

Dress and Style

Let me begin by telling a quick story. When I was pastoring a small rural church while I was in seminary, a man who was an elder made a motion at a session meeting. He said that none of the young men in our community who were beyond high school wore a coat and tie. He said that they buy a sport coat for their graduation, along with a tie, and that is the last time either is put on. That is until, of course, a funeral occurs down the road that they have to dress formally for. He said that we all come to church in coats and ties, which makes all the young men in our community uncomfortable when they come to our church. Thus he made a motion that none of the elders in the church will wear a coat and tie to church anymore.

I have another story from another church I went to some years later. I was working on my washing machine one Saturday morning. I was all greasy and messed up. I found out that I was missing a tool, so I went over to an elder's house. I knocked on the door, and he opened it. He looked at me and he said, "What are you doing visiting me looking like that." I said, "I am not visiting you. I am just coming to borrow a tool."

One of the elders in a church I served said, "We are too formal. We need to dress down." Another elder, with a different concern, said, "In this community, you are not formal enough. You need to dress up." Who was right? It is a trick question. They were probably both right. They were aware of the task, and they were aware of the people. They were trying to make prudential judgment for the sake of the Gospel, both concerning the sacredness of the task and the necessity of connecting with the people. As we talk about dress and style, that is what we are going to try to remember.

The goal for this lesson is to understand how messages can be delivered with greater effectiveness by considering how the preacher can identify with his congregation in dress and delivery. There is probably no better Scripture for this for us to consider than 1 Corinthians 9. Paul wrote, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible." Whose rights was Paul primarily concerned about? He was concerned about the rights of people who hear the Gospel and the right of the Spirit to minister to them. For that sake, he was willing to put his own rights second. For us in this culture, the great difficulty is when we begin to talk about things like style. When we dress, we typically only think in terms of "my rights" instead of considering to whom I am ministering and what will be most effective for their sakes and the sake of the Gospel.

As we think about styles of dress, the watchword is "appropriate." It must be appropriate to honor the task and identify with the people. There is an obvious and unending tension in those two things—to honor the task and identify with the people. What we are trying to do is to present ourselves appropriately for the situation. What do we have to consider? How am I going to dress so I can communicate the Word effectively? What do I have to take into account? I have to consider the people, but I have to consider how they are going to interpret the way I look. What are they going to use to make that interpretation? I have to consider their age or generation, which will be one thing they will use to interpret. I have to consider the societal context in which they are. That could be their socioeconomic level or their region of the country. It could be their nationality. It could be their demographics on the age spectrum. It could be their own history of what they expect men of God to look like to represent themselves. Are all of these societal standards good? Are they all bad? It is not necessarily so in either case. We have to make judgments that are pastoral for the sake of the people and the Gospel. Our judgments will not be for the sake of our own comfort. It is not our rights that are being defended, but it is their rights that we are concerned about.

Most of the time, the decisions that we make about dress and style are appropriate when they disappear. When it is not an issue, dress and style are appropriate. I typically know that my choices are inappropriate when how I am dressing becomes an issue. Is it possible that I might want it to be an issue? Are there times when I think the societal standards are inappropriate and I want to challenge them? Yes, that could very well happen. If that is my intent, however, then I should be aware of what some of the societal norms are. Otherwise I am just creating barriers that I do not intend. Remember that Paul said, "I want to put no stumbling block in the way of the gospel." You may want some people to question what they are doing. The elder who said he wanted us to stop wearing coats and ties was saying that we were becoming a barrier to young men coming into our church. He said he did not want us to put up a stumbling block. On the other hand, the other elder said that if you do not dress appropriately in my community, then the people will not hear you. He was aware of that stumbling block.

Having put all of those parameters in place, let us talk quickly about some of the things to be aware of as we present ourselves as a testimony to others in what we are doing. We are trying to avoid what is either uncaring or unkempt. What are some of the major issues that will always be? They will be hair, glare, and cost. Those will be the issues.

What will be the issues of hair? The issues will be how long it is on your head and where it is on your face. I am sorry, but it is just this culture. You may say, "But Jesus had a beard." Well, he probably did. If some of you have been salesmen, you have been told that you should not have facial hair. In this culture, beards communicate counter-culture in some way. They indicate that I am trying to be rebellious or I am trying to look older than I am or that I do not like dealing with people so I am reacting negatively to our societal norms. Moustaches, however, are different. At least in the Midwest, people will accept moustaches, but beards they will not. You might say, "That is unfair, and it is an unreasonable societal norm." I will agree with you, and maybe after a few years you can convince them of that. You make choices and you become aware of where society is. Regarding length of hair, you may wonder how long is too long. I do not know. In this culture, it is something people are concerned about.

