

Colossians 3:8

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things ... and put on the new self

American Bible commentator Warren Wiersbe, tells the story of Bishop Warren A Candler preaching

- About the lies of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) - Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property
- They pretended to give all the money to the work of God
- But instead of giving all the proceeds to the apostles, secretly kept some of the money for themselves
- When Peter pointed out to Ananias the error of his ways, Ananias fell down dead
- When his wife, Sapphira, came home, Peter asked her if the amount given was the full price for the land
- When Sapphira said it was the full price, her lies were exposed and she too fell down dead
- Bishop Candler asked his congregation: 'If God still struck people dead for lying, where would I be?'
- The congregation snickered a bit, but the smiles disappeared when the Bishop shouted
- 'I'd be right here – *preaching to an empty church!*'

Earlier in chapter 3 of Colossians, we thought about the 'Christian and Christ'

- but now the theme progresses to the 'Christian and the church'
- Christians are commanded 'do not lie to each other'
- Lying is what one writer called 'one of the cold sins'
- The so-called warm sins committed in the heat of the moment
- Murder and adultery, for example, are frowned upon in church
- But the 'cold sins', including lying are no strangers to the church
- When I was minister in another circuit one of my members said to me, 'we do not have murders here ...
- But we do have the weekly character assassination!'

One of the greatest nonconformist preachers of the last century, the Congregational minister

- Dr G Campbell-Morgan called these the ‘sins in good standing’
- Anger, critical attitudes, coarse humour and lying
- Often these are so commonplace in the church as to be regarded as unexceptional
- Satan is the father of all lies, while the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth
- Anger, critical attitudes, coarse humour and lying are not characteristics of Christ or his bride, the church

One of the great errors, even in Biblical preaching, is implying

- that what Christians need is a course of self-improvement - all we have to do is simply to try harder
- I hear this so often in church and we need to speak against it very strongly for
- this is no gospel at all – in fact it is the very opposite of the gospel
- having to try harder in areas where we consistently fail sounds like bad news to me
- the whole issue is far more fundamental than that
- it is not a matter of trying desperately hard to improve the old life
- this is not ‘good news’ and what is not ‘good news’ is not the gospel
- it is a matter of the living the new life, in the new community and having a new rule in life

I, therefore, address it in three ways

- I NEW CREATION
- II NEW COMMUNITY
- III NEW LORDSHIP

I NEW CREATION

Earlier in the chapter Paul has pointed out to the Colossian Christians

- ‘you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God’ (3:3)
- you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above (3:1)

Many of us will be familiar with the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave

- while journeying to Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus is told that his friend Lazarus is very ill
- but for some reason he does not hurry to Bethany so that by the time he gets there, Lazarus is dead
- it amuses me that Jesus went to the tombs and called ‘Lazarus come out’ presumably because
- had he not called ‘Lazarus’ by name, they would have all come out!
- But restored to life, Lazarus had to be loosed from the grave clothes
- the sins Paul lists are the grave clothes of death, but we need to be clothed with the robes of resurrection
- earlier he speaks of ‘put to death’ (3:5), ‘rid yourselves’ (3:8), now ‘taking off your old self’ (3:9)

It is obviously a clothing metaphor, since you have taken off your old self with its practices

- What would such practices be? Clearly all that is written in 3:5-8
- These are the rags of sin, the shroud of death
- The very essence of the new clothes is that they are robes of truth
- They are the robes of Christ
- It seems as if the Colossian Christians have problems with truth
- And before we look upon them too critically we should realise our weaknesses

The creation narrative in Genesis speaks of mankind, male and female

- being created in the image of God, how we were created was how God intended us to be
- the doubt and disobedience of sin have marred that image
- but the gospel is that we can become the person that God intended

Occasionally, I meet someone who says to me, ‘you are not one of those “born-again Christians” are you?’

