

# THE AUSTRALIAN ANABAPTIST

Supplement 2

## ***DISTINCTIVE PRACTICES IN THE MENNONITE CHURCH***

From a series of 6 pre-sermon messages by Paul J. Zehr  
Lakeview Conservative Mennonite Church

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
for brethren to dwell together in unity!  
Psalm 133:1*

*For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace,  
as in all churches of the saints.  
1 Corinthians 14:33*

*Let all things be done decently and in order.  
1 Corinthians 14:40*

*Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded,  
having the same love,  
being of one accord, of one mind.  
Philippians 2:2*

## Segregated Seating

Sunday June 29, 2008

### Distinctive Practices of the Mennonite Church #1

This morning I would like to consider a pre-sermon talk and I have not done that before on a Sunday morning. In fact, I would like to in subsequent Sundays when I am serving to share a series on Distinctive Practices in the Mennonite Church.

We do have some practices that are unique to our setting. As we look around at churches around us we see some differences and sometimes it is good for us to consider why we are doing what we are doing and to convince the convinced and to help the young people among us to also understand and appreciate our practices.

This morning I would like to look at the practice of segregated seating or as one book that I read called it “separated seating.” I am not looking at them in order of importance.

I looked at the definition of segregated and it has the idea of being “put apart, or isolated.” We do not have segregated seating to isolate from the congregation but maybe in that sense separated seating is a better term, although, in a sense, it also means the same thing.

We know segregated seating is rather unique to conservative churches and to plain churches. And sometimes when visitors come among us from other settings they are surprised at our practice of sisters being on one side of the congregation and brethren being on the other side.

Now, as one studies history it would appear that already back in Jewish history in the synagogues there was segregated seating, that the men and women were separate. In fact, the Bible does not speak to it, I believe, because it was a non-issue. It was just the way it was done, it was not questioned and there was no teaching needed on it.

Augustine, who lived in the 300’s to 400’s in his writings made a reference, a passing reference to going to worship. And he described it as this: “Where a seemly separation of the sexes is observed.” Just simply commenting on going to the house of worship where there is a separation of the genders.

I would like to consider ten reasons and benefits of segregated seating. Most of these I have taken from a book entitled *Biblical concepts of the Church* by Leland Haines. And I appreciated considering those reasons and benefits.

The first one that I have:

1) It is a way of holding fast to good traditions that have been handed down and have been time honoured. It is a practice that has been practiced for many years. In fact, it is only probably in the last fifty years that Protestant churches and more liberal churches have moved away from it.

2) Secondly, it gives greater fellowship within the church.

After all the service it is not a family setting. We generally do not have families sit together. Where segregated seating does happen the focus is taken from the family and it provides for a greater fellowship in the group. The focus is not on the family but on worship.

3) Thirdly, separated seating makes it easier for widows, widowers, and singles to feel a part of the brotherhood. They do not need to feel isolated because they do not have their own family to sit with. This gives them greater feeling of fellowship with others. I think we can well understand that. It helps everyone, it brings an equality among the brotherhood. It also aids the keeping of reserve between the genders and especially the single brothers and sisters.

4) Fourthly, the ministers can speak more directly to brethren or sisters when required. And sometimes we, the ministers might be pointing and looking at one side of the house, and that is a benefit.

5) Fifthly, it improves congregational singing where the soprano and alto sisters are together and the tenor and bass brethren are together creating greater harmony. Not that we separate the bass and the tenor in the seats. But it does seem to help congregational singing somewhat.

I have a cousins, I have cousins that are in a Conference setting, a liberal church setting where they have gone, where they have lost congregational singing to a great degree through a number of reasons, one of them was mixed seating and another was the use of instruments in the church. They decided they wanted to have a revival in congregational singing, they wanted to restore some of that and so, for a while (I do not know how long it lasted — I do not think it lasted real long), in effort to restore congregational singing and their ability to do so they had segregated seating. They actually divided the sopranos and they divided the altos and the tenor and the bass to again try and restore what they had lost in the past.

I found that interesting that it is actually a benefit to improve congregational singing to have segregated seating.

6) Sixthly, it lessens distractions between husband and wife and romance between the unmarried in the service thus creating a better spiritual atmosphere.

