

DRESSING CHILDREN ACCORDING TO GOSPEL SIMPLICITY

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What do the three topics this afternoon have in common? The Lord's Day observance, vehicles and dressing our children. I think each of these three have this in common in that they test where our affections are, it helps us to understand what kind of allegiance we have.

Most of us who have had children can remember the wonder and the thrill and the excitement that came when that first little one came into our home, but hopefully before the arrival of that little one we have already developed some understanding of what consistency is in relation to giving direction to that one, in dressing, in manners, and suchlike. I'm glad that in the gospel we have a safe standard for direction for so precious a gift that God has given.

Dressing children according to Gospel simplicity.

This is a part of article 5 of our discipline. I think a periodic look at such a subject is necessary if we are to keep worldly pressures at bay, and we face worldly pressures a-plenty that we need to tackle. This title is a rewording of a statement found in article 5 under number six where it says: "Parents should dress their children according to Gospel simplicity and teach them the serious results of following worldly practices and vanities prevalent today." Parents should. It gives positive direction and then it says: Teach them the serious results of following worldly practices. What was the doctrine of separation designed to do for the children of Israel? It was to safeguard them from idolatry, that they would remember who they were and what they stood for. What are the serious results of failure to dress our children according to Gospel simplicity? I think one of the serious results is an unclear identity as to who we are, who we belong to, the loss of will in being a separate people is a common problem in plain circles, and we see the results of it here and there along the way. And finally the most serious result is the terrible tale of loss to Christ and the church, the wayward son or daughter. Of course it is not always pointing to the way we dress them, of course not, but I think many times that factor is involved.

In the first heading of our outline we would like to inject one word in our title: Dressing **our** children. We need to own the fact that we have a personal responsibility. I'd like to make several observations here as we consider dressing our children.

Observation number one.

Children, our children are a temporary gift, they are God's children loaned to us to mould for His service. It is a temporary gift so we have a stewardship responsibility even in our children.

Observation number two.

These children are our responsibility, ours. Others may assist, grandparents and the church, but they cannot replace our responsibility. Finally it is you and I as parents that are best equipped to develop in our children a love for Gospel simplicity and a love for the church. And we are glad for the assistance that we have from our Christian day schools, Sunday schools, church and suchlike. Parents must come to love Gospel simplicity themselves, the parent who does not come to love the Gospel simplicity way, the separated way, cannot instill a love for that way in their children. We need to understand that and love the way we have chosen.

Observation number three.

Responsibility always yields accountability. Someone is accountable for the way our children are dressed. When mistakes are made that yield a loss, forgiveness can be had through true repentance, but that does not stop the reaping does it? There is still a certain amount of anguish that goes along with the missed opportunity.

Dressing children according to Gospel simplicity will not happen satisfactorily unless a good majority of our families have a proper understanding of separation from the world. By this I mean that a good majority of our families should not think along this line of: What can or may I do and still somehow fit in?

A good majority of our families need to think: What should I do to preserve a separated life, the simplicity of the gospel for the next generation? and that will help us to stay back from the edge a bit and to be on the safe side of issues. Conservative Christians ought to be concerned about staying on the safe side of issues. What is that side? Well it is the biblical side of course and we will look at today as we go along.

Another observation yet: Nothing teaches as effectively as example. Parents should dress their children and should teach them the serious results that would result from following worldly trends of fashion and immodesty. What we do as individuals, as parents, what we have learnt to love, sends a signal to our posterity that nothing else can finally replace.

The second heading we would like to look at: What is Gospel simplicity?

Well it is after gospel direction, it is one standard for all, old and young together, the same principles apply. We would like to just quickly page through the New Testament and look at some of those standards and identify what Gospel simplicity is.

In first Timothy chapter 3 verse nine we have direction given in relation to women's apparel;

1 Tim. 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; But which becometh women professing godliness, with good works.”

