

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says:

**“Awake, you who sleep,
Arise from the dead,
And Christ will give you light.”**

(Ephesians 5:8–14)

Introduction

This week I read a most fascinating book: *The Faith of Christopher Hitchens*¹ by Larry Taunton.

Larry Taunton is a devout evangelical, who is well-known as a Christian apologist. He has debated the so-called “four horsemen” of the new atheism: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens. But when it came to Hitchens, Taunton was not merely a debating antagonist; rather, he and Hitchens became good friends. Some of the last days of Hitchens’s life were spent in the company of Taunton.

If you are aware of the kind of person that Hitchens was, you might find it amazing that these two men could be friends. Hitchens was often crude, harsh, and merciless in his opposition to Christianity—or any religion for that matter. Just consider the title of his best-selling book: *God is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*.²

Hitchens was amoral—a man who, to use Paul’s words, was “given over to lewdness” (Ephesians 4:19). He wrote a book boasting in his sexual exploits, including homosexual activity. He was a heavy drinker and had biting wit. And yet these two men travelled together and talked much together. And on a couple of road trips, they even studied the Gospel of John together!

On one occasion when Hitchens was autographing books after one of his talks, a sycophantic fan asked him, “How can you spend time with Taunton? After all, he is a Christian!” Hitchens responded, in anger, “Because Larry Taunton is my friend, and you, sir, are an idiot!”

After the death of Hitchens (15 December 2011), Taunton was asked to write a book about their friendship. I am glad that he did.

¹ Larry Alex Taunton, *The Faith of Christopher Hitchens: The Restless Soul of the World’s Most Notorious Atheist* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2016).

² Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007).

This Little Light of Mine

Ephesians 5:8–14

Doug Van Meter

In the book, Taunton explores what he perceived to be Hitchens' searching for truth, especially after the events of 9/11. That horrific day, as Taunton explains, had a profound impact upon Hitchens. He began to see that there is something in this world that was not merely ideologically reprehensible, but rather that there are things in this world that are *evil*. That was quite a judgement coming from a man who claimed that there are no absolutes. He often infuriated his friends on the left by his unusual positions for an atheist, such as being pro-life. But what most alarmed them was his flirting with Christianity.

It is clear from this book that Hitchens was becoming more open to *true* biblical Christianity.

In a strange way, Hitchens was one of the most vocal opponents of false Christianity while being a great admirer of those whom he said were "true believers." He had no quarrel with them. In fact, the more of them that he met, the more impressed he was.

One day, about two months before he died, he was asked by a reporter what he thought of his friend Larry Taunton. He said, "If everyone in the United States had the same qualities of loyalty and care and concern for others that Larry Taunton had, we'd be living in a much better society than we do." Taunton told him later that he appreciated his kind words, to which Hitchens responded, "I meant it and have been looking for an opportunity to say it. So there you go, it's on the record now. No one can deny I said it or thought it."

Why am I giving so much time to this? Because it wonderfully illustrates Paul's words recorded in Ephesians 5:8–14. Larry Taunton has been letting his little light shine in the public square for a long time, people have seen his good works, God is being glorified, and some are being helped.

Atheists were almost macabre after his death as they spoke of Hitchens's "good fight of atheism" to the end. But I wonder. No Christian that I know of claims that he had a deathbed experience. But who knows—one day we may find that the atheists glee was way off the mark.

Oh that we could shine our light as Larry Taunton! Be encouraged: This passage make it clear that we both should and can.

The point that Paul is highlighting is that we who are Christians are children of light, rather than children of darkness. We are to live like it.

The Christian who seeks to imitate his heavenly Father, and who aims to walk like his elder Brother, will have a well-empowered testimony that shines bright before a watching world.

There are several things that are true of "this little light of mine." And I think that the best way for us to learn these things is to follow an alliterated outline that I trust will aid is in remembering and applying this passage.

An Existential Explanation

The first thing we learn, in the first part of v. 8, is that this little light of mine is a miracle. “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord” (v. 8).

In these opening words, we are reminded (and how often we need to simply remember!) that we have experienced a profound change to the very nature of our existence; a profound change concerning who we *are*.

Paul continues the previous thought with the word “for,” and gives the explanation why Christians are not to be partnering with those whose lives are marked by fornication – or, for that matter, by bitter un-forgiveness. The reason is that we have undergone a *profound* change.

This verse goes to the heart of our identity—and identity goes to the heart of our behaviour. Here we are told, in a wonderful statement, that we are no longer *darkness* but are rather *light*.

