

*The Transformed Life
is seen in
the way Christians
live*

A CHRISTIAN PERSONALITY (COLOSSIANS 3:1-17)

Your personality is that special bundle of attitudes and behaviors which make you the person you are. Everyone's personality is, in that sense, unique. However, some people have enough characteristics in common that it is possible for psychologists to speak of certain types of personalities: extroverted and introverted, impulsive and passive, obsessive, compulsive, etc.

If it is possible to distinguish these types of personalities because the people who are described by these words have some significant character traits in common, it may also be possible to distinguish a Christian personality because Christians have significant character traits in common.

This is not to say, of course, that all Christians will be, or must be, alike in every aspect of personality. Just as there are Christians who are tall and short, big and little, so people who are extroverted or introverted, or people who are impulsive or passive can be Christians. Nevertheless, if you look at those who are faithful Christians, you will discover that they have some things in common in which they differ significantly from the world. Those character traits which they hold in common we could call a "Christian personality." What is such a personality like, and how can it be developed? Colossians 3:1-17 answers these questions by describing a process consisting of three steps.

STEP ONE: RECOGNIZE THAT OUR PRIMARY MOTIVE FOR CHANGING OUR LIVES IS OUR NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST (Colossians 3:1-4)

The Colossians were in danger of being influenced by heretical teachers. Paul says, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men . . ." (Colossians 2:8). These teachers apparently taught a combination of pagan philosophy (Colossians 2:8) and Judaism (Colossians 2:16, 17). However, for the problem of sin, the best they could offer were worldly regulations. Paul warns the Colossians against accepting the false teachers' regulations: "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch," which were imposed by "commandments and teachings of men" (Colossians 2:20-22). Apparently, these were the kind of regulations which had served to control their worldly passions before they became Christians.

Paul says that these regulations were ineffective. They "have to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:20-23). Rules and legalistic barriers will never keep us from sinning. What will? What would serve as an effective barrier to sinning?

Paul answers that question in Colossians 3:14: The knowledge of our relationship with Christ will keep us from sinning. Paul says that: (1) We have been raised with Christ; therefore, we should seek the things that are above (v. 1). (2) Because we have died and our life is hid with Christ in God, we should set our minds on the things that are above (vv. 2, 3). (3) Our reward will be that when Christ appears, then we will appear with him in glory (v. 4). Therefore, we should put to death what is earthly in our lives (v. 5).

The motive Paul appeals to is clear: Because we are related to Christ, we seek the things that are above. We set our minds on things that are above. We put to death what is worldly in us.

How does our relationship with Christ lead us to change our lives? Several things come to mind: (1) When we become Christians, Christ becomes all important to us; our love for Him means we love worldly things less. (2) Christ strengthens us so that we can overcome temptations. (3) Knowing that Christ has forgiven us makes us want to stay saved and encourages us to resist sin. (4) Since we are Christians, we know that it is simply not fitting for us to live as if we were in the world. (5) Since our Lord has all authority, we want to listen to His Word and to obey Him; by following His teachings we overcome sin and develop a Christian personality.

Perhaps we have been unsuccessful in developing a Christian personality because we have not taken this first step. We have depended on the wrong motives. We have been motivated solely by the desire to avoid hell and have looked on the instructions in the New Testament as so many rules and regulations which must be kept if we are going to stay out of hell. Such an approach to Christianity has "the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body" (Colossians 2:20-23). But, in the end, as Paul said, it is "of no value against fleshly indulgence." Maybe we have been relying for too long on worldly regulations, and too little on our association with Christ, as our motive for living the Christian life.

STEP TWO: PUT TO DEATH WORLDLY ATTRIBUTES (Colossians 3:5-11)

Notice Paul says that we ought to "put to death" worldly traits (v. 5), that we must "put them all away" (v. 8), and that we have "put off

the old nature" (v. 9). We are to "put to death," "put away," and "put off" sinful characteristics. Do not think you can co-exist with worldly attributes! Get rid of them! Kill them, throw them in the trash can, get them out of your life, erase them from your character!

What are we to put to death?