7) Seventhly, when seated separately in the assembly visitors and friends as well as brethren and sisters pay more attention to spiritual matters in the service. When the minister speaks a word that is convicting to one or other person these cannot avoid it as easily by switching their attention to a partner. This creates a better atmosphere for the Holy Spirit to work in. There is a thought of when one chooses their seating partner they can somehow avoid that, the Spirit speaking to them directly.

8) In the eighth place, separate seating also provides for a quieter service. Children are separated and under the control of one parent and when a mother has to leave the service with a small child there is less distraction. It divides the children up often, the father has some of the children, the mother has some of the children and it actually helps to have control.

I know even from our own experience when in a wedding or in a funeral or when we are sitting together as a family that it takes some extra discipline so that the children are not just going back and forth from one to the other. And it is an aid to have a quieter service.

9) In the ninth place, the holy kiss is less likely to be practiced in mixed seating assemblies. And I suppose that is true they often go together, when we lose one practise another quickly follows the same path.

10) In the tenth place kneeling prayer is more appropriate with segregated seating. The practice of kneeling prayer, which is another distinct practice that we want to consider another time, it is more appropriate when brethren and sisters are seated separately.

*Now, a few thoughts on maintaining our practice of segregated seating.* We maintain it first of all, 1) by appreciating it. Secondly, 2) we need to keep on doing it.

I have heard of some groups have begun to make an exception on Sunday evening worship services to sit together as families. I think we want to continue to practice it for those types of occasions. Now, we do make exceptions for weddings and funerals often because that, (I am not sure when that began or what all the reasons were) but that certainly brings many people together and we do sit by families. We do make exception for that, we see a place for that but we do also in that case exercise caution and try to have brethren sitting beside brethren and sisters beside sisters as much as possible to continue to appreciate our practice of segregated seating.

## **Kneeling Prayer.**

Sunday July 13, 2008.

### Distinctive Practices of the Mennonite Church #2

Before we go into the message I would like to look at another of the distinctive practices of the Mennonite church, and particularly the Conservative Mennonite churches.

I would like to consider this morning the practice of kneeling prayer.

It is a practice that is unique and largely confined to the plain people, to conservative people, old order groups and so forth, there are a number of groups that would practice kneeling prayer when in many of the more liberal sections of the denomination that has been lost.

Now as I understand it the Catholic Church has always practised kneeling, they have a kneeling rail in front of the pew that they sit on and they kneel forward and face the image at the front and pray toward that image, so when the Anabaptists withdrew from the Catholic Church kneeling prayer was not something new to them, they continued on the practice that they were familiar with and of course it was not a invention of the Catholic Church. Not everything in Catholic practice is necessarily faulty, there is lots of false doctrine there and false practices, but we understand kneeling prayer comes from the Bible.

Now why kneeling prayer?

The Bible teaches the various postures of prayer, if you go and make a study of the posture of prayer throughout the Bible you will see that people parade in various postures, I think of the Pharisee and the public and went to the temple to pray they were standing as they prayed.

And then there is kneeling. In fact in Psalm 95 it indicates that it is a commanded posture, it is one of the commanded postures:

Psalm 95:6 says: *O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.*

Kneeling is a posture of prayer that is commanded.

In Acts chapter 20 we find the account of Paul who was leaving the church at Ephesus, and he gave them some farewell admonition and it says that when he had thus spoken he knelt down and prayed with them all. (Acts 20:36)

And then in the next chapter he has come to the church of Tyre and he is Fellowshiping with them and it says: When we had accomplished those days we departed and went our way and they all brought us on our way with their wives till we were out of the city and we knelt down on the shore

and prayed. Acts 21:5

Kneeling prayer was also found among New Testament believers, taught in the Old Testament and practiced in the New Testament and then as I have noted when the Anabaptists, there are writings that record how the Anabaptists in their worship they would kneel as a congregation, there aren't long or many writings about it necessarily but here and there in written history there is evidence that they were practising kneeling.

Kneeling is an expression of humility or it can be, and we know that that doesn't necessarily make us humble to kneel, but kneeling is and can be an expression of humility and it is an aid in our humbling ourselves before God, whether it is in our personal prayer life or public, as we kneel for prayer we are humbling ourselves in the presence of God, we're coming down from our stature so to speak and coming before the Lord.