Note that there is no preposition “in.” It is not as if, before salvation, we were *in* the darkness and are now *in* the light. Rather, our “lives, and not just environment, were dark.”³ But now they *were* light.

It is a statement, in other words, indicating a complete transformation of our nature.

“He is pointing to a change in *them*, not merely to a change in their surroundings. Before they were not only in darkness; darkness was in them. And now they not only are *in* light; they *are* light and therefore must shine out as lights to their benighted society.”⁴

Yes, God, by His powerful gospel “has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His live” (Colossians 1:13). But our conversion does not involve merely a *transference*, it also involves a *transformation*.

We might put it this way: Our kingdom inclinations and loyalties have been changed because our identity has been changed. This is the fundamental Christian truth: Christians have undergone a profound change. In the words of Jesus, we have been *born again*.

This is not mere rehabilitation or behavioural reformation; it is rather a thorough *regeneration*. We are new creatures in Christ. We are *completely* new creations. It is vital that we grasp the nature of conversion!

We need to grasp this explanation if we will truly appreciate who we are. This will help us to understand how we “fit” in society.

We need to grasp this explanation if we will evangelise wisely. The question of our identity being settled—once darkness but now light—leads to the vital question, *how?*

³ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 150.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 183.

What produced this change? The answer, of course, has been revealed in the opening verses of chapter 2: God's sovereign grace. If we do not grasp this, then our evangelism will be man-centred, manipulative and/or mechanical.

We need to grasp this if we will truly appreciate the nature of the church. This will go a long way towards helping us to prioritise the church and therefore to protect her purity (2 Corinthians 11:1–4).

Without a proper appreciation of the power of God as experienced in His gospel, the local church will merely be another club. Consider the supernatural existence of each of member and you might be more careful about how you treat them – and vice versa.

We should be seeing by now that doctrine matters. What we believe about the gospel matters; what we believe about the nature of conversion, and therefore the nature of the Christian, matters – eternally so.

Do you know the experience of this transference and transformation? Are you still rejoicing in it? Are you marvelling in it?

We need to grasp this if we will truly appreciate our duty to “walk as children of light ... finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.” This brings us to our next point.

An Ethical Expectation

The second major lesson we learn from these verses is that this little light of mine is to shine (vv. 8b–12). Paul writes,

Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret.

(Ephesians 5:8–12)

The explanation of our identification as no longer “darkness” but now “light” leads quite naturally to an ethical expectation. In other words, such a cosmic spiritual change will naturally be manifested in behavioural change. This is the point of the admonition to “walk as children of light.” Like Father, like son; like elder Brother, like little brothers. Ethics matter.

Paul indicates several ethical, behavioural expectations in the light of our identity.

An Expected Manifestation

After telling us to “walk as children of light” (v. 8), Paul adds a parenthetical statement to show that this little light is not actually *mine*. He writes, “(for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth).”

A *parenthetical* statement means that it is not the main point of the passage; nevertheless, it has an important connection to the main point.

The three virtues listed here are practical, ethical expressions of those who “are light in the Lord.”

Kent Hughes helpfully explains: “‘Good’ means something like ‘generosity.’ ‘Right’ means integrity in all dealings with God and man. And finally ‘true’ refers to the absence of falsehood and deception. These are the ethics of light.”⁵ Perhaps “integrity” is the best one-word summary. Our walk will match our talk. Our light will shine because we are following Christ (see Matthew 5:1–16).

In other words, if you want to know whether or not you have experienced conversion, then examine your life by examining your relationships. How are you treating God? How you are treating others? And, when you don’t treat them right, how does this affect you? How is your integrity? This latter is a bigger issue perhaps than many suspect.

Now, we need to grasp that these characteristics are called “fruit.” They are *derivative*. They are produced *in* us, not so much *by* us (cf. John 15:1–16). The light that I have as a Christian is not mine; it is God’s. As with the moon, the Christian reflects the light of the Son. In fact, the reflected light is such that those in an otherwise night of dark existence are able to see.

Practically, this means that if I will be “good” and “righteous” and “true,” then I will need to bask in the light of Christ. I need to spend time with Him and with those who spend time with Him. This will mean spending time in prayer and the Word. It will require meaningful membership in the community of faith. It will necessitate prioritising Lord’s Day gatherings and midweek small group gatherings.

And this leads to the next observation.

An Expected Examination

Having seen the proof of our new nature (the parenthetical of v. 9—goodness, righteousness and truth), Paul continues his thought from v. 8 concerning what the walk of the children of light looks like. It looks like the pursuit of that which pleases God. The desire to please the Lord is what drives the children of light. It is that which determines how bright their light shines. It may even have something to do with how far it reaches.

