

Clothed with Compassion and Love

Colossians 3:12–17

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Colossians is a letter written by the apostle Paul, around AD 61, to an early group of Christians, probably mostly Gentiles, located in Colossae. Paul had never visited this church; it had been founded by Epaphras and other converts. Why does Paul write to these Christians? Paul writes this letter from prison, and he felt prompted to do so because the church was struggling with false teachings that had infiltrated the church and weakened the faith of the believers. Particularly the kind of false teaching that spread in the church was this: there were influential teachers who were teaching that while faith in Jesus Christ might give you the basic package of the kingdom of God, there was a premium package, a greater spiritual experience and knowledge that could be yours if you adopted certain practices. These practices involved some kind of self-denial or self-abasement that would supposedly lead a person into some heavenly, deeply spiritual and mystical experience.

We can imagine how people might long for such an experience and how those who claimed to have had these experiences felt themselves to be superior to everyone else. There were the Christians, and then there were *the Christians*. They strutted around, proud of the supposed superior status, and they might have on their bodies the marks that meant they had gone the extra mile for this greater spiritual achievement. That's what a real Christian looks like, people started to say.

And the rest of the people in the church wanted to be like these real Christians. It's all they were talking about. What do I have to do to be like them? Tell me the rules and the requirements that I must follow so that I can be a real Christian.

With their minds focused on such pursuit, it is no surprise that the church in Colossae was losing sight of some pretty basic truths – the foundation of their faith – the good news of Jesus Christ. In their desire and pursuit to attain so-called 'true Christian status' and to receive the premium package of Christian experience, they'd forgotten the beauty and power and simplicity of the life of faith and what it meant to live like Jesus. As they sought to achieve higher spiritual status, they were in fact living according to their earthly nature.

The first eleven verses of Colossians chapter 3 tell us these Christians were succumbing to anger, slander, greed and immorality. The Christians in Colossae, driven by their desire for spiritual status and influence, were losing sight of their identity in Christ and they were putting on ill-fitting clothing, clothes that didn't fit a follower of Jesus.

Many Christians today are asking questions about their identity as Christians – what does a true Christian look like? Churches are also asking themselves questions of identity – what does a true Christian church look like? And church ministers too are asking themselves questions of identity – what is a church minister called to be and do?

Many churches today struggle because they have lost clarity about who they are and what God has called them to be. A church that loses its sense of identity and mission will find it difficult to

flourish. Yet churches that know who they are in Christ, and remain focused on his mission, often become places of spiritual vitality, growth and gospel witness.

And in our passage Paul reminds the Christians in Colossae what their foundation is. He reminds the people who they are—and who are they? They are a people chosen by God, holy and dearly loved.

At the heart of the gospel message is the truth that we are who we are, and the church is who she is, not because of anything we've done, but because of what God has done. The church is a people chosen and gathered by God. Just as he called Israel out from among the nations, so now he gathers his children from all the corners of the earth – from different nations and cultures and tongues.

In the first verses of this chapter, Colossians 3, Paul says the following beautiful words about the church: 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (vv. 1–4)

The church is a people made holy by God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in whom our lives are hidden and kept. There is no great secret to holiness, no higher knowledge to be attained. We have been joined to Christ, sharing in his death and therefore also sharing in his resurrection.

In that knowledge we can rest. We can rest from our anxious drive to compete and survive. And in the freedom that brings, we can dress to be the church we already are – the church of Jesus Christ.

And when we live into our identity as God's chosen people, it feels natural, doesn't it, to put on clothes that fit that identity. So we clothe ourselves, says Paul, with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, because these virtues orient us toward God and one another. They take us out of our inward focus – our fear, anxiety, envy and impatience – and help us live in a posture of openness toward one another. They bring us into community.

As we reflect on those qualities today, it is fitting that we also give thanks to God for the 150th anniversary of Mothers Union in Australia.

For a century and a half, Mothers Union has sought to live out precisely these virtues. Its ministry has never been about status or recognition. Rather, it has been expressed through faithful service, prayer, encouragement, hospitality, care for families, support for marriages, and compassion for those in need. Generation after generation of Christian women – and men – have quietly demonstrated what it means to be clothed with kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and, above all, love.

In many ways, Mothers Union reminds us of the very lesson Paul is teaching the Colossians. The Christian life is not about discovering some secret spiritual knowledge or attaining a higher

level of Christianity. It is about becoming more like Jesus. It is about allowing the character of Christ to be seen in our relationships, our service, and our daily lives.

As we celebrate 150 years of Mothers Union in Australia, we do more than honour a history. We give thanks for a living witness to the kind of Christian life Paul describes in this passage. And we pray that these same virtues will continue to flourish not only in Mothers Union, but throughout the whole life of St Augustine's Church.

A big part of how we do this is through worship. Notice in verse 16 that the instruction to teach and admonish one another is closely connected with singing together. We teach and admonish one another as we sing to God with grateful hearts. In worship we orient ourselves toward God. We remind ourselves who is at the centre of everything. In worship, we set our minds on things above. In worship, we learn again what it means to belong to Christ and to one another.

Paul does not tell us to teach and admonish one another by constantly pointing out each other's faults or shortcomings. Rather, he tells us to lift our hearts and voices to God, fixing our eyes on Christ. As the word of Christ dwells richly among us through Scripture, prayer, praise and thanksgiving, the good news of the gospel settles deeply within us. We are reminded that our identity rests not in our achievements, our status or our spirituality, but in the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

And when that gospel takes root in our hearts, it begins to shape our lives. We become a people marked by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love. These are not the badges of an elite Christian. They are the clothing of every Christian.

That is Paul's message to the Colossian believers. Stop striving to become something you are not. Stop chasing a higher spiritual status. Remember who you already are. You are God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. Therefore, live like God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved.

As we give thanks today for 150 years of Mothers' Union in Australia, may we also hear Paul's call afresh. May we continue to be a church that is secure in its identity in Christ, grounded in the gospel, devoted to worship, and clothed with the character of Christ.

And may the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, the word of Christ dwell richly among us, and the love of Christ bind us together in perfect unity, so that in all we do, whether in word or deed, we may do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Amen.