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On to Modesty

“*¿Serán monjas?* (Are they nuns?)” the old woman at the fruit stand asks in a low voice, her attention fastened on two girls coming up the cobblestone street.

“No,” replies her granddaughter with a smile. “They are Patricia Ramirez and Elena Chavez. They have joined the Mennonites.”

Twin towers of the church at San Francisco de Borja cast long shadows across the plaza. The two girls with white veilings fluttering in the breeze, modest skirts and net shopping bags find their way through town. New Christians in Mexico, near the end of the twentieth century, they are in an old situation—Anabaptists in a Roman Catholic town.

“*¡Qué lindo!* (How pretty!)” says the old woman at the fruit stand. “When I was young everyone wore dresses like that.”

Simple Clothes

Those who follow Christ wear simple clothes. Peter Rideman wrote:

Since their citizenship is in heaven, Christians put on heavenly jewels. They learn from the world. Worldly people, no matter where they live, try to dress themselves as much as they can according to the custom of their land. They do this to please the world. How much more should Christians observe and imitate the ways of the land to which they belong: heaven! How much more

should they adorn themselves according to the custom of heaven, to please God! Christians forget all other adornment to obtain the jewel of godliness. Those who desire this jewel are adorned by God with holy virtues. Holy virtues look better on them than gold chains around their necks. Those who recognise this forget about pearls and silk and gold.¹

Menno Simons wrote:

The writings say that the just will live by faith, and that a good tree will bring forth good fruit. We know that a humble person will never come around in jewellery or costly clothing. . . . He knows God and his Word. His fear and love for God forbid him to do such things.²

Then speaking about the state churches, he wrote:

They say they believe, but oh, there are no limits to their accursed haughtiness, to their foolish pomp and pride. They go about in silks and velvet. They wear costly clothes. They put on gold rings, chains, silver belts, pins, and collars, veils, aprons, velvet shoes, slippers, and who knows what all else for foolish finery. They never stop to think that Peter and Paul have forbidden all this to Christian women. And if it is forbidden to women, how much more is it forbidden to the men who are their leaders and heads! Everyone owns as much finery as he can afford, and sometimes more than that.

Everyone wants to outdo the rest in this cursed folly. They do not remember that it is written: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world" (1 John 2:15-17).³

Practical Clothes

The first Anabaptists, following Christ, avoided extremes in clothing styles. They avoided impractical and uncomfortable clothes. But they did not design new distinctive garments. The

¹ *Rechenschaft*, 1540

² *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers* . . . 1539

³ *Van dat rechte christen ghelooue* . . . ca. 1542

messengers Veit Grünberger and Veit Schelch, sent out by the Bruderhöfe in Moravia, are one example among many.

Travelling through Waldt in Pintzgau in northern Austria, the two men fell under suspicion of being Anabaptists. But the people of the town had no way of knowing for sure until they followed them into a hotel and watched them as they received their food. No sooner did the messengers bow their heads in prayer than the cry “Anabaptists!” reached the constable’s ears, and they were promptly arrested and put in chains.

A court description of Philip Plener, elder of the Anabaptist community at Auspitz in Moravia, describes him wearing a grey riding jacket with blue sleeves, a black beret and red trousers. This was in keeping with the Anabaptists’ practice of wearing loose-fitting, solid-coloured clothes, “according to the manner of the land.” Men usually wore knee pants tied around the waist with a sash. Women and girls, even little girls, wore head coverings.

Anabaptist men considered shaving a perversion. When Albrecht, the lord of the Waldstein castle in Moravia, received Anabaptist messengers from the Bruderhof at Wätzenobitz and “in great wickedness cut off their beards,” the entire brotherhood suffered their disgrace. Already in the 1520s Thomas Müntzer taught that wearing the beard was a part of following Christ. Leaders at Strasbourg forbade the trimming of the beard according to worldly fashions, in 1568, and Hans Betz of Znaim in Moravia called the shaving of the beard (as practiced by both Roman Catholic priests and the Protestant Reformers) a “sure sign of the Antichrist.”⁴

⁴ The first Anabaptists, like their Hutterite descendants, wore both beards and moustaches. Two hundred years later, after the Napoleonic wars of the early 1800s, the Amish began to shave the moustache to protest French militarism. Some Amish groups did not stop wearing the moustache until after they were in America.

Johannes Kessler of Sankt Gallen in Switzerland described the Anabaptists in the 1520s:

They shun costly clothing and despise expensive food and drink. They clothe themselves with coarse cloth and cover their heads with broad felt hats. Their entire manner of life is completely humble. They bear no weapon, neither sword nor dagger, but only a short bread knife.⁵

Modest Clothes

Because the Anabaptists were slow to follow changes of style, they did eventually stand out somewhat. Thieleman J. van Braught compared the world's fashions about him with the changing phases of the moon.

