between the old life in *darkness*, dominated by evil deeds, with the new life dominated by the light of the world, Christ Jesus. As a result,

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<sup>6</sup> Caution needs to be exercised in the application of this severe statement. For those who fall into the sins in view through weakness, but afterward repent in shame and humility, there is forgiveness. The immoral person envisaged here is one who knows God’s law and willfully disobeys it with impunity, giving themselves up without shame or penitence to this way of life (Stott 1979, 201).

<sup>7</sup> Most scholars divide this section into two parts. Hoehner (2002, 667) and Lincoln (1990, 317) believe the first part ends in v. 6, whereas Barth (1960, 585) and Thielman (2010, 327) hold that it ends at v. 7. Because the *ταῦτα* (these things) in verse 6 refers back to the sins mentioned in the previous verses it is better to include v. 6 with the first section. And because *γάρ* (for) in v. 8 provides the rationale for the previous verse, it is better to include v. 7 with what follows. Therefore, it is best to divide the section between v. 6 and v. 7 (Merkle 2016).

in verse 8b Paul commands his audience to “Walk as children of the light,” a designation which contrasts the sons of disobedience (v. 6). The phrase “for you were at one time darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light” (v. 8) shifts the emphasis from the indicative (you are light) to the imperative (walk as children of light), stipulating that the Christian lifestyle must conform to the reality of being a new person in Christ. In verse 9, Paul illustrates the characteristics of conduct that provide evidence of walking in the light by a triad of behaviors—goodness (active benevolence), righteousness (right standing with God and morally correct behavior), and truth (integrity and sincerity). Verse 10 provides another element of what it means to walk in the light, namely, Christians should be discerning what is pleasing to the Lord. In verse 11 Paul commands Christians “not [to] participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.”

Merkle (2016) and Hoehner’s (2002, 679–680) arguments for the interpretation that the sinful behavior of Christians is to be exposed can be summarized as follows:

- The overall focus of this passage consists of ethical injunctions to believers (Merkle 2016).
- Paul encourages Christians (not non-Christians) not to participate in the works of darkness but instead to do the works of the light (Hoehner 2002, 679).
- Merkle (2016), citing Hoehner (2002, 679–680), point out that this passage focuses on instructing Christians to grow in maturity.
- In all his writings, Paul only exposes, rebukes, and disciplines those in the church, not outsiders—God alone judges them (Hoehner 2002, 680).

- The verb ἐλέγχω (expose) is used by Paul to rebuke errant members of the community (1 Tim 5:20; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13; see also Matt 18:15; Gal 6:1; Rev 3:19; Did. 15:3; Merkle 2016; Hoehner 2002, 680).
- The verb ἐλέγχω (expose) includes both exposure and reproof and thus the verbal component of the admonishment must be included (Hoehner 2002, 680).

As mentioned at the outset, I contend that it is rather the sinful behavior of unbelievers that is to be exposed. The research will concisely address Merkle (2016) and Hoehner’s (2002) positional contentions to support this interpretation in sections four and five.

#### **4. The Sons of Disobedience (2:2, 5:6), Children of the Light (5:7), and the Imagery of Light and Darkness (5:8)**

Paul’s contrastive argumentation style has permeated the paraenetic section since Ephesians 4:17–32. In 4:22–24, the contrast was between the *old* man and the *new* man.<sup>8</sup> In 5:3–14, an equivalent contrast is now presented by the imagery of darkness and light. The objective of the contrast, which is central to Paul’s argument, is to draw an antithesis between the sons of disobedience (v. 6) and the children of the light (v. 8). The phrase “for you were at one time darkness, but now you are light in the

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<sup>8</sup> The term *new man* is a metaphor for the new life in Christ. Peter called it “partaking of the divine nature” in 2 Pet 1:4. This is in contrast to the old fallen Adamic nature (Utley 2008, 4:22). The expression “to put on the new man” is reminiscent of taking off old clothing and putting on new clothing and is a typical religious Greek philosophical metaphor for personal transformation (Keener 1993, 549). Accordingly, Paul portrays the removing and adopting of certain kinds of behaviors with unclothing (put off) and clothing (put on) imagery.

