

The T-shirt Aristocracy

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I was speaking at a small Missouri church, and I couldn't help noticing I was the only male wearing a necktie. Services were over, and I was shaking hands with the last person to leave.

"Hmmm, seems like I'm the only male wearing a tie today," I noted.

The lady laughed. "Oh, don't worry about that! Our preacher doesn't wear a tie, and he urges us to dress down too, so that we don't offend any seekers who might be poor and unable to afford dress clothes."

I said nothing. I have heard this line many times before. But I was thinking, Oh, please! When did a polyester tie from J.C. Penney become a symbol of decadence? I mean, it's not like any of our church members are wearing Armani suits, Gucci ties, or Berluti shoes.

Consistent

I, too, am concerned about seekers, but when did clothing become the only symbol of opulence?

What about all those \$40,000 SUVs in the church parking lot? How do seekers feel parking by those limousines in their used Ford Fiestas?

And what about all the worship luxuries on stage: the baby grand piano, those Yamaha drums, Fender guitars, and the Soundcraft sound system?

And maybe we should order the church staff to move out of their comfortable suburban homes and into mobile homes, so that their swimming pools and large-screen TVs don't offend the poor.

Deliberately dressing down is patronizing, condescending.

Come on, people, this is America,

where the poor and the rich live and work side-by-side every day, and no one thinks a thing about it.

Dress down if you like, but you are not a martyr for it.

And if we dress down for the poor, then what about all the seekers who are NOT poor (i.e., the middle class and the wealthy)? They have much of value to offer the church (like gobs of money). They might actually be put off by our dowdy duds.

Charm

Who decided, I wonder, that dressing up for church would make the poor feel shut out? Personally, I think it's more likely to attract them. After all, it's our differences from the world that make us attractive, not our similarities. If we look just as grungy as the world, what's our draw?

Some of the casual dress of the world today is truly dark, bleak, depressing, even scary. Shock dress, begging for love and attention. Skin mutilations, nudity, torn clothing . . . Americans are looking more and more like the savages we sent missionaries to convert a generation ago.

Should not people of hope, whose bodies are temples of God, look a bit different from children of despair? And that difference can be a magnet. Dress is an opportunity to witness to the joy and hope we have inside. "Let your garments always be white, And let your head lack no oil" (Ecclesiastes 9:8, New King James Version).

Cost

It's not about money. Some of the poorest people in the world live in places like Haiti, but the Haitians dress like a

million dollars for church, as an expression of their reverence for God.

A needy young man comes to our church in a suit and tie every Sunday. He gets these suits for \$10 at The Salvation Army, and the ties for 50 cents. In this land of discount stores and used clothing outlets, it doesn't take a bank loan to look nice.

As a matter of fact, some "casual" clothes today cost more than dress clothes. Have you priced designer jeans recently? And you can buy two pairs of leather oxfords for what you pay for one pair of brand-name athletic shoes. Some T-shirts cost more than dress shirts.

It's just as possible to show off or intimidate with casual clothes as with a three-piece suit.

Comfort

What most Americans seem to mean when they say casual is that they want to be comfortable. Fine, but comfortable can mean anything. Some people are quite comfortable being naked. Shall we invite them "come as you are" to church?

I wear a sport jacket to church because, frankly, it is comfortable. It conceals my ripped abs and Popeye forearms, so that other males are not threatened. OK, I wear it because it hides my gut, but it's the same principle. A sport jacket is also very practical. It has lots of pockets where I can stash my Jolly Rancher candies, toothpicks, index cards, pencils, and almond snacks.

Some assume that all people are more comfortable in casual clothes, but it's not true. Some of us are miserable in casual attire. After age 40 you have a lot to hide, and you really don't want to be seen in public looking like Rosie the Riveter or Mack the Mechanic. Even young people have very imperfect bodies that can be "cleaned up" with attention to dress.

Whenever I hear someone say, "Dress

comfortably," I always have to ask, "Whose comfort, yours or ours?" One function of clothes is to conceal things that are somewhat less than "art," like layers of lard, varicose veins, furry legs, belly buttons, appendectomy scars, bare feet, and skull-and-crossbones tattoos. These things are not as inspiring as you might think. I can go months without seeing varicose veins, and I hardly even miss them.

The term casual is interpreted many different ways, including crummy, crude, or even lewd. I was visiting a country church where everyone was tastefully dressed, except for the Sunday school superintendent. She was a gorgeous young woman wearing nothing but short shorts and a tight T-shirt. The Sunday school statistics she reported were somehow overshadowed by other statistics, but because of the "come-as-you-are" mantra, no one would speak to her about her appearance. Casual is not permission to seduce.

Choice

There is plenty of room for diversity in church attire. Differences in fashion, color, style, cultural customs. . . . Church members in Kearney, Nebraska, will look different from members in South Side Chicago or Uptown Manhattan, and that's fine.

But I am concerned that the "casual movement" is creating its own snobbish culture. Casual is the new "elite," the new aristocracy. When the minister says, "dress casually," it comes out "ONLY casual." Casual rules. Thus, the freedom to be casual becomes the tyranny of the casual. Dress nicely and you risk the censure of the casual police. Wear a tie and someone will say, "Ooo, whom are you trying to impress?" Or, "Hey, are you trying to make the rest of us look bad?"

If we are free to dress down without

being called “slobs,” then we are also free to dress up without being labeled “snobs.”

You’re not a saint for dressing down, and you are not a Pharisee for dressing up. We should be free to choose.

Conclusion

To my college students, dress is a nonissue. They don’t “get it.” “It just doesn’t matter what you wear,” they argue. “God looks at the heart.”

I love them, but they can be naïve, smug, and self-centered. Eventually they will “get it” when they flunk an important job interview because of their Star Wars T-shirt, or when a door is slammed in their face because a homeowner was frightened by their appearance and called the police.

Maybe God looks on the heart, but few of us have his X-ray vision. Right or wrong, people DO make judgments about the inside by what they see on the outside. And, after all, dress is a clue to how we see ourselves, others, and life itself.

We have 167 hours a week when we can wear what we like, whether it’s pajamas, riding boots, or camouflage. Is it too much to ask that we put on some decent clothes for one hour on Sunday morning?