We notice the principle of modest apparel here coupled with restraint, with governed actions, with a reserve, an almost bashful air you might say, that is kind of out of step with society today isn't it, and the freedom that they express. Modest in form, material, colour, becoming in step with the rest of your life and the rest of the principles of scripture. Of course this rules out some things mentioned here, ornamental extras, gold, pearls, costly array, sometimes the imitations of costly array are rather cheap, dirt cheap almost, but they still send somewhat of a signal as to what is in our heart.

Let us stop next at first Peter chapter 3:

1 Peter 3:3-4

“Whose adorning let it not be that outward *adorning* of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; ⁴But *let it be* the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, *even the ornament* of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.”

I'd like to point out two things here, Peter is emphasising that it is not to be the outward that sends the strongest signal, I mean the class and the flash, but it is to be a character signal that is sent. Not fixing the hair, not the extras, so that the person's character gets the attention instead of the body. Verse four talks about not being a show-off, the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. This passage talks about the outward fixing up as well as the goal that we have in mind, what do we want to produce? And we will look at that goal a little bit later.

Let us now turn back to second Corinthians chapter 6 for another peek at what Gospel simplicity is. Here it is not talking directly about clothing necessarily but in second Corinthians 6:14 we have the challenge of not being unequally yoked together with unbelievers because we are out of step with each other, we are going different directions. Verse 16 in the middle of the verse we start;

2 Cor. 6:16-17

“.....for ye are the temple of the living God;” We need to be behaving ourselves dressing and our bodies in a way that gives the signal that we are the temple of the Holy Ghost, that God is dwelling within us, and verse 16b says; “and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷Wherefore come out from among them,” Here we noticed divine ownership that is coupled with this simplicity idea.

Listed directly with number six directly under article 5 in our discipline are two scriptures Romans 8:12-13 and Romans 12:1-2.

Romans 8:12-13:

“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. ¹³For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

Here we are told that we are not debtors, not to live after the flesh, and so Gospel simplicity involves crucifying the flesh and that is a life long challenge, especially one that is close to the heart of a young mother, to crucify that fleshly urge to show off her little one. In Romans chapter 12, verses one and two, we notice that appearances are a clear indicator as to whom we belong to. This gospel, this good news, when accepted yields an allegiance to Christ and His direction and that direction involves modestly, simplicity, separation, non-conformity etc.

We would like to look for a few moments now at the practical side of dressing according to Gospel simplicity. First of all I'd like to make a few observations under this heading: Dressing children according to Gospel simplicity;

Observation number one; There is a standard, that standard is the fixed. The principles we have in God's word that have been with us throughout the generations. There is a standard, we need to build upon that standard.

Observation number three: It is not man's standard but it is God's standard for man. We may choose to accept this standard as our own and it is only then that we are really qualified to dress our children according to Gospel simplicity.

Observation number three; God's standards are always for a purpose. I think understanding this helps to produce a willing obedience.

Let us turn to Romans chapter 12, God's standards are always for a purpose, And He does not put things into our life without an underlying motive for our good. Yes, He does test us, but for our good and growth.

Romans 12:1-2

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service. ²And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

Notice that a change of mind, a change of what is important, is at the very core of separation, of non-conformity, the very heart of the way we dress our children even. What do we want, what is our goal? Notice that we are presenting our bodies, an ongoing sacrifice, a living sacrifice. Whose approval do we want? The neighbours, even my best friend or first of all our Lord Jesus? We also notice that this is designed to keep us from being polluted. Separation avoids contamination. One of the articles that I read in The Eastern Mennonite Testimony makes this statement; "A scriptural sense of modesty includes orderliness and consistency, modest apparel expresses a sense of propriety and indicates the choice of a virtuous mind."

Now we are looking at the fact that God's standards are always for a purpose, modest apparel expresses a sense of propriety, a sense of what is proper. Something is proper because there is something to safeguard. What is it that we are endeavouring to safeguard as we dress our children, what is it? Why first of all we are promoting a love for Gospel simplicity, our brother earlier was talking about that in relation to cars, vehicles, simplicity, service. Secondly its safeguards modesty. Modesty is important so that we think right and act rightly. It safeguards modesty. Things are given for a reason, it produces a separation which is a safeguard again. I believe that on the cutting edge of our group's safety is this idea of a willingness to be a separated people, an identifiable people. It also yields a steady chartered path, a predictable one, it avoids competition when we have a set pattern, a way of doing things when we build on a foundation. It also calls for one's character to get the attention instead of the body or charm.