“Finding out” (or “try to discern” in the ESV) is an expression of the word that principally means “to examine.” It was used metallurgically to examine the nature of a specimen. One does not want to be deceived by fool’s gold. And neither do we want to be deceived by false ideas as to what pleases the Lord.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 163.

“The heart renewed by the Spirit desires to please God, is anxious to find out what he desires, and is motivated by the sense of bringing God pleasure.”⁶

The children of light are constantly searching the will of God, as revealed in His Word, for *light* on how to live to please Him. And this requires effort, it requires mental exercise. As Foulkes says, the word translated “finding out” “indicates the demand for careful thought and discrimination. The light of God is given, but it does not free us from the responsibility of thought and choice.”⁷

It is a wonderful thing that we are not left in the dark concerning what pleases the Lord. All we need to do is to examine the Scriptures, and as we do so it becomes clear. For instance, we have just been told what pleases Him (4:17–5:7)!

This is why reading good books is so helpful. This is why gathering for sound teaching is essential. This is why training sound teachers is essential. This is why seeking sound counsel is so essential. Beware of the fool’s gold!

Expectation of Separation

If we will please the Lord then we must be separated *unto* that which please Him (v. 10), and we must also be separated *from* that which *displeases* Him: “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (v. 11a; cf. 5–6).

As we saw previously, we are forbidden to participate in evil deeds of darkness. But in a strange way, this also empowers us to reach those still enslaved by them.

We are in the world and yet we are not to be of the world (John 17:15–19). Among other implications, this means that we are to be like Taunton—and like our Lord: friends of sinners.

Like a good physician, we should be exposing the diseases of darkness in order to expose them to the cure: the gospel of Jesus Christ. God help us to not be self-righteous naysayers who know only how to alienate rather than how to be winsome!

We can have friends who are godless while at the same time reprovng their godlessness. In fact, this is a true friend. But maturity is required. Children, don’t try this at home!

I knew an unstable Christian in college who, after winning his girlfriend to Christ, was so elated that he slept with her. Know where to draw the boundaries! And if you don’t know where to draw them, ask someone who does.

Expectation of Illumination

Though we are called to a life of separation from sin, nevertheless, as we have seen, we are not called to a life of *isolation* from sinners. Darkness surrounds us. But in a strange irony,

⁶ Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009), 253.

⁷ Foulkes, *Ephesians*, 151.

the more separate that we live from sin the more that our presence will be felt. In other words, the expression of who we *are* will result in the exposure of what *others* are: “Expose [the unfruitful works of darkness]. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret” (vv. 11–12).

Again, the contrast is between darkness and light. We were darkness and now we are light. And that light will penetrate and illuminate the darkness. That is the point Paul is making.

How do we interpret these words? What is Paul’s point?

Some maintain that the Christian is called to a life of antagonism in which we are to protest all the darkness in the world. I don’t believe that this is what Paul is saying. But I do understand the temptation to behave in this way.

A former colleague and I used to talk about how many pastors seem to mellow with age, and we sensed some of this in our own lives. Really!

Some of the hills on which I was willing to die when I was younger no longer seem that important to me. Further, though many of my convictions are as strong now as ever, my tone has changed. It is not as combative.

There is so much that is wrong with this world that we can be tempted to make everything our cause—or the object of our cursing. I recently watched a very moving film about a young boy who gets separated from his family on a train. The boy must learn to live without his parents. Eventually, he is adopted and years later he begins searching for his birth mother.

I spent most of the film in tears, and when it was finished I was determined that I must do something about about orphans. I understanding the tendency to want to right all wrongs!

We do need to be careful of the tendency to be people who are angry about every wrong. It can be much easier to expose evil deeds while at the same time neglecting to provide the solution—the gospel.

Christians do not have a monopoly on opposing evil. Again, I think of Christopher Hitchens and his identification of the Taliban as evil, and his vocal opposition to abortion.

I think also of Ashton Kutcher, who just recently appealed to the United States Congress for practical aid in combatting human trafficking and slavery. This man is not a Christian, and yet he is horrified by this dark evil.

No doubt there is a time and place to voice our opposition to evil. There are times when we are called upon to take a stand against darkness. Churches, for example, would do well to deliberately observe Sanctity of Life Sunday.

There are times when we are called upon to confront darkness head on—to speak out, to write out, and perhaps even times to protest confronting darkness with both words and

with images of light. But I do not believe that this is what Paul is talking about here – at least not *primarily*.