An Anabaptist, describing life on the Bruderhöfe in Moravia in the 1560s, wrote:

Dancing, playing and drinking are not to be seen among us. No fancily cut, stylish, or immodest clothing is worn. . . . But the one who leaves what is good and returns to the world . . . the one who reappears with a stylish collar around his neck, big floppy pants and checkered garments becomes instantly popular among sinners again. . . . The people of the world commend him for abandoning the brotherhood and for having become a “true Christian.”⁶

Anabaptist leaders, gathered at Strasbourg in 1568, wrote:

Tailors and seamstresses shall stick to the simple and modest customs of the land in regards to clothing. They shall make nothing new for pride's sake.⁷

Peter Rideman wrote:

⁵ From the diary of Johannes Kessler which he wrote during the early 1500s.

⁶ *Geschichtbuech*, ca. 1570

⁷ *Artikel und Ordnungen der christlichen Gemeinde in Christo Jesu*, 1568

The Dutch artist, Rembrandt van Rijn, painted this picture of Cornelis Anso, Mennonite minister of Amsterdam, with his wife, in the early 1600s. Even though Dutch Mennonites were the first to take an active part in commerce and industry (Cornelis was a cloth merchant) many dressed in plain clothes until well into the 1800s.



We serve our neighbours with all diligence, making all manner of things to meet their needs. But that which serves pride, style, and vanity, such as elaborate braiding, floral designs, and embroidery on clothing, we make for no man. We want to keep our consciences unspotted before God.⁸

New Christians entered the Anabaptist movement from all walks of life. They entered by the hundreds and thousands. It would have been neither practical nor possible to help all of them into a new set of clothes. But the brotherhood did give practical direction. Peter Rideman wrote:

The person who comes from the world does not sin when he wears out his clothing after coming to the knowledge of the truth. But he should avoid misusing his conventional attire and should not let it hinder him from finding divine adornment. If it hinders him, it would be better to throw his clothes into the fire than to keep on wearing them. . . . We do not permit our brothers and

⁸ *op. cit.*

sisters to make or purchase stylish clothing. Satan might take an opportunity in that to betray us again.⁹

Modesty and Conviction

Innerly convicted to dress modestly, the first Anabaptists of all walks of life dressed as common peasants. In a meeting at Köln am Rhein in 1591, some of their leaders warned against “the wearing of fancy clothes, which speak more of worldly styles than they do of Christian humility.” But they concluded that “it is impossible to prescribe for each individual what he shall wear.”¹⁰

In the beginning the Anabaptists did not regulate specific dress patterns. When such regulations first appeared among groups with Anabaptist background (such as the Old Flemish Mennonites and the Amish), many leaders warned against them.

Gerrit Roosen, author of the confession of faith of the Anabaptists in northern Germany, and of the *Christliches Gemüthsgespräch* was a leader among European Anabaptists in the seventeenth century. On December 21, 1697 he wrote:

I am truly sorry that you have been disturbed by people who exalt themselves and make rules about things not clearly laid down in the Gospel. If the apostles had told us exactly how and with what the believer is to clothe himself, then we would have a case to work on. But we dare not contradict the Gospel by forcing men’s consciences about certain styles of hats, clothes, shoes, stockings or haircuts. Things are done differently in every country. We dare not excommunicate people just because they do not line up to our

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ At this meeting, attended by a large number of Anabaptist leaders from Germany and the Netherlands, the Spirit of Christ led to unity and peace. Those present from the Netherlands lamented the fact that they had misused church discipline and the ban. They came to see that excommunicating people over details of application was wrong, and all those assembled prepared a statement of faith (the Concept van Keulen) together.

customs. We dare not put them out of the church as sinful leaven, when neither Jesus nor the apostles bound us in matters of outward form. Neither Jesus nor the apostles made rules or laws about such things. Rather, Paul said in Col. 2 that we do not inherit the kingdom of heaven through food and drink. Neither do we inherit it through the form and cut of our clothes.

Jesus did not bind us in outward things. Why does our friend Jakob Amman undertake to make rules, then exclude those from the church who do not keep them? If he considers himself a servant of the Gospel but wants to live by the letter of outward law, then he should not have two coats. He should not carry money in his pocket nor shoes on his feet. If he does not live according to the letter of Jesus' law, how can he force the brothers to live by the letter of his own laws? Oh that he would follow Paul who feared God, who treated people gently and who took pains not to offend the conscience of the weak. . . . Paul did not write one word about outward forms of clothing. But he taught us to be conformed to those of low estate and imitate only that which is honourable. We are to do that within the manner of the land in which we live. We are to shun styles and proud worldliness (1 John 2). We should not be quick to change our manner of dress. Fashion deserves rebuke. New articles of dress should not be accepted until they become common practice in the land, and then only if they are becoming to Christian humility.

I do not walk in the lust of the eyes and worldliness. All my life I have stuck to one style of dress. But suppose I should have dressed myself according to another custom, the way they do it in another land? Should I then be excommunicated? That would be illogical and against the Scriptures.

The Scriptures must be our guide. We dare not run ahead of them. We must follow them, not lightheartedly, but in carefulness and fear. It is dangerous to step into the place of God's judgement and bind on earth what is not bound in heaven.¹¹

Not in extremes, not in worldly fashions but modestly dressed, the first Anabaptists followed Christ . . .

¹¹ *Abschrift von Gerhard Rosen von Hamburg. Den 21. Dezember, 1697*