

Speaking the Truth in Love (Eph 4:15): Life in the New Covenant Community¹

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Introduction and Overview

In the first half of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, all of his readers, the ancient Ephesians as well as us today, are called by the Triune God to a destiny beyond our imagination. This destiny is revealed in the Father's love for us before he made the world, the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ to free us from the destructive broken relationship between Creator and creation caused by human rebellion, and the gift of the Spirit as his guarantee that he has not only started but will finish his work in us. He has begun a new creation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Jesus burst from the tomb on that first Easter, he was the first man in the new creation. By believing in Jesus we are joined to him. We become part of the new creation. We form the new humanity (2:15) that God is creating. Unlike the first creation where God began by making the world and afterwards made creatures to live in his world, in the new creation he has begun by creating the new humanity and later will renew the world in which they are to live. The cross has brought not only peace in our relationship to God, but also reconciliation in ruptured human relations (2:11-18). Thus both Jew and Gentile are forged together into the new humanity, which is called the church. The doxology which begins the letter shows that Paul understands all of this to be the blessing of God to the nations through Abraham.

Paul then explains in the second half of

his letter (chapters 4-6) how we who are called by God are to fulfill his plan and purpose in practical terms of day to day living while we are still in the old world that has not yet been given final judgment. How do we live up to this destiny? First, he focuses on the unity intrinsic to the covenant community of the new humanity (4:1-6), and second, he shows how the diversity within the community is in fact the gift of the risen Christ to enable us to grow up and mature (4:7-16). The goal for the new humanity is to become like Christ, the first man (in the new creation²).

Just as Jewish rabbis discussed behaviour required by the Torah, so Paul describes next, from 4:17 to 6:20, the conduct or Christian Halakah³ stipulated in the new Torah,⁴ the Teaching of Christ.⁵ He delineates the behaviour, the conduct, and lifestyle required in the new creation community. The broad outlines of this section are well known. He begins in 4:17-24 by commanding his readers to lay aside the old humanity and adopt the new humanity and ends in 5:6-14 by talking about moving from darkness to light. These paragraphs form bookends for a well defined unit. In between, we have specific commands and instructions about life for each member of the new covenant community. Next, Paul describes different relationships inside and outside the covenant community that are now altered and transformed by our new calling and destiny: in 5:15-33 the relationships in

marriage between husband and wife, in 6:1-4 the relationships between parents and children, in 6:5-9 the relationships between masters and slaves, and in 6:10-20 our relationship to the enemy and spiritual warfare.

The Shape of the Text in 4:17-6:20

While the general outline of Eph 4:1-6:20 is well understood, the covenantal framework intrinsic to the literary structure and the role of speaking the truth in love within the text as a whole need to be detailed further in order to grasp fully the apostle's message.

Overview of 4:1-6:20:

What the Christian Calling Means in Practical Terms

- (1) Unity, Diversity, and Maturity in the Body of Christ 4:1-16
- (2) Life according to the New Creation Community 4:17-5:14
 - A From Old Humanity to New 4:17-24
 - B Specific Instructions 4:25-5:5
 - A' From Darkness to Light 5:6-14
- (3) Relationships Within the New Creation Community 5:15-6:9
- (4) Relationships Without: Dark Powers and Spiritual Warfare 6:10-20

The section from 4:1-6:20 is arranged in four parts: (1) 4:1-16 forms an introduction to the section as a whole, (2) 4:17-5:14 represents the instructions or stipulations of the new covenant in general for each individual member of the new humanity, (3) 5:15-6:9 explicates how patience and humble submission urged at the outset in 4:2 is exhibited in particular in different relationships within the community, and (4) 6:10-20 fulfills a double role in (1) dealing with the dark powers that oppose the new humanity and (2) recapitulating and summarising the section (and letter)

as a whole.

There is, in a way, a parallel structure between this text and Exod 19:1-23:33. Exodus 19 forms an introduction to the covenant/instructions given to the people of God, Exod 20 constitutes the Ten Commandments (literally the Ten Words),⁶ the heart of the covenant and of Yahweh's instruction to his people, and Exod 21-23 details how the Ten Words work out in practical terms in different life situations. After the introduction in Eph 4:1-16, the section 4:17-5:14 is the Teaching of Christ for his people and as such, is the new covenant and new Torah/Instruction in a nutshell. Thus, 5:15-6:20 details the outworking of this teaching in different life situations. Contrary to the ideals of our American heritage in which we focus on the individual, Paul begins by focusing on community and on our corporate life together (4:1-16). Then, and only then, from 4:17 onwards, does he deal with day to day life as individuals. Even then, he is concerned largely with relationships. This is a timely concern for us today because individualism runs strong in our culture and in the American dream. We exalt the individual who can rise from circumstances of great deprivation or poverty and excel in sports, education, or acting, to become a national idol or even the President. There is, however, a strong emphasis in this text, as well as elsewhere in the Scriptures, on our belonging to a community and to our corporate role and responsibilities before considering our role as individuals.

The *key part* of the section, then, is 4:17-5:14 which details the covenant and its requirements for the renewed people of God. This part is further divided into three units. The units at the beginning and at the end are both general and moti-

vational. The middle unit, sandwiched between these bookends, contains the practical and specific instructions. We must pay attention to how Paul presents his teaching. It is important for those who preach and teach the Bible and for all Christians who study it. There is more space in the Bible devoted to encouragement and motivation than to constantly hammering people over the head with demands.

