

Engage

Thursday 7 January 2021

Old Clothes, New Clothes

Colossians 3:5-17

BEFORE MEETING TOGETHER

If you haven't already done so, watch the Bible Project video: *Colossians, an Overview*
<https://youtu.be/pXTXIDxQsvc>

In the early church it was often the case that a candidate for baptism would take off their old clothes and then, after coming up from the water, would be given a new set of clothes to wear. Whether or not this was the practice in Colossae, Paul knew that the young church there needed to know very clearly what was involved in putting off their old clothes and putting on new ones. Certain patterns of behaviour are the common coin of the world that remains ignorant of the God revealed in Jesus. Like a suit of clothes that's inappropriate for the occasion, these must be taken off, and the new patterns of behaviour must be put on in their place.

STUDY

Read Colossians 3:5-17.

Suppose there was a business in which everybody behaved in the way described in verses 5-9. Suppose a few miles down the road, there was another business where everybody behaved in the way described in 12-17. Which one would you rather work in, and why? Why do you think some people would prefer to work in a business that is characterized by the description in 5-9?

Paul names two main areas of behaviour as typical of the old lifestyle that is now to be abandoned. They have to do with sex on the one hand and speech on the other—two central areas of human life, both involving great potential for both good and evil. Even though some pretend that such things are purely private matters, how does wrongdoing in these two areas of life lead to problems for a community as a whole?

What is the great transformation which Paul gives as the reason for our changed behaviour (9f)?

One result of new life in Christ is new knowledge (10). Paul expects the Christian, as part of their renewal in the image of God—in other words, part of their discovery in practice of what it means to be a genuine human being—to be able to see clearly, and understand, the deeper issues involved behind casual sexual behaviour and casual talk. Contrary to what a lot of people today imagine, being a Christian means learning to think harder, not to leave your brain behind in the quest for new experiences. Thinking straight and knowing the truth are part of what it means to be a truly human being, the sort of human being the gospel is meant to create.

In 10f, Paul says that because of "being renewed in the image of the creator," old divisions of race, ethnicity, culture or geography must be done away with. In what ways might your Christian community exhibit this truth that Christ is "everything and in everything"?

Consider the behaviour Paul describes in 12-17. Cynics might say that this is the behaviour of weak-willed, wimpish people who cannot stand up for themselves. Being tender-hearted doesn't mean being sentimental. Being kind doesn't mean being a soft touch. Humility isn't the same thing as low self-esteem. Meekness is not weakness.

How would you respond to that charge about the difficulty of doing the things mentioned here like forgiving, being patient, being humble? How is a foundation of strength and confidence in Christ's peace the deciding factor in each?

Paul balances the negatives of the old life of sin with the positives of the new life in Christ. What is lacking when a Christian community denounces those things which should be "put off" without the corresponding emphasis on those things which should be "put on"?

A church with no (obvious) sexual sin but which is full of malicious gossip has only swapped one evil for another. Equally, a church where everyone is very caring and supportive but where immorality flourishes unchecked (perhaps precisely because people are afraid to confront it in case they're told they are being "unloving") is allowing noxious weeds to grow all around the flowers in the garden. You can't select some parts of the picture and leave others. For any of the parts to make sense, they all need to be in place.

Verse 16 portrays believers as teaching one another, exhorting one another and singing to God with grateful hearts. How does your own Christian fellowship practice each of the three? How can you contribute to the practice of each in your fellowship?

Notice how Paul draws the picture together, again and again, with reference to Jesus himself. Jesus forgave you, so you must forgive. Jesus is to be the decider in all your deliberations. His word is to be alive within the Christian community. And, finally, whatever you do or say must be able to stand having these words written above it: In the name of the Lord Jesus. Settle that in your hearts and minds and a great deal else will fall into place.

PRAY

Ask the Holy Spirit to remove anything in your life which needs to be removed, and to increasingly clothe you with Christlikeness.¹

NEXT TIME

The Christian Household: Colossians 3:18-4:1

¹ Tom Wright, Dale Larsen, and Sandy Larsen, [Colossians & Philemon: 8 Studies for Individuals or Groups](#), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London: SPCK, 2009), 31–35.