About 13 years ago Brother Glenn Sensenig started an article in The Eastern Mennonite Testimony with this statement; "The manner in which we dress our children may be a more accurate indicator of our convictions on nonconformity than the way we appear ourselves."

I had to pause and stop and think about that and say "amen" to myself when I read it again. It may say more about our real conviction than our own appearance. Dressing children says something to others but it also says something to your children, it tells them what is important to you.

Some years ago when we lived at Mendon we went to the Milford geriatric rest home, on one of those first visits I noticed a middle-aged gentleman sitting back in the corner with an elderly person and he was watching the families come in very carefully, just really with an intrigued look on his face. And after the coats were all of and the folks were lining up getting ready to sing in the program, this gentleman got up and came over to one of the mothers and he said; "I admire your discipline and hard work." Well that young mother was not used to compliments and she got just a little red and she said; "Well, I don't think I worked any harder than anybody else." She probably meant her other peers in the church setting and he went as far to say: "I think you are just being modest." What did this man see? He said: "Apparently you make your own clothes, even the boys' clothes." He saw something a bit different, something unique there. He said: "I watched these mothers and fathers take of the children's coats and hang them up, when the coats came off the shirt tails were in and I watched you pat this one's hair down and take out a comb and do just a little final doctoring to this one." He said; "They are neat, they are tidy, they are clean, you probably even looked in their ears, didn't you?" he said. He was thorough in what he was thinking about and then he said; "Look at that young man over there with his hands in his pockets" he was probably a little four or five year old, he was standing there with his hands in his pockets, he stood just like a little gentleman you might say. He said; "There is a look of innocence and freedom on his face." He saw something there.

Now I would like to ask this question; If in fact those families coming in had taken of some gaudy looking coats and had flashy clothing underneath, that utterly charmed them, would he have gotten the same impression? No, he would not have. He said; "I am jealous for you, apparently you are headed somewhere and I wish that more people were headed the same place." That is what he said. All that he figured out by the appearance of several families' children. He knew that somebody put hard work into it, he said; "You didn't start 15 minutes before you left home to do what you did here tonight, it was a family project no doubt" He said; "I counted one family came in here it appeared to be like there were five or six and probably not any of them over 10 or 12, no wonder" he said, "A lot of hard work." We're not talking about something that is easy, it would be easier to buy things from society, much easier, maybe even cheaper sometimes if you figure the time, but it would send a different signal to that man at the rest home, and others as well, as to what you stand for and as well as for what you want for the next generation.

The cute, the pretty, the catchy would have sent a different signal. But we have a stewardship responsibility. **Psalm 127:3** says: "Lo, children *are* an heritage of the LORD:...." He has given us them with an understanding that we have a goal in mind, in fact in Proverbs 22:6 it tells us that the goal for our children is not to be a lot different to the goal that we set for ourselves, it says:

Proverbs 22:6 "Train up a child in the way he should go:...." in other words modesty and simplicity and humility are things that we work on from the time that little tot comes into our arms, we keep working on that with them. Train up in the way he should go, what do you want? We ought to ask ourselves that question; What do we want? We want that child to feel comfortable in a simple separated outfit, that is what we want. We want to develop a sense of what is proper. Actually childhood is simply the stage in life when we get ready for adulthood and so developing a sense of what is proper for adulthood is a part of childhood. Children are impressionable and children accept very well what their parents consistently stand for. The patterns set in early childhood most often become the accepted frame for later life. So let us send a clear message to have something simple and modest for mother, dad and something abbreviated and skimpy or gaudy for son or daughter simply fails gospel simplicity. To have a dual standard confuses the child's mind.