Destroy the Sins of Lust

"Consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire . . ." (Colossians 3:5). "Immorality" is also translated as "fornication" (NEB) and "sexual immorality" (Phillips). "Impurity" is also translated "uncleanness," "dirty-mindedness" (Phillips), or "indecent" (NEB). "Passion" is translated in other versions as "inordinate affection" (KJV), "uncontrolled passion" (Phillips), and "lust" (NEB). "Evil desire" is also translated as "evil concupiscence" and "foul cravings" (NEB).

When you hear words such as "fornication," "impurity," "passion," and "evil desire," what comes to mind? I cannot help but think of our modern age. How could you have a television program, especially a soap opera, without a large dose of "fornication," "impurity," "passion," and "evil desire"? Nevertheless, even though those things characterize the world, they are not to characterize Christians!

Perhaps we also need to notice that this passage forbids not only the act of fornication, but also the sin of lust. The Christian should not lust! Furthermore, he or she should avoid situations which might make him lust and avoid doing things that might cause others to lust. We have here a powerful incentive to stay away from pornography, to avoid activities such as dancing which are connected with lust, to dress modestly.

Why avoid both immoral acts and lustful thoughts? "On account of these the wrath of God will come" (Colossians 3:6). We might get away with such sins for a while, but when Christ returns, God will settle accounts. Those who have sowed worldliness will reap wrath!

Take Off the Sin of Covetousness

Paul says, "Consider as dead . . . greed, which amounts to idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). Phillips translates this word as "the lust for other people's goods." Again, this warning is especially needed in our world. Frequently, the motivating

power behind modern commerce is greed or covetousness.

It is interesting that Paul speaks of covetousness as idolatry. We do not have much overt idolatry in modern America; people are not in the habit of bowing down to idols made of wood or stone. But there is a great deal of this kind of idolatry: People are putting the acquisition of material goods before God, so that those goods themselves become their god. That is covetousness . . . that is idolatry . . . and that is sin . . . and it brings the wrath of God upon us!

Get Rid of Sins of the Temper

Paul says, "But now put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice. . . ." (Colossians 3:8). We are to put away "anger," which is also translated as "evil temper." It is not always wrong to be angry (Ephesians 4:26). But a certain kind of anger is wrong. Any kind of anger can lead to wrongdoing! Put anger away! Paul also says that we should put away "wrath," translated as "furious rage" (Phillips) and as "passion" (NEB). "Malice," too, must be put away. Phillips translates this word as "evil thoughts." Not only are we to avoid losing our temper; we are also not to hold grudges, to harbor malice in our hearts against those who have wronged us.

Put to Death Sins of the Tongue

Paul says, "Put them all away: . . . slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another . . ." (Colossians 3:8, 9). We are to put away "slander," which is translated in other versions as "blasphemy," "evil words about God" (Phillips), "cursing" (NEB); "foul talk from your mouth," which is translated by Phillips as "filthy conversation," and by the NEB as "filthy talk"; and "lying."

The Christian strives to control his tongue, to avoid sinning with his lips in any way—whether by cursing, or by filthy talk, or by lying. How different that makes him from the people around him!

Why should the Christian put off these things? Because to live and talk in such a way is not in keeping with your new situation. Concerning these sins, Paul says, "in these you once walked, when you lived in them" (v. 7). But you need to put them all away.

. . . since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is

being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—a renewal in which there is no distinction . . . (Colossians 3:9-11).

Your life has changed! You are now a Christian! Live like it! In the past, you were guilty of all manner of sins, but you can no longer live like that! Furthermore, since "Christ is all, and in all," your life must now be dominated by Him, not by the world!

STEP THREE: PUT ON CHRISTIAN CHARACTERISTICS (Colossians 3:12-17)

The figure used in Colossians 3:12-17 is that of changing clothes. Paul has said that we should put to death the attributes which once characterized us; to fill the void these worldly characteristics have left, we should put on Christian traits, just as someone might put on new clothes.