Kneeling as a congregation then unites our hearts in unity as we pray.

Now one thing that is unique in our practice of kneeling prayer is that we turn and face the rear and as I have already mentioned the Catholic practice is to face the front of the building where the images are, and I'm not sure that there is any written history that really says why or when it began that the Anabaptists turned around when they prayed. There is some, I've heard some speculation that they turned away from the image of Mary, I'm not sure whether that was intentional or the fact that they did not feel that they had to face the front indicated that they were not praying to an image but they were praying to God.

And of course the Anabaptists in their simple facilities of worship didn't have a kneeling rail and that practice has been amongst the Anabaptist church and simply again it is not a show but it is an act of humility.

Kneeling prayer was largely beginning to be lost in the Mennonite church, liberal parts of the Mennonite church, when audible prayers started coming in and that as I understand it at one time churches had silent prayer and there are still groups that do that have kneeling prayer and practice silent prayer while they kneel and their audible prayer is only or largely when they stand.

When churches began to have more audible prayer then they ceased the kneeling for prayer because they were having audible prayer, somehow they put that together that if we have audible prayer we stand and if we have silent prayer we kneel.

However we know that it works well to have audible prayer when we kneel and as long as I remember that has been part of the church.

Now a few helps to maintain the practice of kneeling prayer.

We maintain it by keeping it as a regular part of our worship services, we maintain that by maintaining dignity and reverence, quietness in our kneeling where we kneel together as quietly and reverently as we can, we assume a reverent posture for prayer, not a slouch down, it is not a time to relax or take a position of comfort but we maintain a reverent posture. Kneeling prayer is a way to keep this practice in a way that will bring glory to God.

Another way that we maintain this practice of kneeling prayer in a proper way is to have quietness during prayer and reverence.

And one area in that is to be careful about using that opportunity to attend to our personal needs, for example blowing your nose, sometimes you know it is embarrassing to blow your nose in public but then you often hear when you kneel that is often when people start blowing their nose and that is not reverence and that is not the purpose of kneeling prayer at all.

Neither should this be an opportunity to use it as an opportunity for friends to whisper or to talk together, that is very, very irreverent.

We are praying to God and irreverence during prayer is an insult to God and we must never give in to that or anything else, looking around, whatever we may be tempted to do when we are kneeling just simply because other people don't see us as much, let's not get into that behaviour.

And then reverence in rising from prayer is part of maintaining this practice.

Not rising before prayer is finished. Sometimes when the speaker is finishing praying his coming to the end and you can already hear that people are starting getting ready to get up, but waiting till the prayer is finished and it is part of an expression of reverence to the One we are praying to.

We maintain this practice of kneeling prayer by being a humble people that are not ashamed to kneel down before our Lord together.

## **Four-Part Singing (a cappella)**

Sunday October 26, 2008

### Distinctive Practices of the Mennonite Church #3

It has been a while since we looked at one of those distinctive practices that we have as a people that are somewhat unique to us and not because we feel we are being threatened but because we want to understand and we want our youth and children to grow up understanding why we do what we do.

We looked previously at segregated seating and at kneeling prayer. This morning we would like to consider just briefly the practice of four-part singing or a capella meaning by voices only: without accompaniment from musical instruments.

Four-part singing is somewhat unique, not all church groups practice four part singing as we, though there are some settings that practice singing only in unison and we also know that there are churches that at one time practiced four-part singing as we do and it has drifted from their practice and has gone to musical instruments with the congregation perhaps singing along in unison and they have dropped the four-part singing.

We need to understand at the beginning here that four-part singing in itself is not taught in the scriptures and is not necessarily the only right way but we do it and it is part of our practice, part of our heritage and this short message is to help us to understand why we do this.

I do have cousins in a liberal setting and they were recounting to me that atone time how they were trying to revive four-part singing and for a while they put the piano aside and tried to do it but it didn't last. the conviction wasn't there.

And so we appreciate our practice as we have it

In thinking a little bit how it came to be, it was a result of one of the influences that came about through the Great Awakening, we recognize that, it was also introduced through singing schools that were held and I don't have dates to this as to how many years ago that was but there were singing schools and singing was taught because there was a general lack of ability or a lack of knowing how to sing.