I would like to raise this question: Is it more right to make exceptions to Gospel simplicity in our children's attire then in our own? Well the answer ought to be obvious, it is not more right. Ribbons and bows and colour variations and barrettes and puffs and ruffles and frills and unique patterns, skimpiness in length and suchlike, boldness of pattern, we ought to view those deviations the same whether we put them on ourselves or whether we put them on our little ones. The failure in some of those things yields an echo that we hear occasionally. I've heard more than one young lady say; "I can't stand to have my sleeves down, I just can't stand it." I believe that that statement is in part a result in never getting used to

it when they were smaller, never getting used to it. According to Gospel simplicity, the standards of the scripture, we can look around us and see that simplicity is a dying principle in an affluent society, a dying principle. And so God's clothing standards involve modesty, simplicity, economy, durability, serviceability, stewardship and separation. And of course by Gospel simplicity we mean basically free from the fashions and show of the flesh, simply taking God's directions and applying those principles carefully. Practical lines need to be drawn based on a solid foundation, a solid foundation. That foundation is service and not fashion.

About five years ago this illustration was shared in a Eastern Mennonite Testimony article entitled: "Colour Speaks" Brother Jonathan Rudolph the writer of that article said that in 1963 when a new presidential family moved into the White House many were critical when the former flash and fashion were not evident, that was the change over from the Kennedy's to the Johnson's, the new First Lady was more interested in simplicity and service, in fact she said; "I want my dress to serve me not them" in other words "I wear it for my principles and not to please their principles." Definitely there was a difference there.

We want our dress to serve God and not His adversary because His adversary is also our adversary. We are in danger of losing the practical judgement of our parents in an affluent age. When I say the practical judgement, you know the time of our great great grandparents when mother wove the cloth as well as sewed those things together, I doubt if anything was discarded until it was just about in tatters, but affluence and ease has made us a bit wasteful. We think we can afford to waste a little or can we? I think this affects the choices of materials sometimes that we choose. The three to 10-year-olds Sunday dresses sometimes are really pretty light, so light that it is hardly practical to wear them out for everyday because they show the stains and blotches of everyday wear and look kind of drab rather quickly, and so since they came easy we just pitch them out and make some others. Remember the practical decisions that Grandma needed to make.

What is Gospel simplicity? Well it is avoiding the shimmery, the fluorescent, the bold, the splotchy, someone said the modelled appearance. Sometimes we have an extra problem sisters, someone gives you a little neat set of trousers or a shirt or a baby dress or maybe something for one a little older and it just does not fit your home standard, what do you do with it? Well dressing according to gospel simplicity would mean that you would probably alter it a little bit. We ought to probably be a little bit more quick to do that so that our standard is safeguarded. When humility and modesty reign, material can be used by little tots, teens and middle aged alike. I'm glad that when a bolt of material is purchased I see families making a dress for mother or teenage daughter as well as for the little tot, I think that makes sense. Actually it is the vibrant youthful spark and charm that needs special care, special care that Grandma has learned years ago to safeguard, special care instead of the special flash and look. Remember it is the bold spirit that calls for bold stripes and large prints and contrasts, and of course those little girls dresses need to have a simplicity of design as well and a modesty of fit. What reason is there to have about half a dozen different designs that you make this dress this design, that dress another and that dress another and so on. We send a signal of Gospel simplicity to our children, to our fellow brethren and sisters by choosing a simple design and sticking to it, it proclaims: I have a goal to reach and here is how I am planning to reach it. The puffs of the little girl's sleeve should disappear largely before the child can remember them, if you have them there in the first place. I can't say everything that could be said about the practical side but if our heart and our love for Gospel simplicity is right it will help us to come to fair conclusions in relation to these things.

While little boys are not as dress conscious as girls they still do have some challenges and they do talk about their appearance. Remember parents whenever you had your youngster to the place that you could be reasonably sure that when they wore a pair of new trousers or new shoes that the first thing they said at church would not be; "Look at my new shoes." you felt that you had accomplished something when they gained that degree of maturity, that they were not that self-conscious that they were going to show off their new things. I remember as a young lad fussing over how many buttons we had on our coat sleeves, conscious about that. There is something about the simple separated appearance that safeguards our youth

when they get in the mini market and places of public business and so on. Let's do for ourselves what separation was meant to do even for the Israelites, that we would remember who we are, the person that jokes about that and says; "A weakling needs that reminder," I believe is on the precipice of default in a more real sense than the one who mistrust himself.

