

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

EPHESIANS 4.28: THIEVES IN THE CHURCH

E.A.Best

It is first necessary to set this text within the ongoing argument of the epistle. After the initial address (1.1f) the author (he was probably not Paul, though if he was this would make no difference to the understanding of this text) in a eulogistic prayer (1.3-14) shows God's intention toward the world of his making; he is redeeming it through what he has done in Jesus Christ. The readers have been enlightened to understand this and Christ has been elevated to God's right hand (1.15-23). Previously the readers had been dead in sin, now saved by God's grace they sit with Christ in heaven (2.1-10). God's Jewish people would never have expected this to happen to the readers since the readers had not previously been Jews but Gentiles; now however they belong with Jewish Christians in the one church, God's temple, in which his Spirit dwells (2.11-22). In bringing this about Paul had had a double role as recipient of the instruction that Gentiles were to be received and as chief instrument in the carrying out of that instruction (3.1-13). The recognition of God's goodness in this leads the author to a final paean of praise (3.14-21).

Now that he has outlined the plan of God's salvation and shown his readers' place within it the author turns to the way they should live in the community God has created for them, and this occupies him to the end of the letter (4.1 - 6.20). Prior to turning to the details of behaviour he sketches the nature of the community of which they are members (4.1-16). It is the body of Christ, of which he is head. Its members have received spiritual gifts for the good of the community and they should use them to build up their fellow members. It is important to note that the author does not describe these gifts in terms of how they might be used to win others to the community or to ameliorate social conditions in the world outside. The body of Christ is looked at in terms of its inward life rather than as a body with a duty to those not belonging to it.

Before taking up the details of conduct the author again reminds his readers of the life they have left; once they lived in a world that was alienated from God; now they are new people (4.17-24) with a new type of existence. Outlining this new existence occupies him until almost at the close of the letter he reminds them of the spiritual help they may receive in what is essentially a contest with evil spiritual powers (6.10-18).

We return now to the beginning of the discussion of the details of conduct. In 4.15-29 the author sets down four parallel injunctions on speaking the truth, on not being angry, on not stealing and on speaking to others in such a way as to build up the community. Each injunction starts with a negative statement followed by one on the type of conduct required and ends

with a motivation. The first injunction sets the limits of the discussion. Believers are members of the same body, not humanity as a whole but the church, and so they should speak the truth to one another. We might have expected him to instruct believers to tell the truth whether they were dealing with non-Christians or Christians but what he writes is in line with what he said in discussing the nature of the church; his concern is with the inner relationship of its members rather than with their relation to the outside world. It is not that he advocates the abandonment of truth telling when dealing with non-Christians; for some reason of his own which he does not disclose he is not interested in detailing conduct toward unbelievers. This we shall see holds true also for the verse which is our main concern.

In v.28 the subject changes abruptly (there is no connecting particle) from not being angry to theft, though of course remaining within the area of obvious moral error. The plural of the preceding verses also changes to the masculine singular. In the previous exhortations the plural, though masculine, is to be taken as covering both sexes; here the singular cannot, and the masculine is appropriate since the exhortation goes on to argue that those who have stolen should instead earn money. This was something which women in most parts of the ancient world could not do.

While it is probable that lying (v.25) and anger (vv.26,27) were connected in some Jewish paraenesis (*Testament of Daniel* 1.3; 2.1; 3.5f; 4.6f; 5.1; 6.8) there is no reason to suppose that theft was also joined with them; its presence here may then either have been due to a connection with them in early Christian catechetical instruction or, more probably, our author for his own reasons has introduced the new subject. It would be certainly wrong to suppose a connection in thought between v.26 and v.28 as if the anger mentioned in v.26 came from Christians who were infuriated at fellow members who had been stealing and did not support the community.¹ Theft however appears in two of the lists of vices given in the N.T. (1 Cor 6.10; 1 Pet 4.15; cf *Didache* 3.5), and may have been more common than we would expect. While the lying of members (v.25) and their anger against one another (v.26f) would disturb communal living it is not implied that those who are accused of stealing stole from fellow members. On the other hand the new conduct required from thieves would bring positive benefit to the community, and it is this which may have served to tie in our verse with vv.25-7. As a sin theft differs from lying and anger in that probably only a few