Behavioural Requirements of the New Creation/Covenant Community

The middle unit is 4:25-5:5. These verses are clearly marked as a unit because Paul delivers six commands/instructions. Each instruction is structured in the same way. First, the command is expressed negatively; second, the command is given positively; and third, the command is supported by a motivation clause. Slight variation is entailed in the second and sixth instruction. Thus the beginning of each of these instructions are marked off formally as follows (5:1-2 constitutes an interlude which will be explained shortly):

- (1) Do Not Use Falsehood
But Speak Truth 4:25
- (2) Do Use Anger But Do Not Sin 4:26-27
- (3) Do Not Steal But Work to
Give to the Needy 4:28
- (4) Do Not Use Corrupt Words
But Edify 4:29-30
- (5) Do Not Have a Mean Spirit
But Be Kind 4:31-32
LOVE ONE ANOTHER 5:1-2
- (6) No Impure Actions/Words
or Greed 5:3-5

The beginning and ending of this middle part (4:25-5:5) are also clearly marked. The conjunction “therefore” (*dio*) in v. 25 identifies implications from the preceding unit, and the asyndeton (i.e., no clause

connector) between 5:5 and 5:6 is a strong signal to mark the end of the second part and beginning of the third.

As already observed, the first and third parts, 4:17-24 and 5:6-14 respectively, form bookends to the central unit. They are the prologue and epilogue and are communicating essentially the same thing. Paul opens with a general appeal and exhortation to lay aside the old humanity and its lifestyle and adopt the new. The appeal is communicated metaphorically in terms of taking off old clothes and putting on new. Paul closes the section with motivation based upon images of darkness and light. Negatively, Christians must avoid greed and immorality because this behaviour will be judged. Positive motivation arises from the change which occurred when they were joined to Christ. This change is not a matter of being in an environment or surroundings of darkness and moving to a context of light. Rather, they themselves *were* darkness. When they were converted, it was their lives, not their surroundings that were transformed. They are now recreated as light.

The major section which follows, from 5:15 to 6:9, is frequently designated the “household code,”⁷ an expression which may obscure important connections between it and the preceding section in 4:17-5:14. The introduction to the second section and bridge between the two are verses 15-21 of chapter 5. Here getting drunk with wine as the doorway to all the corrupt practices of the old humanity is contrasted with being filled by the Spirit as the divine means for those united to Christ to fulfill his instructions as the new humanity. Recently commentators and exegetes have clarified considerably the meaning of “being filled with the Spirit.” This does not refer to the Holy Spirit as

the content filling us. As Hoehner notes in his magisterial work, “nowhere in the NT does *plēroō* followed by *en* plus the dative indicate content.”⁸ Instead, it indicates the means provided by God the Spirit for letting the teaching of our King (i.e., the Torah of Christ) shape our thinking and conduct as the parallel to this verse in Col 3:16 makes plain. The participles in Eph 5:19-21 spell this out. When we incorporate Christ’s teaching in songs, both horizontally (to one another) and vertically (to the Lord), constantly give thanks for all things, and demonstrate the appropriate submission of certain groups to others in various relationships specified within the community, we are enabled to extend the instructions of 4:17-5:14 in practical ways to all of life in the new covenant community. Paul had spoken specifically of the instruction of the Messiah in 4:20-21. This instruction is listed in specific stipulations in 4:25-5:5. Now the introduction to the next major section, 5:15-21, shows the divine means by which these instructions, i.e., “the word of Christ,” are to be lived out in the new humanity. Thus the section 5:15-6:9 is linked to 4:17-5:14 in exactly the same way as Exod 21-23 is linked to the Ten Words in Exod 20 or the specific stipulations in Deut 12-26 flow from the basic instruction in 4:44-11:32.

Before the covenantal framework of this literary structure can be adequately appreciated, however, first the centrality of speaking the truth in love to the larger whole must be noted and also what Paul means by “speaking the truth in love.”

The Centrality of Speaking the Truth in Love

If there is any way to summarise in just a few words the instructions for behaviour and conduct in the new creation

community, it is “speaking the truth in love.” This expression is central to the structure of the text and forms as well as a complete and perfect summary of the instructions of the new covenant, at least on the horizontal level.

The introduction to the larger section is 4:1-16 which deals with integral unity, diversity, and maturity in the new humanity. Here Paul describes how the risen and reigning Christ has given gifts to the church. The gifts are leaders who equip the people to serve and build up the community. Negatively, the church must not be like children who are easily deceived. Positively, the church must grow up and mature. Verse 15 explains that this is by speaking the truth in love. We can see, then, that this is the key statement in this introductory section, and the key to the whole, because this section introduces the practical part of the letter.

The citation from Ps 68 reveals that Paul sees the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as parallel to the reign of Yahweh through the giving of the covenant/Law at Sinai.⁹ Psalm 68 recalls the triumphs of the Lord in the history of Israel as he revealed himself in an earth-shattering way at Sinai, as he led his people through the wilderness, as he defeated the Canaanites, and as he chose to set his sanctuary on Mount Zion. When he entered his sanctuary, he acquired captives and received gifts among men. The psalmist then looks to a future when not only Israel is united in the worship of the Lord, but all nations acknowledge the rule of Yahweh. This is fulfilled by Jesus, the Davidic Son who is now on the throne. By his death on the cross, Christ has met the big enemies of sin, Satan, and death and has utterly routed them. He has ransomed us from our sin, defeated the dark powers,

and conquered death. His resurrection is not a coming back to life, but the beginning of an entirely new creation, a new world. And after his resurrection, Jesus ascended to the highest heaven. This is none other than the one who is both Davidic King and Yahweh himself, entering the heavenly sanctuary/Zion. Just as Yahweh gave his covenant/instruction at Sinai and began to reign among his people from the sanctuary, so Paul pictures Jesus as Lord giving his new covenant/instruction and beginning to rule among his people from heaven.

The centre of this larger section is 4:25-5:5 (bounded on either side with 4:17-24 and 5:6-14 as bookends). Here Paul details, as the instruction or Torah of Christ (see esp. 4:20), the requirements of the new covenant in six commands. It is noteworthy that the first of these six commands is about speaking truth with one another and that sandwiched between the fifth and sixth instructions at the end is a summary statement showing that all six commands are about conduct characterised by love and by such behaviour imitating God our Father. According to the structure of the text, then, speaking the truth in love is both at the heart of the new covenant stipulations and is also a short summary of it.