Sometimes the past practice was that the song leader would sing a line and then others would follow and so there was a burden for singing schools that people would be able to learn how to sing and the books that were used in these music schools had music written in with the harmony and

staying with four-part singing and of course it then came into the church practice at various times at different places.

We understand of course that there were some that were opposed to it and I want to leave that as it is, but we do have it among us and we do appreciate it as a blessing and believe that it answers to the Scripture where it says speak to ourselves, Ephesians 5:19, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."

We believe it is an answer to that, it is pleasant to the ear, we enjoy singing and it is pleasant even without musical instruments, it is pleasant without having a professionally trained choir. There are churches that have similar singing but have a professionally trained choir. Sometimes when we sing in old people's homes we might refer to our group as a choir, but we are not a choir, we do not have a few that are off to themselves singing but it is a congregation singing together and the singing that we have is such that each can participate in the harmony according to their singing talents, there are different parts that fit the different voice ranges.

We believe it is a good way to express the joyful sound that the Bible teaches in the New Testament era as opposed to the Old Testament where they used various instruments to make the sound.

Congregational singing, and especially as we are looking at four-part singing, is a way of unifying the congregation as different ones are singing different parts and there is a blending together and it does typify the blending in harmony of the different people in their different and various unique characteristics, blending us altogether.

It is an interesting note also that the shaped notes came along with the four-part singing in the singing schools and then later in church life, somewhere along the line there came a thrust to go to the round notes again and a music teacher, Martin Ressler I think it was, in his book he wrote much about music and he was alarmed at the trend in dropping the shaped notes because using the round notes one had to be very trained and very good at singing and reading music whereas the shaped notes you can read a lot easier, those who have lesser talents can read the shaped notes, and it was an effort to keep the professionalism from coming into the church and to keep Congregational singing together.

Some safeguards for our four-part singing.

One is of course to keep the instruments out of the church and out of our homes. We appreciate the practice of being free from instruments and the

recordings, that is one thing that helps us to appreciate the Congregational singing when we listen to music that is similar to what we have in church.

You know if we would develop a taste for the music of the world, for the so-called Christian music that is out there then our Congregational singing will no longer be meaningful to us. And we need to continue teaching music and singing in our schools.

That is a blessing that adds to the blessing of Congregational singing at church.

### **After Service Fellowship.**

Sunday February 2, 2009

#### Distinctive Practices of the Mennonite Church #4

This morning I would like to consider another of the distinctive practices that are our practice and that is the after service Fellowship that we have.

There are many churches that do not practice after service Fellowship as we have it. There are of course some church settings where people hardly know each other and they leave immediately after the service.

It is a practice that we have among Conservative churches, it is not a direct Bible command, we can't find a direct verse that teaches exactly how we must do it, it is a practice that we have and there are some reasons for it and some blessings that go with it.

I suppose the Scripture that comes the closest to this application probably is the Scripture in Hebrews 10:25 where it says we should not be forsaking the assembling of ourselves as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another and so much the more as you the Day approaching.

During the preaching we are being admonished and there is also exhortation, then in the Sunday School hour when the Sunday School lesson is being taught there is exhorting and then as we Fellowship together after the service we have a another opportunity to exhort each other, to speak to each other on a personal level. It doesn't mean that we are necessarily admonishing or chiding each other through that time but it is when our Fellowship, our conversation is a means of encouraging each other and a means of stimulation along the pathway of life.

1] One of the reasons and blessings of the after service Fellowship as we experience it, is the fact that we are social beings and we need to socialize with each other if, we are normal we like to socialize little, we notice a difference in personality and some enjoy that more than others but it is a basic

need mankind to socialize. While our gathering is not primarily to socialize yet it does meet that need on sight.

2] Another reason that we share together after the service is because we are like-minded and we are drawn together and we enjoy being together.

3] Another reason that I already alluded to is to exhort each other, that is on a personal level where we have the opportunity to talk with each other and share and as we hear each other's experiences, how we are facing or experiencing the issues of life, we hear each other out, it is a means of helping each other along the way.