Lord. Walk as children of the light” (v. 8) sets up the contrast between their pre-conversion and post-conversion existence, which was common in early Christian literature (Rom 11:30; 1 Pet 2:10; Gal 1:23) and is characteristic of Ephesians (2:2–6, 11–13; Thielman 2010, 398; see also Lincoln 1990, 326–327).

Keener (2014, 551) provides further context to the contrast by stating that Jewish texts, most prominently the Qumranic manuscripts, often used light and darkness to contrast good and evil.<sup>9</sup> The term light is used metaphorically five times in the passage (5:8a, 8b, 9, 13, 14), referring to the character and revelation of God, the antithesis of the realm of darkness (Hoehner 2002, 671). The imagery of *darkness* is loaded with theological connotations, indicating where the God of light is not. It is used metaphorically to communicate a state of moral or spiritual darkness (4:17–18). Paul does not state that his audience was once in the darkness and is now in the light, but instead that they were darkness and now *are* light (Hoehner 2002, 669). Consequently, Paul is not saying that once they lived in darkness and now live in the light. He is speaking ontologically—about their very being. They were darkness, and now they are light because of their union with Christ (Osborn 2017).

The expression *sons of disobedience* is a Semitic idiom that means people characterized by disobedience. In the immediate context, it is evidenced by a lifestyle of immorality, covetousness, and shameful language

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<sup>9</sup> Light and darkness are presented as being opposite to each other, both in Scripture (Isa 5:20; 9:2; 50:10; Amos 5:18; Mic 7:8; Matt 6:23; John 3:19; 8:12) and in the Qumran literature (1QS 3:18–20, 24–25; 1QM 1:1, 11–16; 3:6, 9; 13:16) (Merkle 2016; see also Hoehner 2002, 670–671). More than any other community, “Qumran stressed that the opposite extremes of ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ characterize the unregenerate and regenerate” (López 2012, 212).

(Eph 5:3–6).<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the children of the light are characterized by “the fruit of the light” (v. 9). In the immediate context, it is evidenced by a lifestyle imitating God (v. 1), characterized by goodness, righteousness, and truth, a life pleasing to the Lord (vv. 9–10).<sup>11</sup>

Biblically the designation *sons* is loaded with theological distinction. Humanity belongs to one of two families: either God is the Father (1 John 3:1, 10), or the Devil is the father (1 John 3:10; John 8:44). Alternatively, they are either in Adam or in Christ (1 Cor 15:22; Rom 5:15–19). Accordingly, they are either children of light (Eph 5:1; 5:8) and God’s possession (1:14) or sons of disobedience (2:2; 5:6) and children of wrath (2:3). The terms *sons of disobedience* and *children of wrath* were used by Paul in 2:2, referring to their pre-Christian life. It also contains a subtle allusion to 2:4–3:10, indicating that some of those sons of disobedience have become “members of God’s household” (2:19). The implication is that a person is either one or the other. The context of the present section (Eph 5:1–14) further supports this dichotomy because verse 8 is introduced by the conjunction *γάρ* (for) explaining that the audience was previously darkness but is now light.

Consequently, Paul reiterates that his audience is not to “participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness” (Eph 5:11a). The term *συμμέτοχοι*

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<sup>10</sup> The passage is a ban on sexual immorality and speech laced with inappropriate sexual content. The excluded practices are sexual immorality, impurity, and lust. Even to discuss such things is to behave like non-Christians. The text emphasizes that the past is past, that to live like pagans is to live anachronistically, to live outside Christ. The inappropriateness of this kind of life is highlighted by the apocalyptic language of darkness and light (5:8–14; Gorman 2017, 601).

<sup>11</sup> The notion of imitating God was common in Hellenistic ethics including Hellenistic Jewish ethics. This tradition may have exercised some influence on Paul at this point. However, the primary sources of the idea are probably Paul’s own concept of the church created in God’s image and the frequent OT notion that Israel should pattern its behavior after God’s character (Thielman 2010, 320, 323; Hoehner 2002, 644).