This central notion of speaking the truth in love was expressed in 4:15 by the Greek verb *alētheuō* whereas here in 4:25 the verb “speak” plus the noun “truth” is used as its object. For the former word, *alētheuō*, Bauer’s lexicon gives the meaning “be truthful, speak the truth.”¹⁰ Indeed, Greek verbs ending in *-euō* have the meaning “to act in a certain capacity or role.”¹¹ The verb *alētheuō*, then, means “to *act* truthfully.” Since this kind of action frequently involves our speech, a common

meaning is “to speak truthfully.” While the first of the six commands given by Paul is specifically about speaking, and indeed four or five of the six instructions either may or necessarily involve speech, “acting or being truthful” does sum up all of them.

And this acting or being truthful must be expressed in love, as the paragraph in 5:1-2 inserted between the fifth and sixth command indicates. This paragraph is a summary of all the commands and instructions. First, it condenses everything to one command or instruction. Second, it explains why this behaviour, this conduct, this lifestyle, is required of us: our actions and our words come from who we are. Ephesians 5:1-2 is directly related to 4:24 where we see that we have become part of the new creation in which the divine image is restored. The conduct of the new humanity must reflect the character and conduct of God himself. Third, since the cross is at the heart of who God is, it is also at the heart of who we are as his children. We can, therefore, define love as a *covenant commitment* to the other person demonstrated in actions that seek the well being of the other person.

Parallels between this communication of the new covenant and the Ten Words at the heart of the old covenant are hard to miss. The first four of the Ten Commands have to do with loving God and the last six have to do with loving our neighbour. In the new covenant, loving God has been replaced by loving Jesus, and loving our neighbour has been replaced by the one command of the Lord Jesus to love one another (see John 14:15 and 15:12). Since Paul is dealing with life in the covenant community, he focuses here on the horizontal part of the new Torah. Remarkably, this is set forth in six instructions just

as in the old covenant and can also be summarized by loving our neighbour (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39). In discussing the meaning of the expression in Lev 19:18, Malamet concludes that it means “to provide assistance” or “be useful” to our neighbour¹²—a definition harmonious with the greater revelation at the cross. In the middle section, then, the importance of speaking truth as a way of showing love is clear because it is the first command. Ephesians 5:15-6:9 shows how this is worked out in particular relationships.

The final section at the end of the letter, 6:10-20, as already noted, fulfills a dual role. Here Paul deals with the dark powers that oppose the new humanity and at the same time recapitulates and summarizes the section (and letter) as a whole.¹³ Drawing from Isa 11:4-5 and 59:17, Paul exhorts the church to adopt and use Yahweh’s own armor for warfare.¹⁴ What is fitting for the head is also fitting for the body in the new creation. And what is the first piece of the armor to be mentioned? It is the belt of truth!

We can see, then, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, the prominence in the arrangement and structure of the text given to speaking the truth. If there is any way to summarize in just a few words the instructions for behavior and lifestyle in the new creation community, it is “speaking the truth in love.”

The Old Testament Roots of “Speaking the Truth in Love”

It is clear that the expression “speaking the truth in love” is central to the message and structure of this text as a whole. But what is being communicated by this expression must be explored further. Is it simply being honest and telling the truth, yet at the same time, doing it in a kindly

way? Is this the way for the church to grow and mature until it measures up to Christ himself? Furthermore, if the expression “speaking the truth in love” summarises living up to the standards of the new humanity, what beyond mere obedience to the commands of Christ is the motivation for living this way? An illustration may help at this point. In your church you find a woman who says she is a Christian. She fears and distrusts all men because, in the innocence of her youth, she gave herself to one in marriage. Years of his brutality left her broken and scarred, but now in her current lesbian relationship she feels loved and safe. You might think, “Well I have to go to this person and in a loving way tell her the truth. I must tell her that this is sin in the eyes of God and that she must leave this relationship.” Is this what Paul’s instruction about “speaking the truth in love” really means?

Notice that the command to speak the truth, the first of the six instructions in 4:25-5:5, is actually a citation from the Old Testament. Paul is directly quoting Zech 8:16 and this citation opens a window into the frame of reference for his thinking. When Jesus and the apostles quote from the Old Testament, they expect you to know the context, because the part that is quoted is usually just the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, readers today are not so well versed in the Old Testament and so some discussion of the background is necessary.

The prophet Zechariah wrote to the Jewish people who were returning to their homeland after years of exile in Babylon. The book begins with a call to repent and a promise that if the people turn away from their sins and return to the Lord, he will return to them (Zech

1:3). A series of apocalyptic night visions from chapters 1-6 unfold the details of the return to Yahweh. Through these visions the prophet announces a return from exile far greater than just leaving Babylon and returning to Jerusalem. Their sins will be forgiven, the broken covenant will be renewed, the city of God will be restored, the temple will be rebuilt, and God the Lord will return to live once more in the midst of his people as King. The following outlines the development of these themes in the night visions:

7-8 on facing page).