I agree with the many commentators who say that Paul, while not excluding speaking out against deeds done in darkness, is rather speaking of what James Davison Hunter (in *To Change the World*) refers to as the Christian's "faithful presence."

Paul is speaking of those who are light *living* like light, with the result that, invariably and inevitably, the darkness will be exposed. Jesus taught that His disciples are the light of the world and this light *cannot, must not*, be hid under a bushel. The presence of light is noticeable in the darkness. In fact, by definition, where there is light there cannot be darkness.

Our lives are to so shine forth the light and the love of God that the darkness and the hate of the godless world system is seen for the ugliness that it is. For example, biblical sexuality, as expressed in the marriage relationship, is must be shown to be so beautiful that fornication and adultery are revealed to be debauched and unappealing. The bright light of contentment with Christ, and all that He is and all that He has done and all that He has promised, must be seen to be so beautifully attractive that the darkness of covetousness is something for which others will feel ashamed. The shining brightness of forgiveness and tender-heartedness should be just too bright for bitterness to be enjoyed any longer.

In other words, as our lives express the light of God to which we are being conformed, the ugly and dark deeds of those outside of Christ – the very way in which we once lived – are exposed.

The word translated "expose" carries with it the idea of *reproof* or *rebuke*. Our lives are a rebuke to that which is rotten in this world. They are a correction to the corruption that surrounds us. I don't mean to imply any kind of self-righteous or wrong-spirited condemnation. I mean what Paul and other biblical writers meant: that *our very nature creates a contrast*. And if it does not, then there is good reason to question whether we are in the faith. If the darkness is not *aware* of any light emanating from us, then perhaps there *is* no light emanating from us.

Let me ask, is your professed Christianity influencing others? The effect may be negative (tension, conflicts, even cursings) or it may be positive (evil restrained, questions raised, integrity respected, friendships desired). But influence, if it is real, Christianity *will* have influence.

You see, God makes a difference. And He makes a difference through His children, who reflect His light and His love.

God made a difference through Joseph, through Moses and Aaron, through Daniel, through Nehemiah, through Ezra, through Ruth, through John the Baptist, through Stephen, and through countless others through church history. And He can make a difference through us too.

Silent Witness?

What is meant by, “it is shameful to even speak of those things”? In the context, perhaps Paul means that it is shameful to speak inappropriately as we address issues of darkness.

For instance, I spoke with a mom this week who said that, recently, her child began to take notes for the first time in a service. She had taught him some principles of mind-mapping. He looked at her during the sermon and whispered, “Mom, what is lust and how do I draw a picture of it?” Now, it would not have been wrong for the mother to tell her son that lust is to have wrong thoughts about a girl (and hope that he doesn’t ask for more information!). But for her to be overly descriptive would perhaps plant lustful thoughts that were not there in the first place.

There is a risk of voyeurism when we address deeds of darkness. This is true in counselling. I have learned to be careful to get all the information that I need in handling discreet matters, but *only* the information I need.

I think that Paul’s major concern is to help the Christian to see that since they are light, they will be exposing the darkness rather than participating in it, including inappropriately communicating about it.

Appropriate Intolerance

In summary, the Christian, by virtue of his nature, is intolerant of sin. The Christian cannot be otherwise. Light will not tolerate darkness. It will overcome.

I said last week that the church should be affirming of people as people – that is, as those made in the image of God. But this does not call for us to affirm them in their sinful lifestyles. Though we can and must affirm the *value* of people who are darkness, we must never affirm the *vice* of their darkness. This is neither loving nor a function of light bearers.

Remember who you are when you go to work, to school, to the sports field, to the shops, to family get-togethers, and to other social functions. Don’t apologise for the miracle that God has done in you! Don’t be a people-pleaser; be a God-pleaser. In other words, live a fruitful life (v. 9) rather than an unfruitful one.

An Evangelical Exhortation

Finally, in vv. 13–14, we learn that this little light of mine is not so little! Paul writes, “But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says, ‘Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’”

These words are deeply encouraging, but they require some explanation.

Commentators are divided over the meaning of, “But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light.”

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Some say that Paul is merely reiterating a truism; that is, that light has the inherent function of revealing. As the NIV translates, “for it is light that makes everything visible.”

But this seems to be a somewhat redundant and even needless statement at this point. Rather, it seems to me that what Paul is saying, though obliquely, is that the light which exposes the darkness also carries the power to transform that darkness into light. It certainly did with these Ephesian believers!

One reason that I hold to this view is because v. 14 is inseparably connected to v. 13. Verse 14 serves as an invitation, if not an exhortation, to what has just been said in v. 13. That is, since the light can penetrate the darkness, there is every hope that those who are spiritually asleep, those who are spiritually dead in their darkness, can hear the voice of God and be raised to spiritual life into the realm of spiritual light.

