

Dressing up for Church

Dressing up for church became a popular practice in the first half of the nineteenth century, first in England, then northern Europe and America, as a consequence of the industrial revolution and the emergence of the middle class. While care was historically given to cleanliness and solemnity on Sabbath days, dressing up for worship resulted, not from a theological teaching, but from the influence of Victorian culture on worshipping communities.

Contrary to popular opinion, medieval Christians had no common practice of dressing up for church because nice clothes were only afforded by the wealthy. Prior to the industrial revolution, society was polarized into the “haves” (the landed aristocracy) and the “have-nots” (plebes, serfs, peasants), with a minimal merchant class in between. Fine clothing was hand-made and far too expensive for common folk who maintained their living through subsistence farming.¹ Common folks had only one or two sets of clothes, made of coarse, drab fabric. One set of clothes was for working in the field, thus getting dirty and tattered; the other was for going into town, and therefore was kept cleaner to avoid public revulsion.² In other words, “dressing up” for anything was never an option for anyone but the wealthiest nobility. In fact, social codes enforced by fines mandated that this class distinction be honored by individuals of every rank.³ Distinctions of dress have functioned to maintain social hierarchy since the beginning of civilization.

All of this changed with the invention of mass manufacturing and the development of urban society. James Hargreaves invented the “spinning jenny” in 1764.⁴ As this and similar machines were reproduced, finer and more colorful clothing, created with more versatile fabrics, made a variety of clothes affordable for the masses.⁵ Industrialization and urbanization gave rise to the middle class socio-economic group, so that a new layer of society received an opportunity

¹ Elizabeth Ewing, Everyday Dress 1650-1900, London : Batsford, 1984, p.56 ff. .

² See Max Barsis, The Common Man Through the Centuries, New York: Unger, 1973.

³ Leigh Eric Schmidt, “A Church Going People is a Dress-Loving People” Church History (58) pp. 38-39.

⁴ Ewing, p.57.

⁵ Ibid, p.60.

to emulate the envied aristocracy and distinguish themselves from the peasants.⁶ Common people began “dressing up” to social events of every kind to demonstrate their newly improved social status.

Various Christian groups of the 18th and 19th century resisted this cultural momentum among the middle class for the same reasons that many of the patristic writers did among the wealthy in the third and fourth centuries.⁷ Decorative clothing and demonstrative accessories (jewelry, etc) were seen as worldly and prideful, interfering with a simple and austere mood of worship. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley frequently wrote and spoke out against fine adornment, saying that gold and costly apparel were sinful.⁸ “Let your dress be cheap, as well as plain,”⁹ Wesley taught, peddling what Leigh Eric Schmidt entitled a “gospel of plainness.”¹⁰ Wesley recommended¹¹ that, at least once a year, Methodists read his thoughts on dress in which he spells out in detail what types and colors of fabrics are acceptable, as well as shapes and sizes of hats, coats, sleeves, and hairstyles.¹² In the early days of Methodist class meetings, people who showed up dressed in fine or expensive apparel would be turned away, denied admittance.¹³ Grass-roots groups like the Methodists and Baptists led the way in condemning elaborate clothing and hairstyles as a means of social protest. Because fine clothing inevitably separates the rich from the poor, these groups called for an end to such excesses in order to promote a more egalitarian society.¹⁴ Preachers like Charles Finney and Peter Cartwright lauded plain dress and

⁶ Richard Bushman, The Refinement of America, New York : Knopf, 1992, p.313,.

⁷ Clement argued that Christians should keep to “simple clothing, of white colour. . . . So that, accommodating ourselves not to variegated art, but to nature as it is produced, and pushing away whatever is deceptive and belies the truth, we may embrace the uniformity and simplicity of truth.” (Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2, p. 284). See also Tertullian, On the Apparel of Women, (AnteNicene Fathers, Vol 4, book 2, chp.11).

⁸ Rupert Davies, A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, London : Epworth, 1965, p.193.

⁹ Sermon 88, December 30, 1786.

¹⁰ Schmidt, p.48.

¹¹ Davies, p.197.

¹² Journals of Wesley, Nehemiah Curnock, ed., London: Epworth Press 1938, p. 468.

¹³ Davies, p. 197.

¹⁴ Schmidt, p.40.

told dramatic stories of converted sinners who discarded their jewelry and ruffles immediately upon conviction during camp meetings.¹⁵

But the growing prosperity of the middle class cultivated a craving for bigger and better houses, church buildings, and clothes.¹⁶ Denominations with a greater proportion of wealthy members (e.g. Episcopal, Unitarian) began selling pews to wealthy families to fund elaborate church building improvements.¹⁷ As the Victorian enculturation of the middle class progressed, fancier and more formal worship houses began to draw the influential people of society, so that the more populist congregations (e.g. Baptist, Methodist) had to work hard to try to keep up with improvements to their own facilities.¹⁸ Borrowing from the Episcopalians, Methodist and Baptists began to bring choirs and organs into their worship services.¹⁹

Children's religious periodicals like the American Sunday School Union's *Youth's Friend* in the 1840's began introducing articles on manners and dress together with moral instruction.²⁰ Beginning on the east coast in urban areas, gentility began to fuse with virtue and morality among Christian groups of every type.²¹ In 1843, Horace Bushnell, an influential Congregational minister in Connecticut, published an essay entitled "Taste and Fashion," in which he argued that sophistication and refinement were integral attributes of God that mature Christians should naturally emulate.²² Thus was born the environment for "dressing up for church," in which members worshiping in an elaborately formal, decorated building naturally began wearing formal clothes out of a sense of propriety of morals, as well as pride of status.²³

In 1846, a North Carolina Presbyterian pastor named William Henry Foote wrote that "a

¹⁵ Bushman, pp.317-318; also Schmidt, p.49.

¹⁶ Bushman, pp.335,352.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 350.

¹⁸ Ibid., 335, 342, 346.

¹⁹ Ibid., 337, 349.

²⁰ Ibid., 321-324.

²¹ Ibid., 320-323.

²² Ibid., 328, 331.

²³ Ibid., 350.

church-going people are a dress-loving people.”²⁴ By his time, people had developed dress rituals around Sabbath observance that were followed regardless of changing circumstance. For example, in warmer summer months, Presbyterian immigrants in Maine and western Pennsylvania would carry nice shoes and stockings to the meetings, only to put them on during the meetings, and take them off again upon leaving.²⁵ In Britain, working men with only one good suit would pawn the suit on Monday for money to live on during the week, only to redeem it again on Saturday for worship the next morning.²⁶ Peter Cartwright (1785-1872) was a Kentucky Methodist preacher whose life and ministry encompassed the 50 years that saw this change of culture among American evangelicals. At the end of his life, he lamented “The Methodists in that early day dressed plain . . . they wore no jewelry, no ruffles . . . But O, how have things changed for the worse in this educational age of the world!” As Bushman said:

The Methodists, who were among the most restrained Christians at first, were wearing fashionable clothing by the 1850's, signifying absorption of genteel values. . . Cartwright saw the course of Methodist history over his lifetime as a movement along the axis from simplicity to refinement, allowing fashion and pride to undermine faith and worship.²⁷

²⁴ Schmidt, p.36.

²⁵ Ibid., p.49.

²⁶ Nicholas Terpstra, in a communication with the author, June 27, 2001.

²⁷ Bushman, p.319.