- to which I always reply, ‘I didn’t know there was another kind!’
- the very reason why the whole notion of being born again is vital to understand the gospel
- is to live a new life without the new birth is not possible - it reduces the grace of God
- where salvation is by grace to a notion of self-improvement, where salvation is by works
- this is why when we are telling others what we believe we must always include ‘Jesus, grace and faith’

The good news of the Christian gospel is that we are made new

- by the new life – a spiritual life, hidden in Christ – being born within us
- the new life is born within when we trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour
- the Christian has had a radical, life-changing experience – and now we need to be clothed in the right way
- there are things to put off, and things to put on, as we are being renewed
- in knowledge and in the image of our Creator, ‘knowledge’, not some hidden experience
- but knowledge of the Creator, when we are renewed in God’s image, we become the person he intends

The metaphor of clothing can only go so far, for the old nature is still painfully with us

- old nature has to be put to death (stop feeding it) and the old clothes discarded as filthy rags
- but Paul’s concern is not simply for the individual but the community

II NEW COMMUNITY

In the Old Testament, Israel was the chosen people of God

- but in the New Testament we learn that believing is really the essence of Israel
- and therefore the community of believers are the ‘spiritual Israel’
- believers are God’s society and must be the people God intended us to be

The church, the new society, requires a fresh way of living – in church we cannot have worldly divisions

- whether they be national, traditional, tribal, geographical, social, cultural, such divisions are irrelevant
- there are undoubtedly problems of these kinds outside of the church
- the critical question is whether the church can model harmony and integration to a divided world
- Paul lists some of the sharpest divisions known to the ancient world
- Greek and Jew; circumcised and uncircumcised; Barbarian, Scythian; slave or free

On a recent visit to London I was remembering one of my West Indian friends

- who was a member of the church where I did a student placement in the early 80s
- the area of Plymouth where I grew up was very monochrome
- so it was an eye-opener to me to go to cosmopolitan West London
- my supervising minister drove me past another Methodist Church
- remarking that many of the church members there were racists – I was shocked
- it sounded a harsh and judgmental thing to say and not what I had expected of him
- but like many sins their racism was subtle, they welcomed black people to their church

It taught me some valuable lessons

- in my first appointment we elected a steward who was only 23 years old
- she made a great steward and went on to be a Methodist minister
- some people did not like it, because of her age, and because she was from Yorkshire, not Surrey
- in my second appointment some members nominated a steward who did not come
- because he was Cornish (good) and a villager (better still) – not an upcountry person
- as some of them said, ‘we don’t mind the “new people” coming but we don’t want them running it’
- in both cases I resisted those who were on the wrong lines

In West London, as part of my placement, I was sent to a meeting with a bishop

- it was on a Saturday evening and I confess I did not want to go
- the thought of Episcopal paraphernalia does not warm my heart at the best of times
- my supervising minister told me, ‘if I were you I would arrive at 8.00 pm’
- rather reluctantly I arrived at the church at the appointed time
- to find the whole place rocking, the Bishop being a West Indian Pentecostal
- and the meeting being what our Caribbean friends would call ‘a revival’
- amid the dancing, tambourine-banging, hallelujah-shouting and Pentecostal hollering
- I was feeling more stiffly white Anglo-Saxon than usual
- When the lady, they called her ‘Missionary’ who was leading the service said:
- ‘We are so pleased to see our brother from the Methodist Church’ (benign smile)
- ‘And we’s gonna ask him now to give us the Word of the Lord’ (horror)
- Not used to constant interruptions and exclamations of ‘go on’, ‘there’s more!’

I simply did my best, but I returned to as many of these meetings as I could

- And on the last night I was able to go Missionary said to the congregation
- ‘We never heard a Methodist speak like him. He may have white skin but he has a black heart!’

In 2000, returning to Mitcham overnight, I noticed the lights on in my old church, where they had choir practice

- Inside I was greeted by one of my former members who had been a steward in my time
- she introduced me to the choir members with these words, ‘this is John, my son’
- the choir members looked confused not surprisingly for Beatrice has a Ghanaian heritage
- it doesn’t look likely that we are related, but we have the same Father
- on the Sunday I met a young Mum, whose children I had baptised
- I admired the beautiful Kente cloth wrap that she was wearing as her traditional dress
- There and then she tore it in two and gave me half, how different from a member in another country
- Who told me after a service, ‘you are English and you have no right to be here’

Circumcised or uncircumcised, such matters of legal or ceremonial standing were important in the ancient world