¹ As G. Agnell, *Work, Toil and Sustenance* (Lund, 1976), p. 128, supposes.

members of the community would have committed it. Occasionally commentators (e.g. Hodge) express surprise at its inclusion as a sin to which Christians were open. Yet in some societies theft is endemic ('it fell off the back of a lorry', 'everyone does it'); indeed the sexual sins in which some of the Corinthian Christians indulged are in a way equally surprising for church members. The inclusion of theft as a possible sin in the exhortation gives us some information as to the kind of people who became Christians in the first century and reminds us how difficult they found it to break away from the ethical norms of the society from which they had been converted. Theft of course had been recognized in Judaism from the time of the Decalogue as a major sin (Isa 1.23; Jer 7.9; Lev 19.11; *Pseudo-Phocylides* 153ff; cf Strack-Billerbeck I, 810-3) and was also widely condemned in the Gentile world. This is probably why our author does not need to explain that stealing is wrong. Since our letter is a general letter directed not to one church but to a number it may for that reason give us a better insight into the kind of people who became Christians in the early days.

The present participle κλέπτων with the article is best taken as equivalent to a substantive, 'the thief', as denoting the person who becomes involved in stealing. It is not that these Christians were once thieves and have now given up the practice; if that were so the injunction would have been unnecessary. But thieving would have been a part of the life of some Christians before conversion and while it might go too far to say that then or now they lived by stealing it still formed a part of the way they lived. Slaves are hardly in view here (*pace* Hendriksen, Masson, Caird in their commentaries on Ephesians) for though they could steal, as Onesimus may have taken some of the property of Philemon with him when he ran away, they were not in a position to make this a common practice. Our author again is not thinking of theft as equivalent to careless work or slacking in a master's time; if he meant this he would have said so. Slaves moreover if they had been stealing were not in a position to give it up so as to devote their labour to earning and thereby to contribute to the welfare of the community. Their work was allotted to them by their owners who would have reaped whatever reward there was in it. The way slaves are to work is dealt with in 6.5-9. What is in view here are day labourers and men with some skill in a trade, perhaps even shopkeepers; all these could have mixed stealing with their normal occupations.² There were many day labourers whose work would

² cf M.I.Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (2nd edn. London, 1985) pp. 73-75, 107, 185f; C. Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt im Mt. 20: 1-16* (Freiburg and Göttingen, 1990), pp. 64-66.

have been in part seasonal because related to the market gardens which lay around cities and provided produce for them; others would have had to depend in other ways on the availability of work e.g. when ships were being unloaded in the docks or when master builders required additional labour for heavy and unskilled tasks (without much machinery there would be bursts of activity when many labourers would be needed); the work of skilled tradesmen could for similar reasons also have been seasonal. There were many ways in which shopkeepers could have stolen from their customers by cheating them (e.g. with false weights) though if this was what was in mind we would expect it to have been made clearer. When there was no work for day labourers and skilled tradesmen there was no money; there may have been public relief for the distressed in Rome but not for those in other parts of the Empire³ and Ephesians was not written to Roman Christians but to those in Asia Minor. Wages also were too low for capital to be built up as a reserve to cover periods of unemployment. Those without regular work may have been forced during periods of unemployment to steal to maintain themselves and their families.

Those who have been and are stealing are bidden instead to seek work. Work was highly valued among Jews as a normal human activity (Exod 20.9; Ps 104.23; Prov 6.6; 28.19; Eccles 7.15; *T. Issach* 5.3; Josephus, *c. Ap.* 2.291; the idle rich are denounced in passages like Amos 6.4-6). Jesus had a trade and teachers of the Law were generally expected to support themselves (*m. Abot* 2.2). Work was also highly valued in the Greco-Roman world (Epict 1.16.16f; 3.26.27f; 8.26.2f; Dio *Orat* 7.112f; 123f) though there in contrast to Judaism manual labour was often, but not invariably, regarded as inferior to work with the mind.⁴ That our author envisages those who stole with their hands rather than those engaged in financial swindling is indicated by the following exhortation which instructs them to work with their hands to relieve the needy. The energy and ingenuity devoted to theft would be better used in honest work. There is then an inner logic in the movement from theft to work. Our author does not mention restitution of what has been stolen, let alone the fourfold restoration offered by Zacchaeus to those he had cheated (cf Lk 19.1-10), nor does he demand repentance or threaten with eternal punishment those who disobey what he says. Here as with the other injunctions of 4.25-29 his attention is focused solely on the welfare of the

³ Finley, *op.cit.*, p.40.