Chiastic literary structures function to emphasize what is at the center. At the center here is 8:8b which employs the covenant formula, “They will be my people and I will be their God in faithfulness and righteousness.” Just a few lines earlier, in 8:3, we have the remarkable words, “I will return to Zion and I will settle in the midst of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth and the mountain of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies will be called the Holy Mountain.” This is a text, then, that

Summary of Zechariah’s Apocalyptic Night Visions	
1:7-17	A Yahweh is Omniscient King: He Knows the Problem of the Exiles
1:18-21	B Four Horns and Craftsmen: Punishing Nations Who Exiled Judah
2:1-13	The Return to Jerusalem and Restoration of Zion (i.e., the Exiles)
3:1-10	C Office of High Priest Restored—Symbol of Future Removal of Sin
4:1-14	C’ Power & Presence of Yahweh through Leaders to Rebuild Temple
5:1-4	B’ Israelite Covenant and Curses Effective in Restoration Community
5:5-11	The Sin/Wickedness of the Returned Exiles Removed to Babylon
6:1-8	A’ Yahweh is Omnipotent King: Punish Babylon Who Mistreated Zion

The program of restoration and return outlined in the night visions is crowned by chapters 7-8, a climactic section that moves from fasting to feasting, i.e., the fasting of the people because of the end of the exile and the celebration of the restored Zion. M. Butterworth has demonstrated that the entire section is a chiastically structured unit—the first paragraph matches the last paragraph, the second matches the second-to-last, and so on¹⁵ (See Chiastic Structure of Zechariah

focuses on the covenant between God and his people being renewed and the return of Yahweh to Zion. As a result, Jerusalem will be called the city of truth. This is exactly the topic and theme of Eph 4:1-6:20. Paul is describing the new covenant and showing that “speaking the truth” results in the covenant community life. Appropriately, he cites Zech 8:16 since this verse describes in practical terms what it means for Jerusalem to regain its title as City of Truth: “But this is what you must

Chiastic Structure of Zechariah 7 – 8⁶

A (7:2) Bethel sends men to entreat the favor of Yahweh.

B (7:3) Question about fasting.

(7:5-7) Off-putting response: What was behind the fasting?

Remember the words of the former prophets when the land was settled and prosperous.

C (7:9-10) Give court decisions that are just.

Show compassion and loyalty in relationships.

Do not devise evil and harm against one another.

D (7:11-14) They refused the words of the former prophets.

Therefore came great *wrath* from the Lord.

The people were exiled among the nations.

The land became desolate.

E (8:2-8a) I was jealous with great jealousy and wrath.

I will . . . *dwell in the midst of Jerusalem.*

Promise of blessing for a *remnant of this people.*

I will **save** from . . . east and west.

They will *dwell in the midst of Jerusalem*

F (8:8b) They will be my people and I will be their God.

E' (8:9-13) Let your hands be strong.

Promise of blessing for a *remnant of this people.*

You were a curse among the nations.

I will **save** you.

You will be a blessing.

Fear not. Let your hands be strong.

D' (8:14-15) As I purposed evil when . . . provoked me to *wrath*

So now I purpose to do good. *Fear not.*

C' (8:16-17) Give court decisions that are just and bring well-being.

Speak truth with one another.

Do not devise evil and harm against one another.

B' (8:18-19) Fasts will become feasts, so love shalom and truth.

A' (8:20-23) Many will come to entreat the favour of Yahweh.

Blessing will flow to the nations through Jews.

do: Tell the truth to each other. Render verdicts in your courts that are just and that lead to peace.”¹⁷ Clearly speaking the truth in Zechariah is operating in the context of social justice within the community.

Now if we are discerning readers of Zech 8, we will quickly realize that Zechariah is reacting and responding to the earlier message of Isaiah. The book of Zechariah is, in fact, dense in allusions to earlier portions of Scripture, particularly, Isaiah. And he uses earlier passages of Scripture in much the same way as Jesus and the apostles did—or better, apostolic interpretation of scripture follows models already found in the Old Testament. We must pursue the trail of the City of Truth back to Isaiah.

Isaiah commences his preaching like a thunderstorm. His opening sermon is full of lightning and thunder. God is so upset with the behaviour of his covenant people that the prophet exclaims, “the faithful city has become a whore, a prostitute” (1:21). The Hebrew word for faithful here comes from the same root as the word for truth in Zech 8:3, 16.

The messages of the prophets are sometimes quite shocking. Prophets functioned as spokesmen for God, raised up to call attention to the failure of the people of God to be covenant keepers. They confronted the people of God and exposed the clever and devious ways by which they had gradually slipped away from the standards defined by the covenant at Sinai for a proper relationship with God and proper treatment of each other. The prophets were giants in the art and skill of communication, employing every conceivable method possible, yet all of their statements, their promises and threats, are based on the covenant God made with Israel, especially as found in its fullest

form in the book of Deuteronomy.¹⁸

As Isaiah and other prophets sought to apply the covenant with Moses and Israel to their situation and times, they found new ways to condense and summarise in a single sentence or even phrase the apparently unwieldy mass of commands and instructions in the Torah. Even the Ten Words/Commandments upon which some six hundred or so instructions are based could be further condensed and summarised.¹⁹

The heart of Isaiah’s message is that the covenant between God and Israel given by Moses at Sinai is broken. He summarises this covenant, the Ten Commandments, using expressions or idioms for social justice and faithful loyal love, or being truthful in love. His expression for social justice will be described and illustrated first. Note Isaiah’s prophecy in 16:5:

In love a throne will be established;
in faithfulness a man will sit
on it—
one from the house of David—
one who in judging seeks justice
and speeds the cause of
righteousness (NIV).

In contrast to the regime of the kings of Isaiah’s time, a future king is promised who will rule in justice and righteousness. Now according to the Hebrew poetry—which is based upon lines in parallel pairs—justice is matched in the first line by righteousness in the second. Normally in prose when the words justice and righteousness are coordinated, they form a single concept or idea: social justice. This is a figure of speech known as a hendiadys, one concept expressed through two words. The word-pair becomes an idiom expressing a single thought that is both different and greater than just putting the two words together. Just as one cannot analyse “butterfly” in English by studying

“butter” and “fly,” so one cannot determine the meaning of this expression by analysing “justice” and “righteousness” individually. Hebrew poetry, however, allows such a word-pair to be split so that half is in one line of the couplet and half in the parallel line. Now Isaiah’s promise in 16:5 is based upon Deut 17. Verses 16-20 of Deut 17 describe the manner in which the future king of Israel is to exercise his responsibilities. Following three negative commands in vv. 16-17 are three positive commands in vv. 18-20—all relating to Torah: (1) the king shall copy the Torah; (2) the king shall have the Torah with him; and (3) the king shall read the Torah.²⁰ In other words, the only positive requirement is that the king embodies Torah as a model citizen. This is exactly what Isaiah is saying in 16:5, except he employs the concept “social justice,” expressed by the broken word-pair “justice–righteousness” as a *summary* for the Torah.²¹ Deuteronomy calls for a king who implements the Torah in his regime, and Isaiah predicts a king who will deliver social justice in his rule. They are saying the same thing.

