What shall we wear?

Colossians 3:12-17

How one dresses is not necessarily number one on the priority list of major concerns for many Mennonites, or Christians, for that matter. However, the passage from Colossians 3 does seem to be a popular one with Mennonites. This passage was the text for the 2001 Mennonite USA gathering in Nashville where the theme was “Get It Together in Christ.” It was also the text for the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 2009 held in early June this year. Their theme: “Living Inside Out.” Both theme statements imply individual and community relationships.

According to their Canada Assembly program book the Colossians text “encourages us to wear our inner convictions on the outside, visible to the world, like a piece of clothing.” The program book cover featured a zipper icon with this explanation: “A zipper separates and connects the inside of a piece of clothing to the outside. Referencing the clothing symbolism of the scripture text, this also playfully illustrates our connectedness through our common faith. As a zipper binds together two pieces of fabric, love “binds everything together in perfect harmony”.

Paul talks about how his readers might wear their convictions and how they might connect with each other in a harmonious community. It is presumed that the letter to Colossians is directed to a group of new believers, many of whom had been Gentiles. At the end of verse 11, Paul clearly informs that “Christ is all and in all.” There are no special groups who have special access to Christ. Then he identifies to this group of believers in Colossians how they fit in.

You are chosen ones; you are holy, and you are beloved, Paul told them. Right from the start, these believers are part of the chosen – they belonged; they were holy – they had a unique quality; and they were loved – not just loved, but beloved, e.g. dearly loved. This must have been uncommon and unfamiliar to them, and possibly it was unbelievable that God loved them as individuals and cared about their affairs. Such love extended by God was in sharp contrast with the worship of extant gods who were distant and indifferent.

Once Paul establishes who they are in God’s world, he advises: “…clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (v. 12). Paul probably used the metaphor of putting on clothes because it is something very familiar and done repeatedly. It is a way in which these new believers can begin to imagine themselves adopting a new way of life. Put on these garments.

When we put on clothes, the clothes go around our bodies. They cover us. We are enfolded by them. I think one aspect of Paul’s metaphor illustrates how close clothes are to us. Our bodies are surrounded by clothes. We wear them as we go about. They keep us dry, and move with us in our daily activities.

Clothing ourselves involves choices. We choose which clothes to wear after a short or perhaps a lengthy review of options and potentially the upcoming day’s activities. It is an intentional act. So too, Paul was advocating that the Colossians choose to put on kindness, patience, meekness, compassion, humility and love – to be forgiving ad grateful. They are to

intentionally “wear” or demonstrate these virtues. And love, Paul says, is the most important. “Above all, clothe yourselves in love which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (v. 14). This verse seems to sum up the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians – Paul’s correspondence with the Corinthians. Put on love. Live “inside out”. Let your outer wear reflect your inner self.

Being a realist and knowing that people in a group or community do not always agree, his advice to clothe themselves with love follows his advocating that this group “Bear with one another” and forgive one another (v. 13). All this is general good advice. I think even President Obama has inferred, if not outright stated in a number of speeches, that we are to “bear with one another” and to act in kindness. But it’s easier said than done. Furthermore, Paul sets a higher standard than I’m guessing Pres. Obama expects. “Forgive each other, just as Christ has forgiven you…” (v. 13). C.S. Lewis said “We Christians must forgive the unforgivable in others because God has forgiven the unforgivable in us.” Be loving and forgiving while you admonish each other in wisdom. This is an awesome task but a necessary one to maintain harmony within a group of believers. The theme “Get it together in Christ” fits Paul’s instructions.

What shall we wear? How can we possibly dress like Paul suggests? I believe Paul offers steps to meet the challenge. Each step involves Christ and how we relate to him. First of all Paul identifies each person and community member as “God’s chosen… holy and beloved…and called” (v.12, 15). It does imply responsibility, but with such a blessing -- a blessing that cannot be found elsewhere. Secondly Paul says “…let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (v. 15). Again, this is not peace as the world sees peace, but perfect peace that quiets our anxiety about what we should wear and how we’re going to maintain our “wardrobe”. Thirdly Paul said “…be thankful” (v. 15). In six verses Paul requests believers to be grateful three time. Besides the simple request to be thankful, Paul adds give thanks to God the Father in all that you do (v. 17). And my favorite -- “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (v. 16). When you live with gratitude in your heart wearing humility, kindness, patience, compassion, meekness and love will be a little easier. Paul’s four and fifth steps are really big ones, I think. I dwelt for some time on Paul’s instruction to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” (v. 16). I checked the thesaurus for synonyms for dwell. Here’s how the statement might sound. Let the word of Christ abide in you, roost in you, establish itself in you, stay in you, occupy you, lodge in you, or maybe, “hang out”. Most of the words indicate some permanence and I think that was what Paul intended. Let the word of God come into your hearts and live in you.

I believe the statement intends to focus those who read it. If the word of God dwells in you, you can’t go anywhere without it. It is the measure by which you behave toward yourself and others. The word is above all other standards. But there is also something luxurious about it. Paul says “Let the word of God dwell in you richly.” The word richly adds a lavish component. Richly means luxuriously, thoroughly, completely, abundantly, even opulently.

Besides the thesaurus, I also consulted William Barclay’s book The All-Sufficient Christ: Studies in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians. I thought his explanation of the basic meaning of the Greek word for holy corresponded to my understanding of the word of God dwelling within and of Paul’s last admonition in the selected verses: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (v. 17). Barclay explained that in Greek the word for holy (haigios) is also the word for saint. The word means “different”. “So, then, first and foremost the Christian is ‘different,’ but the most
important aspect is how this difference is expressed as one lives in and engages with the world.”² Barclay references German theologian Adolf von Harnack’s analogy to explain the meaning of Holy as different.

A man cannot live unless he is in the air and the air is in him. Just so a man cannot be a Christian unless he is in Christ and Christ is in him. We may put this very simply: for the Christian, the atmosphere of life is Christ; Christ is the very air he breathes. He will be continually conscious that he is forever in the presence of Christ. He will speak no word without remembering that Christ hears it, and do no deed without remembering that Christ sees it. He will make no decision in life without asking: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’”³

What shall we wear? Clothes dictated by our inner self and our relationship with Christ. I encourage you to think about the traits that Paul discusses in Colossians 3:12-17 the next time you put on clothes. You are God’s chosen, holy and beloved. Therefore, consider these ideas: suit up with compassion, pull on meekness, dress up with compassion, sport kindness, bedeck yourself with humility, decorate yourself with gratitude, honor yourself with patience, add a scarf of forbearance, take along an extra layer of forgiveness; and, as you let the peace of Christ rule in your heart and the word of Christ dwell in your heart, gird yourself with love, and, speak and act in the name of Christ.

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³ Ibid., 121.