- especially among people who had been brought up as Jews; again the application to us is more subtle
- but I wonder if it is to do with people that we label in some ways as being different

Barbarian, Scythian; the Greeks regarded those who did not speak Greek, as culturally inferior, as ‘barbarians’

- ‘Scythians’ were simply uncouth ‘northerners’, socially and culturally the lowest of the barbarians
- This can manifest itself in our preference about the style of prayers or of music in the church
- we all have our cultural preferences, but we have to try to avoid divisive elitism

‘Slave or free’ is a matter of social caste; in Britain we still have class distinctions

- in our society we have plenty of single parents, unemployed people, factory workers
- but our churches can give the impression that we are socially middle class
- possibly explaining why vast tracts of our own city are almost spiritual wildernesses
- and we have to work hard to make sure that is not the case here

In the realm of the new self, distinctions that used to matter have no real significance

- Christ is *the* great principle of unity: Loyalty to Christ must take precedence over all earthly ties
- This is not something that can be forced, that is simply an effort at corporate self-improvement
- And despite there being some merit in the unbeliever attempting this - it is not the gospel
- Unity in the church is a result of spiritual revolution in the lives of individuals
- Jew and Greek come together because both have been changed
- The old nature is being put off and the new nature being put on
- The common language of the new community is not Greek but ‘truth’
- Things which destroy community have got to go. Fellowship is something you cannot do on your own
- Fellowship is effectively being Christians together, it is ‘with one another’

The titles given to Israel (Deut. 7:6-8) are given to the Colossians, ‘chosen people, holy and dearly loved’

- this is the privileged position of Christians as the heirs of Israel’s privileges
- because the church is the people of God its members must behave in a godly way
- the actions compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience
- Under the Lordship of a:

III NEW RULER

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

In the largest sense, the peace of Christ comes by way of obedience to him (cf. John 14:27)

- the word we translate ‘rule’ originally had the meaning of ‘act as umpire’
- inner conflicts and differences in groups must be subject to Christ’s rule of peace
- thankfulness is associated with peace

The Lordship and kingly rule of Christ is also expressed through the indwelling of his word

- this applies to teaching, that is in accordance with his word
- and praise, that is in accordance with his word
- teaching does not only mean what we hear in Sunday sermons
- but what is taught in Bible classes, house groups, midweek meetings
- Sunday schools, children’s work, youth clubs
- Many churches are keen to ensure that all this work is lively and well done
- But ‘lively’ is only a worldly description if all it means is that it is upbeat and fun
- But we must not miss the importance of monitoring the content of all our groups
- That it is truly biblical and consistent with the word of Christ
- That is that it is ‘lively’ in its truest sense
- Having the characteristics of the living Christ and not the characteristics of the grave and death

The same is true of worship (Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs)

- I don't think we were intended to make a sharp distinction between these
- But clearly what we sing and the way we sing it has an important function
- We start to give authority to the words that we sing, so they need to be true
- Just because it is old or new or has a good tune is no guarantee that the words are good
- That is why the distinction between 'worship' (often meaning what is sung) and word
- Is not always helpful – we need theologically and Biblically informed people who check what we sing

It is all done in the name of Christ, with thanks to God for being made new, in community under his Lordship

- Giving thanks shows that we retain a sense of God's goodness
- And our community must be built on the values of Christ and his Kingdom
- Compassion: pity and tenderness expressed toward the suffering and miserable
- Kindness: combines ideas of goodness, kindness, graciousness, sweetness of disposition
- Humility is a humble disposition: our service is not first and foremost self-gratifying but Christ-serving
- Gentleness is the opposite of arrogance of self-assertiveness, willing to make concessions
- Patience enables one to bear injury and insult without resorting to hasty retaliation but forgiving
- The word translated 'love' (agape) is the word for distinctive Christian caring love
- although not all of these were considered virtues in the ancient world
- they are often used as characteristics of God or Christ, and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22)
- the whole range of attributes is consistent with love – it is the whole outfit (clothes) of Christ
- The believer is a new creation, becoming the person God intended, for whom Jesus is Lord
- The church is the new community, becoming the society God intended, where Jesus is Lord