(partakers; v. 7), used for not partaking with the sons of disobedience, indicates the fullest possible participation in something. “Its only other use in the New Testament is in Ephesians 3:6, where it describes the full participation of Gentile Christians with Jewish Christians as the people of God” (Thielman 2010, 335). Paul’s injunction to expose the deeds of darkness in verse 11b relates to activities that originate in and are cloaked by darkness and therefore are characteristic of the pagan gentiles referred to in 4:17–19, who are “darkened in their understanding” (Thielman 2010, 344). In 4:17–19, Paul paints an evocative portrait of the pagan gentiles in the futility of their minds, darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency to practice every kind of impurity with greediness (4:17–20). Therefore, sons of disobedience (v. 6) refers to gentile pagans who are characteristically and habitually sinful and thus fit the definition of sons of disobedience and children of wrath (2:3), who have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God (v. 5).<sup>12</sup>

The objective of this short discourse analysis is to argue for two points: 1) Paul’s contrastive argumentation style and the discourse flow present an antithesis between the sons of disobedience and the children of the light and emphasize that they are two distinct groups of people, each with specific characteristics and ethics. The ethical dualism presented in Ephesians demands that the church recognizes that it is essentially different from the surrounding society. Also, under the power of the Holy Spirit, it often must live by values opposite to those of society because light

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase *kingdom of God* appears in sixty-five verses in the NT and kingdom is associated with Christ at least ten times, but only in Ephesians 5:5 are the two persons of the Godhead mentioned together in relation to the kingdom (Hoehner 2002, 661).

is opposite and incompatible with darkness (Culpepper 1979, 533). 2) The text presents ethical teaching to explain that walking in the light (v. 8b) is one of the specific ways the audience is called to imitate God (v. 1). This walk is evidenced by the fruit of the light (v. 9a). Paul provides three facets of walking in the light. First, discern what is pleasing to the Lord (v. 10). Second, have nothing to do with the unfruitful deeds of darkness (v. 11a). Third, expose them (v. 11b). By naming the deeds to be exposed (unfruitful deeds of darkness; v. 11), Paul sets these deeds in direct contrast to the fruit of the light (v. 9).

At this junction, it would be understandable if this nonconformity seemed to require separatism (Eph 5:7, 11). However, it will become clear later that what Paul has in mind is something quite different (vv. 13–14).

## 5. Contextual Exposition of Ephesians 5:11b–14

The phrase “but rather expose them” (v. 11b) is probably best rendered as “but rather even expose them” (LEB) because, according to Hoehner (2002, 678), the conjunction *καὶ* functions ascensively (i.e., even). The contrast is provided by the adversative conjunction *δὲ* (but) and the comparative *μᾶλλον* (rather). In context, then, it was not enough to “not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness” (v. 11a); steps must be taken to expose them. English translations generally supply *them* for comprehensibility, though a direct object is absent from the Greek text. Although the objects to be exposed are undefined, it seems best that it refers to the deeds of darkness (v. 11a), rather than to the persons themselves (v. 12) because of the reference to “all things being exposed” in verse 13 (Merkle 2016).

The conjunction *γάρ* (for) in verse 12 provides the reason the fruitless deeds of darkness must be avoided and explains why they should even be exposed. The personal pronoun *they* refers to the sons of disobedience (v. 6; Thielman 2010, 245). This verse can be translated either as “for the

things they do in secret are shameful even to mention” (NET) or “for it is shameful even to speak about the things being done by them in secret” (LEB). It could be taken concessively (rebuke even though it is shameful to speak about) or parenthetically (for it is shameful even to speak about the things being done by them in secret). On the whole, it is probably best to understand it in the latter way (Best 2003, 258). Again, *καί* functions ascensively (are shameful even to mention). Does Paul mean that such sin cannot be verbally addressed? Some commentators think so (e.g., Lincoln 1990, 330). Thielman (2010, 344) believes that Paul is exaggerating for the sake of emphasizing the seriousness of the sins in view.<sup>13</sup>