4] Another reason and another blessing after service Fellowship is that it is an opportunity to encourage, to offer encouragement to an individual's needs. Where there are sometimes needs that we wouldn't necessarily address in the public part of the service here it gives us opportunity to address each other in individual terms and share maybe the struggles that we are having. It is an opportunity for the Ministry to share with the people on a personal level rather than just on a collective level.

Now some guidelines for keeping the blessing.

First of all we need to keep spiritual. To keep our after service Fellowship blessing we need to keep it spiritual and not simply gravitate to business discussions. There are plenty opportunities during the week to do our business, to make our plans, and to keep our blessing we need to keep it spiritual.

Now there is a place to ask each other how it is going and maybe that even affects some everyday life things but not necessarily helping each other to do our business more effectively, but rather it may be more how we are relating to the spiritual side, to the emotional side of what we are facing in life.

There is a place to ask each other about each other's well-being, not in a nosy sense, not in a sense that we have to know everything about everyone else, but in the sense that we are interested in each other and that we are not just concerned about our own lives but we are interested in our brethren and sisters and especially in how we are facing the challenges of life.

It is an opportunity, and this should have been probably first, but it is an opportunity to make applications from the message that was given there is then an opportunity to discuss and make applications to it.

The second guideline in keeping our after service Fellowship a blessing is to prevent a generation gap to have a time where we have a healthy mix of young and old sharing together in Fellowship. And I appreciate that we

have that, the older ones can meet the younger ones and there is some sharing. I know there is a tendency for people to tend to gravitate to their own friends and their own age group and we need to continue to put forth effort to share altogether across generations.

The third guideline is to avoid cliques where we do not always visit with the same people.

Again it is easy to Fellowship with those that may be only in our own category or may be special friends, but we need to put forth effort to everyone, to speak to the aged, to speak to the withdrawn, to speak to the discouraged and meet many. We should try to meet many, now we can't maybe always do that but one extreme would be to simply say hello to everyone and not have much Fellowship and the other extreme might be to have all our time spent with one person, but to be somewhere in between there trying to reach out to a number of individuals and be an encouragement to them.

A fourth guideline is controlling our children.

When we as parents are busy and Fellowshiping, and we are enjoying the Fellowship of that time it is easy for us to forget about our children and just assume and that they are being what they should be and doing what they should be, but we need to remind ourselves to be aware of what they are doing.

I have already seen children after the service running on tombstones out here and I don't think parents were aware of it, I've already seen children walking on chairs in the basement and I don't think parents were aware of it, and I'm not pretending that I am always aware of what my children are doing but I do know that it is possible for our children to be doing things that we are not aware of.

And to keep it a blessing we need to remind ourselves to control our children.

The fifth guideline that I have is to keep the after service Fellowship a controlled atmosphere, not too loud and not so that it distracts from the spirit of worship.

I remember quite a few years ago being in a one congregation where they really enjoyed their after service Fellowship, but it got very noisy, and laughing and talking, and it can be overdone, we need to keep our spirit of worship, the atmosphere reverent.

The last point, the last guideline I have is to exercise moderation. There is a time to leave. There are extremes, we could leave too soon after or probably linger too long, there is a place to share further in each other's

homes and we ought to exercise that hospitality and continue our sharing on a one-to-one basis in each other's homes

## **Distinctive Attire - The Plain Coat**

Sunday March 8, 2009.

### Distinctive Practices of the Mennonite Church #5

The area that we would like to consider this morning is the area of distinctive dress. We are going to look this morning at the plain coat and another time we will look at the cape dress.

We are looking at these practices because they are rather unique as we and in contrast to the world around us and in contrast to much professed Christendom. It is important for us to understand why we're doing what we are doing whether it is kneeling prayer or what ever area it is in.

Why do we wear the plain coat?

The Bible teaches that we are, and in 1 Peter 2:9 it says:

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:.”

That verse teaches that we are a special people and that we ought to stand out and be different from the world. Now it does not specifically say in that verse that our dress needs to be different but the principle of standing out as different is there, we are a special people to God and we ought to show forth His praises in the world, there ought to be a marked difference between us and the world around us.

Romans 12:2 also teaches that we are not to be conformed to this world, and there are other principles as well from the scriptures that would back the application of the plain coat.

Now we know that the Bible does not teach specifically the plain coat, it is an application that the church has made and it is based on the teachings of nonconformity, it is based on the teachings of the Bible, it is based on the principles of uniformity, being of the same mind, walking by the same rule and measurement and the principle of simplicity.