The meaning of the word-pair “justice–righteousness” both as an *expression* for social justice and as a *summary* of the covenant/Torah is also clearly illustrated, in particular, in chapter 5, a damning indictment of the “City of Truth” constructed as a series of six woes. Another instance of the broken word-pair “justice–righteousness” is embedded in 5:7, the headline for the section, showing that the violation of social justice is at the heart of all six woes. In the first woe the prophet thunders about land-grabbing: “Woe to those who add house to house and field to field” (5:8). The second woe (5:11) condemns the partying of the nouveaux riches whose money came from mistreating the poor

and vulnerable. The final four woes are all ways of elaborating the original charge of perverting social justice. The last woe is the climax and summarises by combining the two original charges of gaining wealth by social injustice and living a life of pleasure to spend that wealth. Between the two groups of woes Isaiah announces punishments based upon the retributive justice of the covenant/Torah. Of major import in this judgment unit is the broken word-pair “justice–righteousness” (5:16) attributed to the Lord in contrast to the Judean nobility: he is completely devoted to (i.e., holy) and exalted in demonstrating social justice; indeed the covenant/Torah is an expression of his own character.

The economic and social situation addressed by Isaiah in chapter 5 signals the breakdown of conventions governing ownership of property.²² Prior to the monarchic period, Israelite economy was based on farming and shepherding. Property was inherited and preserved within *clans*—a kin group between the extended family and the tribe. Diverse instructions in the Mosaic covenant were given to preserve economic equilibrium in ownership of property and protect the poor and powerless, e.g., laws concerning boundary markers,²³ female inheritance rights,²⁴ levirate marriage,²⁵ *goel* responsibilities,²⁶ and jubilee/sabbatical years.²⁷ Two factors brought changes to this social system: monarchy and urbanization. With the advent of kingship, land could be acquired by the crown: sometimes corruptly as in the case of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kgs 21) and sometimes legally through the confiscation of the estates of criminals and traitors. Thus, a family inheritance could be enlarged by a royal grant. Samuel warned about this in 1 Sam 8:14-15. Recipients of such royal largesse

would live in the capital city and eat every day at the king's table, all the while enjoying the revenue of their holdings. In this way, important nobles and officials, especially those who ingratiated themselves to the king and his henchmen, were in a position to acquire by legal and illegal means the property of those vulnerable to oppression.

On the other hand, the development and growth of cities created new ties between peasant farmers and a new class of merchants who usually lived in the towns and influenced public affairs. When a farmer suffered economic setbacks from crop failure due to drought or locusts, for example, he would turn to a merchant or moneylender in town. He would either be charged interest for a loan or be forced to cultivate land belonging to others on a share-cropping or tenant basis. We have documents from the Jewish community in Elephantine, Egypt, from the fifth-century B.C. that tell of Jews who had to pay interest rates of five percent per month. When unpaid interest is added to the capital, the average annual rate is sixty percent.²⁸

As agricultural plots become the property of a single owner (perhaps an absentee landlord who is a city dweller), as peasants become indentured serfs or even slaves, and as their goods and services are received as payments on loans, the gap between the rich and poor widens. Since land ownership translates into economic and political power, issues of property rights and taxes, as well as laws concerning bankruptcy, foreclosures and loans, fall into the hands of the rich, thus aiding and abetting a gap in power as well.

The situation which Isaiah condemns is graphically portrayed: large estates amassed by adding field to field on which

sit "large and beautiful homes" (5:9b). The acquisition of land comes as debts are foreclosed and the property is expropriated. Since all of this is done according to the laws of the marketplace and by statute, it is all strictly legal—but utterly immoral and violates the social justice of the Torah. This is a powerful demonstration of the parable of the vineyard at work: everything looks legal and proper on the outside, but a closer inspection shows the grapes are rotten and stinking and stunted. The image of a landowner dwelling all alone in the midst of the country is a picture of great horror. While American society idolises and praises rugged individualism, ancient Israel valued the community over the individual. The interests of the group were more important than those of a single individual, no matter how clever or skilled and talented the entrepreneur. It is difficult, therefore, for us to feel the horror of ending up as a society of one.

Readers may well wonder if discussion of Isa 5 is not a digression from the topic at hand, i.e., discovering the meaning of "speaking the truth" in Ephesians. Yet, as already noted, in the last section of Ephesians when Paul exhorts the church to adopt and use Yahweh's own armour for warfare, he draws specifically from Isa 11:4-5 and 59:17. The first passage brings to a climax promises of a coming scion of David, indeed a new David, whose rule will be characterised by social justice. Isaiah 11:3b-5 states,

He will not judge by what he
sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears
with his ears;
but with righteousness he will
judge the needy,
with justice he will give
decisions for the poor of the
earth.

He will strike the earth with
the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he
will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash
around his waist (NIV).