The conjunction *δέ* in verse 13 is adversative, expressing the antithesis of secrecy in verse 12. *All things* refers to the things done in secret. There are two issues in this verse. First, it is challenging to decide whether the prepositional phrase *ὑπὸ τοῦ φωτός* (by the light) depends on the preceding participle *ἐλεγχόμενα* (exposed) or on the following finite verb *φανερῶνται* (is made visible). Second, determining whether the finite verb is middle or passive also presents a challenge. Thielman (2010, 346) remarks that “A number of commentators [e.g., Lincoln (1990, 331)] attach the prepositional phrase ‘ὑπὸ τοῦ φωτός’ (*hypo tou photos*, by the light) to ‘φανερῶνται’ (*phaneroutai*, becomes visible), which would then yield a slightly more intelligible statement that everything exposed is made visible by the light.” Hoehner (2002, 683–684) believes that joining the prepositional phrase to the participle and taking the finite verb as passive seems to be the best option because it provides the best progression: “All the things which are exposed by the light are made manifest.”

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<sup>13</sup> Some commentators wonder why, if Paul is referring to non-Christians, he mentions that the deeds are done in secret, since the conduct of unbelievers is without restraint and blatant. For a discussion on this, see Thielman (2010, 345).

Accordingly, believers are told to expose the unfruitful works of darkness, and when these works are exposed by the light, they become visible (v. 13). Consequently, verse 13 provides another reason for the appeal in verse 11b. Paul urges believers to expose (v. 11b) the secret deeds of darkness (v. 12) because when these deeds are exposed by the light (fruit of the light in believers, v. 9), by contrast, they become demonstrably visible for what they are (v. 13). Accordingly, the pericope combines the concepts of being exposed and being revealed via the notion of light.<sup>14</sup>

In Ephesians 5:14, Paul expands on the concept of verse 13. The conjunction *διὸ* (therefore) is explanatory, introducing what the phrase “For everything made evident is light” means. Some translations put the *διὸ* clause with verse 14, while others put it with verse 13. The break is not interpretive, but it seems to make better sense to include this clause with verse 13 because it completes Paul’s thought and allows the quotation in verse 14 to serve as a concluding remark (Hoehner 2002, 684).<sup>15</sup>

Cumulatively 5:12–13 “take up a proverbial saying, along the lines of Luke 8:17,” “for nothing is hidden that will not be revealed, and nothing concealed that will not be made known and brought to light” (Bruce 1984, 376).

Paul’s economy of words makes it challenging to ascertain what he means by the statement in verse 14a. Some interpreters have a problem with the literal translation “For everything made evident is light” (v. 14)

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<sup>14</sup> Engberg-Pedersen (1989, 102) confirms this, stating, “It is because the deeds that the addressees are enjoined to confront are deeds of darkness (v. 11, with the whole Hellenistic Jewish meaning of this), hidden things (v. 12), that confronting them by relying on the ‘light’ will equal ‘revealing’ them—in fact *φανερῶν*. In other words, v. 13 in our passage spells out in what particular context *ἐλέγχειν* obtains the meaning of *φανερῶν* (while also of course retaining its root meaning of confrontation, which is not part of *φανερῶν*).”

<sup>15</sup> The NET and LEB keep the phrase as v. 14. The NKJV keeps the phrase as v. 13. The NIV (2011) keeps the phrase as v. 13 but separated by an em dash.

finding it “disturbing” (Thielman 2010, 347) and “baffling” (Barth 1960, 572).

These interpreters are then compelled to take ‘φανερούμενον’ as a middle-voice participle and translate, ‘whatever makes manifest is light’ (Abbot 1897, 156; cf. Eadie 1883, 387). Now we have the simple idea that light, by definition, is that which exposes darkness. As many others have observed, however, in the forty-eight other uses of ‘φανερόω’ (Phaneroō) in the NT (and one other in the LXX), the term never appears in the middle voice, and Paul has just used the term in the preceding phase in the passive voice. A middle sense here is unlikely. (Thielman 2010, 347)

Considering the above and that the finite verb in the preceding clause is passive, it is likely that the participle φανερούμενον should also be passive. Paul then is simply stating that everything that becomes visible is light and no longer darkness (Hoehner 2002, 684–685). Considering that the phrase is difficult to understand, translators have not rendered it literally. Some chose to translate the clause as a truism, “for it is light that makes everything visible” (NIV 1984).