Looking just a little bit at the historical basis of the plain coat.

We are not exactly sure where it all began. Right from the beginning of the Anabaptist movement there was, as people observed the Anabaptists, it was apparent that they did not follow the fashions of the world. Menno Simon wrote against it, teaching that they were to dress simply and not

adorn themselves, not dress themselves in a way that expresses pride and brings attraction to oneself.

The suit coat as we have it stems back at least to colonial American times when the coat that they wore had a collar that was somewhat similar to the collar that we wear on our suits today. During, I'm not sure how long ago, maybe 100 years ago or may be closer to 200 years, there were changing fads back there just like there are today. We are aware that today the world changes their fads, men's hair gets longer it gets shorter, the sideburns get longer they get shorter, and back then there was fads, and the collar back there in the world started to get higher and higher and eventually fell over and the lapel coat evolved.

But the Mennonite church, the plain people, continued to wear the same collar and many Conservative Christian groups also continued to wear the plain collar as we wear it but have since largely dropped that practice, it was not only or was not necessarily rooted as a strictly Mennonite practice but as everyone else started to follow other patterns by now it has become a distinctive, unique Mennonite practice.

I would like to consider some of the blessings of the plain coat.

The first one is that it is a positive identification. It identifies us with the people of God, it does not identify us with a club, like a dairy club or a woodworking club, it identifies us as a people of God and whenever people have seen the plain coat, see someone travelling may be in an airport or somewhere, conversation is initiated, wherever the plain coat is observed by people for the first time they almost always connect it with a religious meaning, it identifies them with God. They don't know of all of which is in that person's life and what they teach and yet they think of God and they think of the fact that this person is devoted in following the Lord. That is a positive identification.

And furthermore it does give the message that we are not conformed to this world, it gives part of that positive identification, it gives the message that we are not following the world.

The second blessing that I have is that it provides for uniformity.

It is an application that provides for uniformity and where we all practice it then it identifies us with each other and it identifies us with a group. If the church were to open it up for anyone however they want to dress, well it is not hard to imagine what would happen, we only have to look around, we only have to look back in history a little bit to know what happens, but it is an application that provides a method to uniformity as a brotherhood, so we are all speaking the same thing.

In the third place it provides for stability.

The plain coat has provided through the years, as fashions have come and gone, a stability as we still follow this pattern, we don't have to worry about the changing fashions, we don't have to feel that pressure.

And fourthly it is an economic application.

Now the plain coat isn't necessarily cheaper than other suits, in fact sometimes it can cost a little more, not necessarily a lot more, one can pay a lot with either style, but it is an economic application in the sense that it provides and satisfies the principle of simplicity and that principle will in the long term be an economic one.

In the world the general pattern, thinking of the Prime Minister for example, he has many public appearances and I haven't paid a lot of attention but I don't suppose that every time he appears in public that he dresses exactly the same way. I think when he appears in some settings he is dressed maybe with the suit and with this tie and at other times he tends to be a little more casual with the shirt button open and still wearing a lapel coat and different types of coats, and when one goes that path it takes a lot of different garments and changes of garments to express the mood or the occasion, but with the plain coat there's an application of a biblical principles and economic application where we only need one application.

I am not saying that it is wrong for us to have more than one suit, it is good to have a better one may be, and one not so good for some occasions, but basically we wear the same thing, we don't have a lot of difference in our wardrobe.

Another blessing that I see is that it provides a guide for the rest of our wardrobe.

Our Faith and Practice (statement church standards) says that the plain coat principle will direct our brethren to have a consistent application in all areas of life.

This means there is the principle for the application of the plain coat as an application of Bible principles and when we have a practice of wearing a plain coat and then if we are consistent the rest of our wardrobe will match it.

I mean it is not consistent for us when we are wearing a plain coat to church on Sundays and during the week have a multicoloured jacket, an advertising cap on our head and bright colours and so forth, it isn't consistent. And so it is a principle, it is an application that helps us to make the rest of our wardrobe consistent too.

I would like to think of little yet of three points on maintaining the practice of the plain coat.

The first point that I have is: To appreciate it and not be ashamed of it.