In other words, *this little light of mine is not so little! It is powerful!* Stott summarises this view when he writes, “This, then, is the twofold effect which a Christian’s light has on the prevailing darkness: it makes visible and it makes light.”

Since I was once darkness and now I am light, others who are darkness can also become light. No one is too dark that, by the power of God, they cannot become light. No one is so lost that they cannot be found. No one is so sinful that they cannot be forgiven. No one has gone so far that that the gospel cannot translate and transform them. And we who are light must believe this and we must behave like this. Let your light shine!

Remember the way that you *were* and compare that to the way you now *are*. For some, that will be deeply encouraging while for others this might be deeply disturbing.

Perhaps Jesus’ most well-known parable is that of the prodigal son. But next to this is probably that of the sower and the four soils. If the prodigal parable provides us with much encouragement, perhaps the soils story provides us with much warning.

What about you? There may be people reading this who started out attending a church with great enthusiasm. You heard the gospel and apparently received it with great joy. You loved to gather here with other believers. But now?

Now you grit your teeth as you arrive. You get angry when an elder enquires about your absence. You are on another planet when the Word of God is preached. You continually rebel against the appeal to gather with the body.

The sad reality is that some of you have abandoned the appeal of the light and are further into darkness than when you first started attending. You may no longer be fornicating; you may no longer be drunk; you may no longer be abusing drugs; but you are in deep, deep darkness. As Jesus warned, your light has become darkness, “If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” You are in serious trouble. And if you do not repent, if you do not answer the divine invitation, then you will die and go straight to hell.

Amos 5:18 describes many who sit in churches, many who point the finger at others and who long for God's judgement upon their enemies. Be careful: "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! For what good is the day of the LORD to you? It will be darkness, and not light."

So I ask, with all sobriety, can you truly say, "I am now this; I am no longer that?"

Again, this little light, fundamentally, is not mine. It is Christ's. We see this in the final stanza of v. 14: "And Christ will give you light." As we saw at the beginning, this little light of mine is a miracle—because it is not a natural but rather is a supernatural light. It comes from Christ. Yes, as we have seen, we are to be stewards of this light. But if we completely ignore this light, if we blow off all admonitions to "let your light so shine before men" (Matthew 5:16) to the glory of God, then it is pretty clear that we have no concern for the glory of God—probably because we have never experienced the grace of God.

But, if you want this grace, then humble yourself and heed the call of Christ.

Of course, for this to occur, you will need to open your eyes and ears; and only God can do that. Beg Him for repentance and give heaven no rest until He graciously rains gospel mercy on you; give God no rest until He translates and transforms you. Give Him no rest until you are no longer darkness but are rather light in the Lord.

Send the Light

Again, these verses provide us with wonderful encouragement that, when it comes to this little light of mine, it is not actually so little. God can use it to expose the darkness of those enslaved to sin while simultaneously delivering them to the kingdom of His dear Son. We must *shine* and *speak* and *send* this light to those who yet sit in darkness, so that they might repent and enter the kingdom of light, producing, over time, the fruit of this light (Matthew 4:16–17).

At BBC, we are committed to the Great Commission. We support a number of missionaries. We have sent, and continue to sacrificially send, them to places of great spiritual darkness. We do this because we believe in the power of the gospel to transform sons of disobedience into children of light. We do this because the light that we *have*, the light that we *are*, is not ours; rather it is *God's*, and we are called to properly and to productively steward it. A huge part of the stewardship of His light is the exporting of it. We have an excess, as it were, of this light and so, like Eskom, we distribute to others who need it—even to those who do not *realise* that they need it.

Someone has said that the light that shines the furthest shines the brightest at home. That is a helpful missiological concept. As BBC stewards God's light, as we walk as children of light, we will no doubt continue to shine the light further and further, for the good of those who presently sit in darkness and ultimately, to the glory of God.

I have sought to faithfully shine the light of the glorious gospel of God in this place. I have sought to display the light of Christ before your eyes. Yet I understand that only God can

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shine this light into the heart. I hope that He has done this. But if you are still darkness, you have no one to blame but yourself. Paul makes this clear in this exhortation: "Awake.... Arise!" what will you do? Will remain spiritually stupefied in careless slumber? Will you choose to remain a spiritually decaying corpse? Or will you wake up, get up and give up your sin as you look up to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of sinners, the one who shines His light into this dark world?

Do it. Do it now and experience God's miracle of a life transferred and a life transformed.

AMEN