⁴ cf. R.F.Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry*, Philadelphia, 1980, pp. 38ff, 44,45,48.

community. Paul had made a point of working to support himself during his missionary activity, presumably for the benefit of that activity (1 Th 2.9; 1 Cor 4.12), and so indirectly for the benefit of the churches he founded. The words of v.28 are very similar to those of Paul in 1 Cor 4.12; that passage may have been known to our author, or, more probably, since the contexts of the two passages are very different, the words may have been regarded as the true pattern for the behaviour of a missionary and then simply carried over to apply to ordinary life.

Although referring to work our verse provides no 'theology' of work for only the case of 'reformed' thieves is considered. The purpose of work has been evaluated in many different ways: it gives self-satisfaction through the act of creation, it enables people to get on in the world (the profit motive), it prevents revolution, those who work can remain independent of others (1 Th 2.9), a motive very like the Stoic idea of self-sufficiency (cf Phil 4.11), or gain respect from the outside world (1 Th 4.11f), or cease to be a burden on the community (2 Th 3.6ff). Some of these reasons would be more true of the modern than the ancient world for in the latter most work was dull and repetitive; it also required real effort and application as the word for working, *κοπιῶν*, implies (Paul uses the root of his own work in 1 Cor 4.12; 2 Cor 6.5; 11.23,27; Gal 4.11; Phil 2.16). Many of these reasons for work (whether they are good or bad reasons is irrelevant) would hold true as much for unbelievers as for believers (4.22-4). A fresh motive has however been introduced here to apply to believers: the good of the community. In many ways it is a motive similar to the link Jews made between work and almsgiving (Agnell, op.cit, p.128; cf *T. Issach* 5.3; 7.5; *T. Zeb* 6.5f; *Pseudo-Phocylides* 22ff). In seeing the purpose of work as directed to benefitting (*χρηῖα* is used of physical need in Mk 2.25; Jn 13.29; Acts 2.45; 4.35; 20.34; Rom 12.13; Phil 2.25; 4.16) the community our author reflects the emphasis on the sharing of goods which we find among the early Jerusalem Christians (Acts 2.45; 4.32-5.11; 6.1ff) and which led to the collection made among Gentile churches for them (Rom 15.26f; Gal 2.10; 2 Cor 8.1ff; 9.1ff). Yet he does not lay the duty of sharing on the community as a whole but only on thieves within it. Sharing however probably forms the background to his injunction; it comes to the surface here because having begun by mentioning a vice, theft, he wishes to supply a good motivation for his readers; having started from theft as a way of life he needs to put something positive in its place.

While the total meaning is clear, the good of the community, τὸ

ἀγαθόν,⁵ has been understood in different ways. (a) The word may have been deliberately chosen to draw out the difference in moral value between what the thief could do now and what he has been doing, and should be taken adverbially, 'working honestly'. (b) It could be taken as the direct object of ἐργαζόμενος and refer to the product of the work (Agnell, op. cit., p.129); the carpenter, for example, if making a chair should make a good chair. (c) It could denote the objective of the work (cf Gal 6.10), 'doing what is good with one's own hands'. (b) reads too much into the word and at the same time is rather narrow (cf Lincoln in his commentary on Ephesians in the Word series); (c) is in the end very little different from (a), but (a) is to be preferred because of the contrast with the person's previous way of life.⁶

Among those whom our author envisages as his audience a few will have been wealthy and well-educated; he apparently does not look on them as potential thieves, though that gives us no reason to suppose that such people do not at times cheat others in their commercial and financial activities; even small shopkeepers may do so. Yet to tell these people not to thief but to work would not in fact help the needy since their cheating enabled them to make money; if they stopped cheating they would only have less to give to others! Ephesians refers to those who were not slaves and yet worked in one way or another with their hands, e.g. day labourers (see above). If they work they may bring in some income which can be used for the good of the less well off in the community; the general poverty of the ancient world meant that there were always some who were in real need. It could be argued that our author should have overlooked the sin of theft since those who gained money in this way might still have contributed to the poor; he knows however that theft is basically wrong and so cannot encourage among his readers a 'Robin Hood' attitude (stealing from the rich to benefit the poor).