As I said before when people see us with it they think, the first thing that comes to their mind in general is that they think we are devoted to some religious cause, and we are, and so let's not be ashamed of being identified with Jesus. Let's not be ashamed to bear reproach for the name of Jesus.

You know it is a lot easier for us; it is a lot easier for the flesh to dress in a way that would have us to blend in with the world and we certainly wouldn't stand out so different, and the basic reason for that is because we are not willing to stand out for Jesus.

The second point I have is: To wear it.

We need to appreciate that we need to wear it. We wear it for worship or any other occasion that calls for formal wear, we wear it. Another part of wearing it is not being too ready or too quick when the weather warms up a little bit to put it aside as if it is something that we don't want to wear unless we absolutely have to wear it.

I think another area in wearing it is to continue to wear it after church and not be too quick to put it aside. And maybe when one is travelling, I've already seen that sometimes when people travel on the Lord's Day that they seem a little reluctant to wear the plain coat when they are driving, when we need to encourage each other to wear it, not to be ashamed to be seen with a plain coat outside or in public.

The third point that I have is: To button it.

To maintain the practice of the plain coat to button it. Now what does a little thing like that have to do with maintaining the practice of the plain coat? Again our Faith and Practice says open suit coats appear inconsistent in most situations.

I know it is a temptation, especially for young men, to feel a little uncomfortable in wearing the plain coat and one of the ways that is expressed is by just having it hanging open, not quite comfortable with it but well have it on but not quite comfortable to close it.

Some years ago we were at a suit-store to get a suit, a suit that was to be changed over to a plain coat, but the sales lady was a very zealous sales lady and was explaining how the suit ought to be worn and she was saying it from the perspective of the world. But what I was impressed with was what the world sees as the signals of casual dress is basically the same as what the church has been saying. She said that the proper way to wear a

suit is to button it up and to have a suit that is unbuttoned is a casual expression.

And as we said we wear the plain coat as part of our formal wear it is not when we are dressed casually, it is not a casual dress. She further said if one is serving, she said at the altar, maybe she was from a Catholic perspective I don't know, she says if one goes to serve at the altar then the suit should be buttoned the whole way and if one wants to start to unbuttoned some buttons then start at the bottom never at the top.

And isn't it interesting what the world sees when they see us?

In conclusion: Do all to the glory of God.

When we wear what we wear, the plain coat included, it must be to the glory of God. There must be a holy life backing it, a consistent life.

You know I know of individuals who have worn the plain coat for years who do not have a pure heart and it doesn't help that heart, but a pure heart will be unashamed of Jesus and be willing to stand out as different.

That is a challenge especially to the young man but to all of us to be willing to stand out for Jesus.

### **Distinctive Attire – The Cape Dress**

Sunday April 5, 2009.

#### **Distinctive Practices of the Mennonite Church #6**

We have been looking at the distinctive practices in the Mennonite church and likely this is the last of the series considering and this morning as I said last time we are looking at the cape dress.

Earlier we looked at some worship practices like segregated seating and kneeling prayer and four part singing, after service Fellowship and considering a couple of items of our dress where we stand out to be quite different from the world and even from other so-called Christian groups.

Last time we looked at the plain coat and many of the Bible principles that we refer to it that time also refer and apply to the Cape dress.

First of all looking at some of the Bible principles for the Cape dress as we practice it.

We have the principle of nonconformity and we looked at that as one of the principles for the plain coat, to be not conformed to this world in Romans 12:2.

Turn to first Timothy chapter 2, we have the principle of modesty here, 1 Timothy 2:9-10

“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; <sup>10</sup>But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.”

Especially we are considering here the term modest apparel and the original Greek term that is used here has the thought of that extra covering, that descending covering that is worn, and the idea of modest apparel is that which is to cover and I think we understand what modesty is.

Also another Bible principle is the principle of uniformity and that is a principle that is also true for the plain coat, we have an application here that we do similar.

You know we could have a practice that everybody has their own method or thinks of their own standard of modest apparel and I think we could soon understand what would happen, there would be a lot of variety, that there would be a lot of innovations and a lot of changing from time to time, but when we have a uniform practice it is not only uniform across the brotherhood, brethren or sisters, but it is also a uniform practice throughout the years, it doesn't change year in and year out.