Becoming a Christian is like transferring one's citizenship from one kingdom to another (Colossians 1:13, 14); it is like being born again (John 3:3-5; 1 Peter 2:2); it is like being raised from the dead (Ephesians 2:1). But it is also like a change of garments. Isaiah rejoiced that God had clothed him "with garments of salvation" (Isaiah 61:10). The prodigal son's salvation was symbolized by the putting on of a robe (Luke 15:22). Jesus used a change of garments as a symbol of salvation in the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:11-14). In heaven, those who are saved will be clad in white robes (Revelation 7:13, 14). In Galatians 3:27 we read: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." *You have put on Christ.* As the NEB says, "You have all put on Christ as a garment."

Although in Colossians 3:1-3, Paul likens the Christian's transformation to a resurrection, he also says it is like a change of clothes:

. . . you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self . . . and so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:9-12).

The idea is this: You have died to the old life; you have been raised to a new life; now you should put on new clothes—change your garments—wear the kind of clothes which are fitting for your new status.

Consider these new garments we are to wear:

Put On Concern for Others

That concern is expressed by two words: First, “compassion”—a trait which could always characterize the Christian! The Christian is always concerned about others and their needs. Second, “kindness” should characterize the Christian! The world may think it is smart to be sharp, to be able to come up with the quick and cutting retort, to insult others and “cut them down to size.” The Christian, in contrast, always tries to make life easier for everyone he meets.

Put On Humility

Two words emphasize this idea. The first is “lowliness.” The KJV translates this “humbleness of mind”; the NEB says, “humility.” The Christian does not “put on airs.” He recognizes that he is but a sinner, saved by grace, that without Christ he would be nothing. His aim in life is to serve, not to be served. The second is “meekness.” The NEB translates this word as “gentleness.” Meekness is not weakness; it is strength under control. The Christian demonstrates meekness by dealing gently with others.

Put On Appropriate Attitudes Toward Those Who Disappoint or Hurt Us

Three words seem to describe how the Christian reacts in adverse circumstances. First, *patience* should characterize the Christian. This word is translated in the KJV as “longsuffering.” The idea may be that the Christian bears up in adversity; he does not “lose his religion” when the “going gets tough.” Second, *forbearance* should characterize the Christian. Christians can put up with imperfect people. Others are weak; they make mistakes; they have annoying quirks of character. What should we do? It may be that all we can do is to learn to put up with them and love them in spite of their faults. Third, *forgiveness* should characterize the Christian! (Colossians 3:13). *Even in the church*, members are likely to have complaints against each other! What then? While we should not forget other passages which teach us to go to one another, the “bottom line” is that *we should forgive!*

Put On Love Towards All

Paul says, “And beyond all these put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (Colossians 3:14). Love is the primary ethical objective, the highest requirement, the crowning glory, and

the unique achievement of the Christian personality. Love is most important. And love “is the perfect bond of unity.” Perhaps this means that all the other traits are put together in one’s personality in the proper proportions by love. Or it may be saying that love makes it possible for Christians to dwell together in harmony.

Put On Attitudes and Behaviors Which Build Up the Church

Three characteristics seem to speak of our life together as God’s people. *Peacefulness* should characterize the Christian community! (Colossians 3:15a). Peace should rule in the individual Christian’s heart. When individual Christians are at peace with God, they will be at peace with one another. Furthermore, *thankfulness* should characterize the Christian community (Colossians 3:15b). We are thankful individually, and the church when it worships together should express constantly its collective thanksgivings. *Worship* should characterize the Christian community (Colossians 3:16). Christians constantly worship God. In particular, Christians are people who praise God and exhort one another in song.

CONCLUSION

How should we sum up what we have said? Let us attempt to describe a Christian personality. How would you recognize one if you saw it?

Imagine someone who has been saved by Christ, who has, therefore, dedicated himself completely to the Lord. Spiritual things, rather than earthly things, dominate his life. He spends time thinking about what Christ has done for him. His objective is to be what Christ wants him to be. He thinks of himself as submerged in Christ and looks forward to the day when he will be with Christ in glory.

In the meantime, he does his best to renounce worldliness. He tries to become Christlike. He is compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forbearing, forgiving, and loving. He is at peace within and at peace with others. He always thanks God. In short, the individual with a Christian personality tries his best to obey Colossians 3:17: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” If you do that, you will indeed have succeeded in acquiring a Christian personality.

—Coy Roper