

It is a subtle thing and usually takes years to accomplish, but without “protection,” without the connective tissue of the “therefores” keeping us who are parts of the body organically related to the head, it not infrequently happens that instead of living as we started out — child followers of Jesus — we become bosses on behalf of Jesus. Sometimes we are very good bosses, looking out for the welfare of others; other times we are barely disguised pious bullies.

### Negative Space

The change of emphasis from church as the being and work of God to church as our participation in the being and work of God begins with a negative command: “you must no longer live as the Gentiles live” (Eph. 4:17). As familiar as I am with this letter, every time I come to this, it feels like a bump in the road. Up until now, virtually everything has been stated with glowing affirmation. Paul is extravagant in his enthusiasm, unstoppable in his praise. It is as if nothing were ever praised enough and he can’t wait to make up the deficit — if necessary, single-handedly. The energy of his language overflows with metaphor and simile, stretching the sinews of syntax to the breaking point.

The colorless, austere, negative words, “you must no longer live as Gentiles,” seem out of character. Why doesn’t Paul just transfer his enthusiasm for what God does to an equivalent enthusiasm for what this congregation can now do with and for God? Why doesn’t he challenge them to “do great things for God”? The momentum is up. Why doesn’t he bring them into the action? Why this “no” just when they are ready to get involved in every “yes” God is doing in and for them?

I’m wondering if it’s because he doesn’t trust their maturity. These newly Christian men and women grew up in a non-Jewish culture. They came into the church without the rich centuries of stories and worship and moral practice that were deeply embedded in anyone growing up Jewish. These Ephesian Gentiles are newcomers to all this. As Gentiles they come from a world in which Greek and Roman gods and goddesses provide the stories that are background to everyday life. These stories,

while they are certainly religious, have no moral content to them. Sexual immorality and violence permeated the supernatural in that culture.

In the Gentile imagination of that age, religion and morality didn’t mix. Not that morals were absent from their culture. They had philosophers who had many wise things to say about the moral life that continue to stand the test of centuries. Their literate intelligentsia took second place to no one in providing moral guidance. But the men and women in the street, mostly unschooled, along with a considerable slave population, wouldn’t have been much affected by the philosophers. In the imagination of the common people, Zeus and Hera presided over a pantheon of sexually profligate and murderously rapacious deities. The stories the Gentiles told about their gods and goddesses sometimes showed remarkable psychological insights and were endlessly entertaining, but they were also devoid of righteous moral content. Artemis, the reigning goddess of the city of Ephesus, was a fertility figure on public pornographic display, an idol carved with a thousand breasts.

So that is the world that seems most likely to be behind the term “Gentile” here — not so much an ethnic designation in contrast to Jew but a reference to this culture that was rich in religious imagination and so impoverished morally.

So as Paul moves his attention into the daily world of the work and behavior of these Gentile Christians as they live out this resurrection life to “the praise of his glory,” he is pastorally alert to how easy it would be for them to unconsciously take on this wonderful new gospel but unthinkingly fail to remove the trappings of the old culture. Out of long Gentile habit they well might continue to assume that religion has nothing to do with morals. When Paul characterizes this old Gentile way of life, he describes it as “darkened” understanding, “alienated from the life of God . . . , abandoned . . . to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (4:18-19).

If Paul were writing to a mostly Jewish congregation, I doubt very much if he would be going over the moral basics in so much detail. Jews were raised from the cradle on the Ten Commandments. They prayed Psalm 15: “O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may

dwell on your holy hill?" (v. 1). They answered the questions with a list of ten simple actions about which there is no ambiguity — straightforward moral acts. They also prayed Psalm 24, which asks a similar double question: "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?" (v. 3), answered this time with three obvious straightforward moral acts. Jews had centuries of thorough schooling in moral behavior that tilled the soil of the heart for receiving the gifts of God and growing in righteousness and holiness, the two summarizing words that Paul uses to designate life lived appropriately in church in response to God.

But Gentiles didn't grow up under the tutelage of Moses or the prayers of David. They grew up on the stories of Artemis and Helen, Odysseus and Achilles, Orpheus and Euridice, Oedipus and Jocasta. And so Paul, as he leads them into the world of faithful living, cultivating a life that is responsive to the gifts of grace, a life that can flourish as it grows in righteousness and holiness, sets some negations in place. Nothing complex or difficult, just a few simple guidelines, giving the Gentiles a helping hand on their way to developing a moral life that provides good soil for growing up in Christ.

The Christian life does not start with moral behavior. We don't become good in order to get God. But having been brought into the operations of God, moral behavior provides forms for maturing in a resurrection life. Moral acts are forms in the sense that a pottery vase gives form to a bouquet of flowers, in the sense that a bucket provides a container for getting water from the well to the kitchen, in the sense that a bugle gives form to a compressed column of air so that taps can be played. Moral acts are art forms for arranging and giving expression to resurrection.