The literal translation is problematic because not everything that becomes revealed is light. If this was true it would mean that when darkness is confronted with the light of Christ Jesus in Christians and the fruit of the light is exhibited in their lives, the confronted see the nature of their deeds and respond to the light in such a way that they become light (v. 8). This would result in automatic salvation, which clearly cannot

be true.<sup>16</sup> The problem arises because the full force of verses 11b–14 is not immediately apparent. However, the concluding quotation provides an interpretive nuance. The quote informs those who have recognized their sinful condition that if they are drawn to the light of Christ they will become light (see 1 Cor 14:24–25). Accordingly, it is a call to salvation.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the exposure serves a greater purpose than revealing the deeds of darkness. The transformative effect of the light may lead to the conviction of sin and repentant faith in Christ Jesus; “Awake, O sleeper! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!” (Eph 5:14).<sup>18</sup> The first

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**16** I accept that the light—namely believers and their deeds (Eph 5:8–9)—does not always exercise a transformative influence on darkness, even if they have been spiritually illuminated. It is also accepted that darkness generally rejects and avoids the light—Christ—whose presence convicts them (John 3:20). However, this does not mean that the consciousness of the people in darkness is without inner moral sense, thus open to some extent to the influence of the light of Christ. “The New Testament speaks of people being convicted by the law (Jas 2:9), by conscience (John 8:9), and by the working of the Spirit (John 16:8)” (Foulkes 1989, 151).

**17** Engberg-Pedersen (1989:104) discusses two passages that are almost always referred to in connection with the text in inquiry; 1 Cor 14:4–25, and John 3:20–21. Both passages combine the use of ἐλέγχω with the concepts of darkness and light. They are like the Ephesians passage in that they talk of ἐλέγχω in relation to non-Christians (the former certainly, the latter reasonably so), but differ from it in that their focus is not on the confronters, but instead on those being confronted.

**18** Considering that we have no original copy of the quotation, it has been the source of much debate. The long-standing consensus is that Paul is quoting a Christian Easter or baptismal hymn. Verse 14a, (for this reason it says) is an introductory phrase intimating that a quotation from the OT might follow. The difficulty with the quotation is that it does not emanate from the Tanakh (Stern 1992, 591). It is widely accepted that the introduction makes clear that Paul thought it to be from an authoritative tradition (see 4:8). Among the several views for the source of the quotation, the two most popular are Isa 61:1, and maybe certain similar passages, namely, 9:2; 26:19; 52:1. For a comprehensive discussion of the issue, see Hendriksen (1967, 234–237), Best (2003, 259–262), and Thielman (2010, 348–351). For a comprehensive study contending that “Paul himself is responsible for the form of this citation, as he typologically appropriates texts [the first two lines relate to Isaiah 26:19 and the third to 60:1] from their original contexts and redacts them to fit with the fulfilments that have come through Christ,” see Lunde and Dunne (2012). Those who interpret it as a call for conversion hold that the metaphor refers to people spiritually dead in their sins (Thielman 2010 350–351). Those who interpret it as an exhortation to disobedient or wayward believers (Hoehner 2002, 686–88), see sleep figuratively for those who are slumbering in moral and spiritual indolence (Merkle 2016)

two lines (Awake, O sleeper! Rise from the dead) recall the language of 2:1 and 5–6, where Paul describes his audience as formerly dead in their trespasses and sins and then made alive, raised, and seated together with Christ in heavenly places. The third line (and Christ will shine on you) recalls 5:8, where the light-dark imagery of the passage began, and which describes the audience’s movement from their former existence, defined by darkness, to a new reality defined by the light of Christ (Thielman 2010, 350).

It is noteworthy that the implied object of the verb *expose* (5:11b) is deeds and not the people who do these deeds, and that Paul contrasts these deeds with the fruit of the light (v. 9) and deeds that please the Lord (v. 10). In verse 13, Paul speaks of all things, not everyone (Hoehner 2002, 678–680). Accordingly, “Paul probably has in mind the exposure of the deeds themselves as the evil practices they are” (Thielman 2010, 344–345), “rather than rebuking the persons themselves” (Merkle 2016). However, when deeds of darkness are exposed, the doers are indirectly reproofed (Hendriksen 1967, 234).