Paul's "belt of truth" comes from the last part of v. 5: "faithfulness [will be] the sash around his waist." The word "faithfulness" translates *'emûnâ* and is related to *'emeth*, the usual word for truth. Both are derived from a root meaning to be firm or faithful. The NIV speaks of the belt and the sash of the king. The Hebrew word actually means girdle or loincloth. This is the most basic garment of all our clothing. Even today underclothes are called foundation garments. The foundation of this kingdom is righteousness and faithfulness. Verse 4 combines justice and righteousness to communicate the idea of social justice. The future king will be a true son of God as required by 2 Sam 7:14-15 because he will exhibit in his rule the social justice of the Torah (Deut 17:16-20), which is an expression of the character of Yahweh himself. Chapter 59, the other Isaianic text from which Paul draws his depiction of the armour of the Lord, contains three occurrences of the broken word-pair "justice–righteousness." It is significant, then, that between Isa 11 and 59 almost one-quarter of the occurrences of this word-pair in Isaiah are alluded to by Paul in his description of the armour of God.²⁹

Discussion of the Isaianic background to Ephesians can be concluded by returning to 16:5. The first part of the verse contains another word-pair split over lines in poetic parallelism: "lovingkindness and truth" (Hebrew: *hesed* and *'emeth*). This word-pair is also a *summary* of the relationship entailed in the covenant/Torah.

It is difficult to find an equivalent for *hesed* in English that adequately encompasses all it means (usually "lovingkindness" in NASB), and this term has occasioned numerous studies during the last hundred years. It is normally used in a covenant relationship between two parties—a stronger party and a weaker party. It refers to the obligation of the stronger party to help the weaker party. An excellent example is Gen 47:29:

When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt" (NASB).

Here we have a family relationship, a father and a son. In this context the son is stronger and the dying father is weaker. The son must show covenant kindness and loyalty by fulfilling the father's wish to be buried in Canaan. Genesis 47:29 employs the same word-pair as in Isa 16:5.

The function of the word-pair "lovingkindness and truth" (*hesed* and *'emeth*) as a summary of the covenant/Torah is illustrated nicely by Ps 117. Although this is the shortest hymn in Israel's Hymnal, it functions like a dissertation abstract, summing up the whole: Yahweh is to be praised for his covenantal faithfulness and love. This, in sum, is what Israel has experienced in covenant relationship with God.

The Covenant as Social Justice and True Humanity

We have considered the word-pairs "justice–righteousness" and "lovingkindness–truth" as summaries of the covenant/Torah. Both social justice and faithful loyal love are expressions of

the character of Yahweh and of conduct expected in the covenant community where Yahweh is King. Although Paul's expression "speaking the truth in love" is closer linguistically to the word-pair "lovingkindness-truth," his direct and indirect use of Isaiah and Zechariah show his thinking is also based upon the word-pair "justice-righteousness." Each word-pair summarises the Torah of Moses in a different way.

Before returning to Eph 4-6, a brief sketch of the pre-history of the Mosaic covenant/Torah can cast further light on both the covenantal framework of Paul's teaching and the meaning of "speaking the truth in love." Without consideration of how the communication in Ephesians fits into the larger story, our understanding will be flat and one-dimensional.

The concepts of faithful love and social justice are actually found on the opening pages of Scripture. According to Gen 1:26-28, humans are created as the divine image. Although gallons of ink have been spilled in the interpretation of the divine image, space permits here only a brief explanation summing up detailed study of this text. The creation of humans as the divine image involves a covenant relationship between humans and the creator God on the one hand and a covenant relationship between humans and the creation on the other hand. It is important to note that the divine image describes who we are as humans, how we are "hard-wired," our ontology. An understanding of the divine image in merely functional or relational terms is false.

The covenantal relationship with the creator God may be captured by the term sonship and is implied by Gens 5:1-3 as Dempster clearly states,

By juxtaposing the divine creation of Adam in the image of God and the subsequent human creation of Seth in the image of Adam, the transmission of the image of God through this genealogical line is implied, as well as the link between sonship and the image of God. As Seth is a son of Adam, so Adam is a son of God. Language is being stretched here as a literal son of God is certainly not in view, but nonetheless the writer is using an analogy to make a point.³⁰

The covenantal relationship between humans and the creation can be summed up by the terms kingship and servanthood. It is interesting to note, as Randall Garr has shown, that the ninth century B.C. Tell Fakhariyeh inscription uses the same words found in Gen 1:26: *šalma'* ("image") refers to the king's majestic self and power in relation to his subjects, while *dmûta'* ("likeness") refers to the king's petitionary role and relation to the deity.³¹ Thus the ancient Near Eastern data confirm and correspond exactly to this exegesis of the biblical text.

Genesis 2:4-25 casts further light on the divine image, showing that the Adamic son is like a priest in a garden sanctuary. He must first learn the ways of God in order to exercise the rule of God as God himself would.³² What is implied is that the faithful loyal love and social justice in the character of God himself will define both the God-human covenantal relationship and the human-world covenantal relationship.

The larger story of scripture moves rapidly to show that Israel inherited this Adamic role.³³ Yahweh refers to the nation as his son in Exod 4:22-23. The divine purpose in the covenant established between God and Israel at Sinai is unfolded in Exod 19:3-6. As a kingdom of priests they will function to make the ways of God known

to the nations and also bring the nations into a right relationship to God. Since Israel is located geographically on the one and only communications link between the great superpowers of the ancient world, in this position she will show the nations how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in a truly human way, and how to be faithful stewards of the earth's resources. This is the meaning of Israel's sonship.

Within the Mosaic covenant, Deut 17 intimates that the king will be the leader in this role. Earlier we already noted that the main and only requirement is that Israel's King model in his own behaviour and conduct and, hence, implement in his rule the faithful loyal love and social justice of the Lord himself as enshrined in the covenant/Torah.³⁴

At the heart of the divine image is a right relationship to God on the one hand and a right relationship to the world on the other. It can be summarised by social justice or by lovingkindness and truth, i.e., being truthful in love. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and chaos and death resulted. God made a new start with Noah, but this, too, ended in chaos and destruction. Finally, he made another new start with Abraham and his descendants. The covenant at Sinai shows Abraham's seed how to have a right relationship to God and also how to treat each other in a truly human way, how to be God's true Adamic son and servant king in the world.