The traditional Easter thing in nominal Christianity was to wear that new Easter dress and in many churches it has become a fashion show, whereas we believe in having a practice and an application that remains constant and is a stable application.

Looking a bit at the historical basis of the Cape dress.

Studying history would show that from way back in the early church there was, it would seem that there was that extra piece, we don't know exactly how it was, but there was an application, an attempt made to be modest by having that extra piece of cloth. The Mennonite church has long embraced the Cape dress as we have it today as an application of modesty and we appreciate it.

Coming to the present I thought I would read from our Faith and Practice (statement of faith and church standards) and what we have agreed upon as a brotherhood. I'm not reading the whole section but that which relates to the Cape dress:

"We maintain that our brethren and sisters should conform to the same principles of modesty and nonconformity in apparel with a purpose to witness to the scriptural truths of simplicity and sex distinction. We believe that the Cape dress for the sisters consistently gives such a testimony."

It also speaks of the plain coat in there, and then dropping down for more explanation on the Cape dress:

"Plain dresses express simplicity as they have a plain neck or a plain collar or a narrow band with no tucks. Sleeves shall be at least three-quarter length and are either plain or have a narrow cuff or one with elastic and without ruffles. Ornamentation such as puffed sleeves over the shoulder, decorative buttons and stitching shall be avoided. All Cape dresses shall include a belt. Skirt length shall be the midpoint between the knee and the ankle.

Materials of shimmery, loud colour or patterns shall be avoided. Form fitting sweaters such as pullovers are inconsistent with modesty."

I think that we appreciate our position, our practice. But there are several threats that we are faced with in our present practice which we want to continue as a consistent application through the years. In my short lifetime I have seen various threats and various fads come and go and the church thankfully has ever stood firm on these various principles.

The one threat is in relation to immodesty.

Even though it is a Cape dress it is possible to make it in a way that is immodest, probably most obviously would be if the dress would be too tight, and I think we have grown in the past number of years in that area, I think a number of years ago there would have been a lot of dresses that were tighter than what they are now.

Another area would be in the low necklines, when the necklines are made lower and begin to expose more of the body it is an attack on immodesty and the principles of the Cape dress.

Sleeve length is another. The original constitution of the CMCO (Conservative Mennonite Churches of Ontario) back in the early sixties, that was one of the burdens that the sleeve length was to be at least the three-quarter length because of the concern at that time of the beginning trends of shorter sleeves and exposing the sisters arm.

Ornamentation is another area that is addressed here in the Constitution and has also been threatened in the past, and maybe isn't quite as much of a threat today right at the moment, but it certainly comes and goes and will continue to be a threat. But ornamentation such as, I remember when a lot of the ruffles and the ruffles at the end of the sleeves and that is why it says the elastic at the end of the sleeve, there is a practical purpose with elastic but it is not to be for ornamentation.

Or the threat of the top end of the sleeve, puffing up the top to make that have some appeal, or extra stitching, that has already been a pressure in the past and maybe still is in some circles.

Another area threat to the Cape dress practice is simply innovations of design in general.

The waistline has probably been one of the greatest and the first place that innovation takes place in the Cape dress, where there were changes done to the waistline and it is not that many years ago when the elastic came into the waistline and was looked at as an innovation somewhat, but it was felt that it would be an acceptable practice as long as the belt is part of the Cape dress and that is why our Constitution speaks of the belt and one of the purposes of that is, and I know that is a very probably a statement contended about in the Constitution more than others, but the burden behind it was to continue to have a stability of practice that when the belt is no longer part of the Cape dress than the waistline goes up or down or there is soon a lot of other changes and it is an attempt to keep their practice uniform and stable through the generations.

Another innovation is hemlines.

I well remember when the pressure was for shorter dresses, Bible schools was where the pressure was too, they needed to measure the dresses to make sure that they were long enough because the pressure was to have dresses too short and now the trend has gone the other way and Bible schools have needed to address that trend. We want a practice that is consistent and a practice that is stable so that we can continue to appreciate the Cape dress as an application of modesty in our time.

And as I said there can be other applications of plain dress and modesty and we don't criticise those who have a different application in other groups but we believe it is a blessing when we do have an application that we follow and we are unified in.

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