Well we're looking at dress, let's go on to just a few issues in a bit.

Many of us have seen plain folks out biking with anklets and gaudy shoes that look like they came from the sports shop, where did this trend start? At what age? Probably younger than we think. On the shoe issue it seems in the day and age of covered feet, if we have long sleeves and mid-calf length dresses that it calls for shoes that cover the foot as well. Sometimes we make the mistake of having pretty, skimpy buckle ups on the little girls and wonder why the open top foot seems so popular amongst the older young ladies. We avoid things like sports (brand) names and stripes and puppy tongues and long tongues and gold buckles and catchy leather designs and so on. I would like to raise this question: At what age do the heels start going up and why? And is there a reason for girls heels to continue growing while boys ones don't? I personally believe that we probably stumble the worst as plain people in regard to some of the shoes that we tolerate. Again simplicity and service. The lack of fashion is what we ought to be aiming for and dress shoes should be comfortable enough and serviceable enough to wear out for everyday. I am a firm believer in that. You ought to picture that if it is not fit for Sunday then you ought to consider getting something different. When we lived at the corner of Jones Lane two ladies that worked at the bank used to walk by our house everyday and it was interesting that when you met them in the bank they were about 2 inches taller than when they were taking their afternoon walk, they discarded one set of shoes and put on something that was fit for the occasion. And so if you can't pass out the "Star of the Living Waters" comfortably in your Sunday slippers then you ought to think about the practicality a bit more.

Well let us go on. Actually dressing affects more than just our shirt, our pants or our dress or our shoes, a part of dressing in the morning is also combing your hair. And I thought it was interesting that this gentleman at the Milford geriatric mentioned that as well, there was a neatness and a tidiness there. What about the cute, the novel amongst the little girls? I realise there is a bit of variation that can be proper and acceptable in place, but sometimes you see really unique things, the hair is parted on this side for three weeks and then in the middle for three weeks, then they have little ponytails that stick out and hang down towards their ears, then it is one braid, two braids and ponytails single, and I've seen all kinds. What is our mothers, that wants to fool with that youngster's hair and make it look so cute and so unique. What is our goal? What do we want them finally to imbibe and embrace later in life? Adopt a consistent arrangement and stick to it and this sends a signal of stability, a signal that you are satisfied. One of the scriptures that we read talked about broided hair or plaiting of the hair, it is talking about weaving or fashioning it in a catchy attention getting way.

This may be a bit of a trick question but the question is: What do barrettes and stockings have in common, what do they have in common? Well in some homes their minds or their practices reveal that since they are on both ends they belong to match, so you have blue stockings and blue barrettes and green stockings and green barrettes. That is more common than what we think. What signal are we sending by that kind of thing? I'm glad that there are hair coloured fasteners still on the market and I think that Gospel simplicity means that we ought to basically stick with one thing and be satisfied with it. Maybe the personality and character and the fact that God has created that young man, that young lady, that they came into your home for a purpose of service to Him, ought to be the underlying principle.

What about the boys? Would you choose to cut your son's hair shorter than fathers for practical purposes? I think it should grow a little, fast enough that that child cannot long remember when it was too short to comb, and we have some pretty big boys whose hair is almost too short to comb. It makes you match right into society and makes it possible to disappear. I wish somehow I could convince some of our youth that that is really a threat to them instead of a help. A threat to Gospel simplicity. Do you remember that when we read first Peter 3: 3-4, that verse four ended with the challenge, that our goal is a meek and quiet spirit which is in the sight of God of great price.

We want a practice for our children with rules of life that is a foundation upon which convictions can be built that make them men and women for God's service.

May the Lord bless as you seek to walk in the way of Gospel simplicity.