In both Exodus and Deuteronomy the Mosaic covenant/Torah is divided into two sections: (1) the Ten Commandments/Words and (2) the Judgments. All the Judgments in Exod 21-23 and the Detailed Stipulations in Deut 12-26 flow from the Ten Commandments and express

further how they work out in practical terms. The Ten Words also have a bipartite structure.³⁵ The first four commands show how to have a right relationship to God and the last six how to have a right relationship to each other as humans. Although these instructions are given negatively, as prohibitions, they could be restated in positive terms as the basic rights of every human: (1) "You must not murder" is the right of every person to their own life, (2) "You must not commit adultery" is the right of every person to their own home, (3) "You must not steal" is the right of every person to their own property, (4) "You must not testify falsely against your neighbour" is the right of every person to their own reputation. No society can endure that does not respect the basic inalienable rights of every person. Thus the last six commands can be paralleled in the law codes of other societies in the ancient Near East: The Laws of Ur-Nammu (2064-2046 B.C.), The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar (1875-1864 B.C.), The Laws of Eshnunna (nineteenth century B.C.), The Code of Hammurabi (eighteenth century B.C.), The Middle Assyrian Laws (twelfth Century B.C.) and the Old Hittite Laws (seventeenth - fifteenth centuries B.C.). But in the Mosaic covenant/Torah, why are these commands given negatively instead of positively? And why are they expressed in the second person singular instead of plural? Because when you say "You must not murder" it means that each and every individual in the community must think first about the right of his neighbour to his life, not first about his own rights.³⁶ In other words, all of these commands are about social justice, they are about being faithful to love my neighbour as myself, and—in terms of the larger story, about being fully and truly human, i.e.,

fulfilling the covenant obligations of the divine image.

The Covenantal Framework of Paul's Teaching

The Mosaic covenant/Torah and the larger story that informs it is clearly the background to Paul's statements in Ephesians. Just as the old covenant at Sinai has six commands describing lovingkindness and truth which Jesus encapsulated by saying "love your neighbour as yourself," so Paul's instruction/torah to the new covenant community are six commands which can also be summarised by "speaking the truth in love." When Paul talks about speaking the truth in love, then, he means the same thing as faithfulness and lovingkindness in the Old Testament. The same social justice that underlies the old covenant underlies the new.

These connections both to the old covenant and also to the larger story beginning in Gen 1 are *consciously* made by Paul. It is no accident that the first command in his list is about speaking the truth, and the grand summary in Eph 5:1-2 inserted before the last command is about acting in love so that love and truth form both parentheses and a summary of his instructions just as it does in the old covenant. It is also no accident when Paul says in 5:1-2 that when we love one another we imitate God—a clear reference to the divine image. There is further direct reference to the divine image in the bookend sections in 4:17-24 and 5:6-14. In 4:24 Paul commands us to put on the new humanity that is "created according to God in righteousness and holiness which derives from the truth"—a direct reference to renewing the divine image, as the parallel in Col 3:10 shows. Righteousness and holiness are mentioned

here not as elements of the divine image, but as facets of being truthful in love in a covenant relationship, for this is what defines the divine image. Likewise, in 5:9, the closing bookend section, Paul speaks of the fruit of light as goodness, righteousness and truth, summaries of the divine image as covenant relationship. And in 4:21, at the outset, he says that truth is in Jesus, because just as the old covenant is an expression of the character of Yahweh, so the new covenant is an expression of the character of Jesus, whose self-sacrifice in 5:2 lifts matters to a new level. Even the verb *marturomai* ("solemnly testify") in 4:17 is reminiscent of calling the old covenant the "Testimony" and so establishes a covenantal context.³⁷ The motivation for being truthful in 4:25 is that we are members of one another, i.e., we are a covenant community.

The Meaning of Speaking the Truth in Love

The meaning of the phrase "speaking the truth in love" cannot be uncovered by simply cracking a Greek lexicon or even performing an exhaustive lexical study. The biblical theological background and framework must first be understood. In the new covenant community, loyalty to Jesus has replaced the command to love God in the old covenant,³⁸ and speaking the truth in love sums up the social justice of our relationships in the new humanity.³⁹

Earlier a question was raised, "What do I say to a person who believes she now feels loved and safe in a lesbian relationship?" What does speaking the truth in love mean in such situations? According to a biblical theological understanding of Eph 4-6, such a lifestyle is not only morally wrong, it is a form of social injustice

and leads to being less than fully human. While homosexuality remains a real problem, our churches must face the fact that the problems of adultery and the failure of marriage relationships to reflect the realities of the new covenant are just as serious in the sight of God.

Understanding “speaking the truth in love” changes how we treat each other in the church. After all, are we not just a bunch of sinners whom God has brought together? How do we accomplish our goals and objectives? Do we plan behind the backs of others to get things to work out our way, or are we conscious that we are in a covenant community that is the new humanity. And it is only this humanity which will survive divine judgment and enter the new heavens and the new earth. Do we treat each other with faithful, loyal love? We must obey these instructions because only in this way can we attain social justice, only in this way can we become truly human. Any other path will lead us to lose what it means to be truly human.

ENDNOTES

¹I acknowledge with gratitude Daniel I. Block, Chip Hardy, and John Meade for constructive criticism of earlier drafts of this paper. They not only rescued me from many mistakes, but stimulated my thinking in significant ways. Conversations with Dan Block I have especially treasured.

²Combining Eph 4:13 and Col 1:18b.

³Note how six of eight occurrences of the term *peripateō*, i.e. conduct, lifestyle, *halakah*, employed in Ephesians by Paul (2:2, 10; 4:1, 17 (x 2); 5:2, 8, 15) are concentrated in this section.