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A woman in her late twenties began attending my congregation at the invitation of some friends. After a few weeks she asked if she could have a conversation with me. She wanted to become a Christian. She knew virtually nothing about the Christian faith, had no idea of what "becoming

a Christian" involved. We talked and prayed. She was ready. She made the commitment to follow Jesus. She presented herself for baptism.

But she didn't know much about the faith. She had never gone to church, never read the Bible, had just more or less gone along with the culture she had grown up in and did what her friends did. She asked for more conversations. So we met every two or three weeks in my study, talked and prayed together, explored the meaning and implications of this new life on which she had embarked. It was all so fresh and new, an interior life that she had never even known she had, a community that she never knew existed. She was a "Gentile," American style, and knew nothing of church.

Conversations like this are always interesting, listening and observing as the Christian faith, this practice of resurrection, comes alive in a person for the first time. She took everything in, embraced everything readily and gladly. But one thing puzzled me. She lived with her boyfriend. Eventually I learned that she had always lived with her boyfriends, beginning when she was twenty. The living together rarely lasted more than six months or so. She wasn't interested in marriage. She told me all this without apology and not as a confession but quite casually, as we were getting acquainted with one another. I wondered if I should say anything. Surely she knew that the Christian way had some sexual implications for the way you lived. She was in church each Sunday. She was becoming acclimated to church, this Christian community. I assumed that she would eventually notice. I waited for her to bring up the subject.

One day on impulse I said, "We have been having these conversations for seven months. Astrid, would you do something for me?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"Live celibate for the next six months."

Surprised, she said, "Why would I do that?"

"Just because I asked you. Trust me. I think it's important."

I learned later that her boyfriend moved out before the week was over. A month later when she came to see me, she didn't mention it. But the following month she brought it up: "When you asked me to live celibate for six months, I had no idea what you were up to. You

asked me to trust you, and so I did. It's been two months now and I think I understand what you were doing. I feel so free. I've never felt so 'myself' before, never felt so at home with myself. I thought everybody did what I was doing — all my friends did. I just thought this was the American way. And now I am noticing so many other things about my relations with others — they seem so much more clean and whole. So uncluttered. And do you know what? I have been thinking that I might want to get married someday. Thank you."

The celibacy decision survived the six-month mark and continued for two more years, at which time she and her fiancé exchanged vows and I blessed their Christian marriage.

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Artists use the term "negative space" to name the importance of what is not there in a sculpture or painting. An artist has to know what to leave out as well as what to put in. Openness, emptiness, breathing space — what you don't see provides adequate room to see the created work. Negative space is as much a part of a work of art as what you do see.

The negatives are important as we find our way into the practice of resurrection. They keep the clutter down. As Paul brings us into the church picture, he is cautious. He doesn't pepper us with imperatives of what needs to be done, what opportunities are out there just waiting for us to accomplish. He is careful not to give us any encouragement to take charge of this kingdom business. He lays a groundwork consisting of what we don't do. None of Paul's negatives require anything heroic. Modest self-restraint, minimum effort: put away falsehood, don't let the sun go down on your anger, no stealing, no evil talk, don't grieve the Holy Spirit, no wrangling, no slander, no malice, no fornication. These negatives name actions or attitudes that were accepted as commonplace, some even sanctioned, in the Gentile culture of the Ephesians. Also in the Gentile culture of Americans. Things haven't changed all that much.

Most of the Christian life is a response to what God says and does. The negatives don't define our lives. God's positives define us. What the negatives do is leave room for the main action, God's action.

When we talk too much or do too much, we get in the way of what God is doing. We become a distraction. As we immerse ourselves in church, we realize that there are culturally accepted practices, Gentile ways of life, that we must set aside. We realize that there are things in this Gentile culture that we grew up in that are extravagantly admired and rewarded by our secularized society but that we must not do. A good thing, said or done in the wrong place or at the wrong time, is a bad thing. Becoming mature "to the measure of the full stature of Christ," the practice of resurrection, requires a lot of negative space — a lot of not saying, a lot of not doing.

### Shy Member of the Trinity

The premise behind all these negatives — "you must no longer live as the Gentiles live" — is a huge positive: God is active, incredibly active, active beyond our imagining. By this time it will not have escaped notice in our reading of Ephesians that God is referred to sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son (or Jesus or Christ) and sometimes as Holy Spirit. All three Persons have a way of being over us, creating and providing; a way of being with us, revealing and saving; a way of being present in us, blessing and sanctifying.

In the three Persons, there is a versatile and dynamic oneness, yet there are also roles and primary actions that proceed uniquely from Father, Son, and Spirit. God the Father: God bringing everything into being and holding everything together by his word. God the Son: God entering our history, showing us God in action in human terms that we can recognize, accomplishing salvation for all. God the Spirit: God present with and in us, inviting us, guiding and counseling us, wooing us into participation in all of God's ways of being God. All these operations of God are in evidence as Paul directs and accompanies us in the process of growing up in Christ. The doctrine of Trinity is the church's way of thinking about God that keeps all of these operations of God together and in relation to one another.

As we assimilate and participate in all the ways that God is God, it