Regarding Hoehner’s (2002, 680) argument that the word *expose* (Eph 5:11b) includes both exposure *and* reproof and that this verbal force must be understood as part of the idea, it does not appear to fit the argumentation of the passage. As discussed in the lexical section, ἐλέγχω has a wide semantic range. Consequently, the precise meaning of ἐλέγχω lies in its use in any given context. I concur with Barth (1960, 570–571) that out of the three means by which this exposing which ἐλέγχω refers to is done, *conduct* is the most likely in the present context because the immediate context discusses behavior. The summary given in verse 15, “Therefore be very careful how you live” also supports this idea. This makes it unlikely that the exposure is verbal. The exposure is done by a contrastive lifestyle (Lincoln 1990, 330). Consequently, Barth’s (1960, 570) paraphrased translation reads as “disprove [by your conduct].”

## 6. Conclusion

In debating the meaning of, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph 5:11) scholars generally fall into one of two camps. One is inadequate, and the other requires nuance. The view that that Christians are to reprimand other Christians is inadequate because the contextual allusion to the sons of disobedience and the imagery of darkness references those outside the Christian community. If the text calls for Christians to reprimand unbelievers, it will violate the discourse flow (vv. 3–14) and Pauline theology (1 Cor 5:12–13).

Although the passage in inquiry is part of the paraenetic section of the letter and focuses on ethical injunctions to Christians, Paul’s contrastive argumentation style and discourse flow must be considered so that interpretation is coherent with his flow of thought in Ephesians 4:17–5:14. Paul’s presents an antithesis between the sons of disobedience and the children of the light and emphasizes their ethical duality. What precedes 5:11 is ethical teaching to explain that walking in the light (v. 8b) is one of the specific ways that Paul’s audience is called to imitate God (v. 1). This walk is evidenced by the fruit of the light—all goodness, righteousness, and truth (v. 9a).

Paul then provides three facets of what it means to walk in the light. First, discern what is pleasing to the Lord 5:10. Second, have nothing to do with the unfruitful deeds of darkness (v. 11a). Third, expose them (v. 11b). Following 5:11b the nature of the exposure is disclosed. The inner argument of 5:12–14 provides the reason for the appeal. Paul urges Christians to expose the hidden deeds of darkness (vv. 11–12) because everything the light exposes becomes visible (v. 13). The two phrases combine the concept of being exposed and being revealed via the notion of light. The full force of the exposure only becomes apparent by the concluding quotation in verse

14, which is a call to conversion, and emphasizes the agency of Christ's light in the process. The quote informs those who have recognized the nature of their deeds and sinful condition that if they are drawn to the light of Christ, by his grace and mercy, they will become light; accordingly, it is a call to salvation. Consequently, the exposure serves a greater purpose than revealing the deeds of darkness. The transformative effect of the light may lead to the conviction of sin and repentant faith in Christ Jesus.

Although some interpreters view expose (Eph 5:11b) both as exposure and rebuke of others in the Christian community, I argue that, contextually, it refers to gentile Christians discerning cultural norms that are unworthy of their new identities in Christ and living in a way that provides the evidence that exposes darkness, because this interpretation best fits the discourse flow of 4:17–5:15.

It should not be automatically assumed that because Paul affirms the values Christians must live by in contrast to those living outside the community, the audience was living anachronistically. Ephesians was not written to correct specific errors in a local church but to prevent problems in the church as a whole by encouraging the body of Christ to mature and be united in Christ Jesus. Consequently, Paul is not appealing to his audience to reprimand anyone. Paul wants his readers to realize that the church is to live by values different from that of society. Rather than being corrupted by the surrounding darkness, Christians are urged to exercise their transformative influence on it. If the church has some missionary role in this passage, it is not through the proclamation of the word but by its very existence as the sphere of light (3:10). Therefore, Christians have the responsibility to represent the light of the world (John 8:12) appropriately; as a people who live the message (Jas 1:22) and demonstrate the transformative power of the gospel, both spiritually and socially, so that the testimony of their walk validates the sincerity of their relationship with God.

Therefore, this text provides an often neglected and underestimated appeal for non-verbal gospel communication. Paul urges Christians to fill a missionary role, not by proclamation, but by promoting moral excellence, representing their new identity in Christ, and displaying the gospel's transforming power through their godly behavior.

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