⁴Many Christians think of Torah mainly as Law, i.e., the Law of Moses. Two

important facts should shape our thinking about Torah. First, the Hebrew word *tôrâ* means “direction” or “instruction.” See L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, 3rd ed. by W. Baumgartner, J. J. Stamm and B. Hartmann (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967-1995), s.v. Second, these “instructions” are given in the form of a covenant. The Torah, then, is unlike any law code in the ancient Near East. It is a set of directions for living in the framework of a covenant relationship. Here “instruction” and “Torah” are employed interchangeably to try and keep these truths in focus.

⁵Pauls refers directly to the Instruction/Teaching/Torah of Christ in Eph 4:20. This is also equivalent to “the Word of Christ” in Col 3:16.

⁶Called the “ten words” in Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; and 10:4. They are referred to as commandments in the New Testament (Matt 19:18, 19; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Rom 13:9; 7:7, 8; Matt 5; 1 Tim 1:9, 10).

⁷See, e.g., Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 405-09.

⁸Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 703.

⁹Justin Martyr eloquently connected Jesus’ crucifixion and his reign: “the Lord has reigned from the tree” (*First Apology* 41.4).

¹⁰“Wahrhaftig sein, die Wahrheit reden,” Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur* (6th ed., rev. and ed. by K. Aland and B. Aland; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 70.

¹¹J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A*

Grammar of New Testament Greek (vol. 2, *Accidence and Word-Formation*; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929), 398-400.

¹²A. Malamat, “‘You Shall Love Your Neighbour as Yourself’: A Case of Misinterpretation,” in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. E. Blum, C. Macholz, and E. W. Stegemann; Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1990), 111-15.

¹³See, e.g., O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 459.

¹⁴The expression “man of war” is applied to Yahweh both in the exodus (Exod 15:3) and in descriptions of the new exodus (Isa 42:13) which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

¹⁵Mike Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah* (JSOT Supplement Series 130; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 149-65.

¹⁶Adapted from *ibid.*, 163.

¹⁷Zechariah 8:17 reinforces this teaching negatively, just as v. 16 expresses it positively: “Now do not devise evil in your heart against each other and do not love false oaths.”

¹⁸See especially Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (trans. Hugh Clayton White; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

¹⁹See Matt 22:36-40.

²⁰I am indebted to Daniel Block for the privilege of consulting a preliminary version of his forthcoming commentary on Deuteronomy. Part of his research is available in Daniel I. Block, “The Burden of Leadership: The Mosaic Paradigm of Kingship (Deut. 17:14-20),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 259-78.

²¹Some eighteen or nineteen instances

of the word-pair “justice–righteousness,” frequently split over poetic parallelism, occur in Isaiah: 1:21, 27; 5:7, 16; 9:6(7); 11:4; 16:5; 26:9; 28:17; 32:1, 16; 33:5; 51:5; 56:1; 58:2(x 2); 59:4, 9, 14. In 11:4; 51: 5; and 59:4, verbal forms of the root *šaphat* are employed instead of the noun *mišpat*; the instance in 51:5 is not listed in the rather exhaustive and excellent study of Leclerc although it appears as valid as the instance in 11:4. See Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), esp. 10-13, 88, 157.

²²This description of the background to the social situation in Isa 5 is adapted from and based upon Leclerc (*Yahweh is Exalted in Justice*, 59-60), who brings together many seminal studies on the topic.

²³Deut 19:14; 27:17.

²⁴Num 26:33; 27:1-11; 36:1-13.

²⁵Deut 25:5-10; Ruth 4:5, 10.

²⁶Redemption of property (Lev 25:23-28), of persons (25:47-55), of blood (Num 35), levirate marriage (Ruth 4:5, 10) by the nearest relative.

²⁷Leviticus 25.

²⁸If one considers compounded (or unpaid) interest, the rate would be higher.

²⁹Isa 11:4; 59:4, 9, 14.

³⁰S. Dempster, *Dominion, Dynasty and David: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (InterVarsity, 2003), 58-59.

³¹W. Randall Garr, “‘Image’ and ‘Likeness’ in the Inscription from Tell Fakhariyeh,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 50, nos. 3-4 (2003): 227-34.

³²See Gordon J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of

Eden Story,” in *‘I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood’* (ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns: 1994), 399-404; William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 24-25; and M. Hutter, “Adam als Gärtner und König (Gen. 2:8, 15),” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 30 (1985): 258-62.

³³Exodus 15:17 shows that Canaan becomes for Israel what the garden sanctuary was for Adam. See also N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 21-23.

³⁴See Block, “The Burden of Leadership,” 259-78.

³⁵There are different approaches to numbering the Ten Commandments in Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant traditions. This does not affect the general observations offered in this paragraph.

³⁶I owe this insight to Daniel Block. N.B. This is also the thrust of Zech 8:16.

³⁷Cf. “the tablets of testimony” (Exod 31:18; 32:15; 34:29) and the “ark of the testimony” (Exod 25:22, 26; 30:6, 26; 39:35; 40:3, 5, 21).

³⁸Hence John 14:15.

³⁹The claim that social justice sums up the requirements of the stipulations for the new creation/covenant community must be considered in context. These instructions are given to a people who are *already justified and forgiven* so that they may know how to live and treat each other in the community which models for the rest of the world life in the new creation. In Eph 1:13-14, Paul equates “the word of

truth” with “the gospel of your salvation.” Nonetheless, the gospel that Paul preached included justification, daily growth in holiness both individually and in relationships in the covenant community, and final redemption. Thus there is no conflict between “speaking the truth” as social justice and “the word of truth” in terms of believing the gospel and being saved. In addition, since the character and righteousness of God expressed in the old covenant is not different from that expressed in the new covenant—although doubtless brought to fuller light in the new covenant in greater fullness—there is continuity between the social justice we see in the Old Testament and the teaching of Paul in the New.