More generally poverty was endemic in the ancient world; in an economy of scarcity anyone who does not work becomes a burden on others (2 Thess. 3.6ff). There was then a great need for all to share together and be

⁵ The order of the words of this final clause varies in the manuscripts but the meaning is not basically affected whatever order is chosen

⁶ W.D.Morris, 'Ephesians iv.28', *ExpT* 41 (1929/30), p.237, supposes a primitive corruption of the text which originally read τὸν ἄρτον; as with almost all 'primitive corruptions' there is little to be said for this.

liberal to one another (Rom. 12.13; 1 Tim. 6.18; *Didache* 4.6-8) and we can see the first Christians active in this respect (Acts 2.44; 4.32ff; Gal. 2.10; Phil. 2.14-20; 2 Cor. 8.1-5; 9.1-5; Rom 15.25-27; 1 Cor 16.1-3). The practical question of what was to happen to the thief and his family if he was no longer able to thieve to support them and could not obtain work is not discussed; the thief and his family instead of contributing to the financial needs of the community would then have been a drain on its resources.

When reading this injunction in Ephesians we have to imagine a situation very different from that of today's western world where there will almost always be some form of welfare relief for those without work. The wealth of the western world is such that there is no need for everyone to be in fulltime work and earning money in order for society as a whole to be prosperous; a considerable number of unemployed can be supported without causing an undue burden to fall on the remainder who are working. Again our author limits what he says to those who stole physically; theft cannot really be restricted in this way either in the ancient world or in ours; financial manipulation or the underpayment of employees can equally be forms of theft. We do not know the views of our author on these sins or on those who having made money in dishonest and/or wrong ways then give vast sums to charitable or religious causes. Consequently the simple statement of v.28 gives little guidance for today's complex financial and industrial set-up.

The most disturbing feature of v.28 however is not its failure to cover different forms of theft, but its limitation to criticism of conduct directed only towards fellow believers. In this limitation it is in line with the sharing of the early Jerusalemite Christians which was equally restricted to the community; Barnabas sold his farm and gave the money to the community (Acts 4.32-37; cf 5.1-6). Yet when the rich man came to Jesus to ask him what he should do to inherit eternal life Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor; he did not tell him to bring the proceeds with him into the community of the disciples to be shared among them. In the light of this it is necessary to ask why our author is not interested in seeing the wider distribution of the money raised by those who ceased thieving and began to work. The problem here applies equally to his limitation of truth telling to fellow disciples (4.25) and to his general attitude throughout all his discussion of behaviour. Believers are told to be kind to and forgive one another i.e. fellow believers, and not to be kind and forgiving to all (4.32). Fornication is not to be named among them because it might cause a scandal to outsiders but because it is not fitting to mention it among the saints. Whereas in 1 Pet 2.18-25 slaves are instructed how to behave when attacked by non-Christian masters both the masters and slaves of 6.5-9 appear to be Christians and so their relationship is an inner community affair.

If we explore why Ephesians restricts itself to inner community behaviour we might answer that it is a general letter whose author probably did not know what was going on in each of the churches which his letter would eventually reach; it is then more difficult for him to speak of how Christians should behave towards outsiders for in this respect their circumstances would be very different while the inner life of their communities would be much the same. Yet one would still have expected him to indicate that lying was as grave an offence when non-Christians were deceived as when Christians were. He could also have suggested as does Paul (1 Thess. 4.12) that it is important for Christians to be seen to live quiet and orderly lives and so gain the respect of outsiders. It is however probably true that the community felt pressures from outside because its members were different (they did not worship idols, they had only one God and not many) and this drove them in on one another for mutual support; as a result their conduct towards one another became all important.

Our author could have written a different letter in which he set out clearly all the ways in which Christians should interact with non-Christians but he did not choose to do so and we cannot guess at what he would have written if this had been his objective. It is impossible for us to discover with any degree of completeness his reasons for the restricted view of conduct he adopts; we have to interpret the letter he has written and not another we might have liked him to write. Yet as we do so in the light of what we read elsewhere in the New Testament, and especially what we learn from the example of Jesus, we need to widen what he says so that those we teach do not think there is a different attitude for Christians to take up to non-Christians from that to other Christians.

E. Best