With the issue of glare, I am talking about the paisley dinner jacket that you wear into the pulpit. What are the norms of what people expect in this culture? In the United States, if you are north of the Florida line and east of the Rockies, what do people normally expect the preacher to wear if it is not a Generation-X church? They expect a suit, at least on a Sunday morning. It will not be a sport jacket and slacks. It will be a suit and tie. What will be the color of the suit? It will be dark, and the tie will not have cartoon characters on it. That is, of course, unless you are the children's minister or the youth pastor. In that case, everything goes.

We can tease about it, but you have to consider whether you meant to make dress an issue or not. There are times when we need to make an issue about it. I so respect the elder who said he wanted us to stop wearing ties. He still wanted the preacher to wear a tie, but he did not want the rest of the elders to wear ties. He knew that in his community for the preacher not to wear a tie would cut his respect. On the other hand, in the Generation-X churches or Emerging churches, preachers typically do not wear ties. They are trying to connect to another aspect of society that is not familiar with church culture and does not have those expectations. This is the identification with people that moves a different way.

What are other issues of identification? To go into a poor community and wear a thousand dollar suit may be a problem. On the other hand, to go to an affluent community and wear the suit that your mom got you when you were in high school may be a problem as well. You may say that the affluent people need not judge people by their clothes, and the people in urban communities need not judge people by

what they wear. I recognize that, but are you trying to make it an issue? If you are trying to make it an issue and correct peoples' ideas, then more power to you. If you are just stepping on landmines that you do not know about and you do not intend, then it is better to adjust so that it is not an issue if you do not mean to make it an issue.

When I go into churches I do not know, I always button my coat. When I do not button my coat, in many communities it does not communicate informality, but rather it shows a lack of respect. If I do not button my coat, in many communities I go to there will be people who are mad at me, not for anything I have said, but simply because I did not show respect. It would be like wearing a hat in a church in many communities. You know not to do that. You may say, "Who cares?" Yet, although you and I know it is not something in the Bible, people are not going to hear us if we wear a hat into a formal worship setting. In some communities, the same will be true about buttoning coats and things like that.

We are talking about appropriateness. The issue of cost not only has to do with suits, but also with expensive jewelry and where your rings are. Your rings may not just be on your fingers but also on your ears or your nose or your eyebrows. I will grant you that there are some communities where that can be very effective. When my son began to minister in a downtown arts community, he said he had to wear a ring in his ear. He said, "I am white, blonde headed, and small. If I simply look like a suburbanite, then I will not work in this community. I will not be able to minister." He wanted to be able to identify with the people. I knew what he wanted to do, and he knew what he wanted to do to minister in that community. Now, however, it will be difficult for him to get a job in a suburban community.

Consider the drama of the communication event. Recognize that everything communicates something. Imagine that we have just finished the reading of the Word. I pray, "O Lord, my strength and fortress, You are my refuge in time of distress." Then I close my Bible, put it away, and say, "What I want to talk about today is..." All of the verses I am going to comment on may be in my notes. Yet what did I communicate? I communicated that we have dispensed with the preliminaries of the Bible, and now we are going to get to the important stuff, my message. I did not mean to say that. What I communicated by what I did, however, was a clear message. I am asking you to think about the fact that everything is a message. I want you to weigh that as you consider your responsibilities before the Lord.

Those responsibilities include being concerned about a style of delivery. I would encourage you, in this generation particularly, to develop a personal style. That means, first of all, do not be afraid to be self-revealing. I will tell you that this is a generation that virtually demands this. Two generations ago, to speak about yourself in the pulpit was anathema. Today, however, not to speak about yourself will itself deaden your ministry. It is the expectation. It is redemptive vulnerability. It is not simply saying, "I am a terrible person." It is rather saying, "We all struggle with this, but God helps." It is to identify with the struggle as you point to the hope of the Gospel. It is redemptive vulnerability.

Second, speak as though you are explaining something from across the kitchen table. Remember the quote about Spurgeon that he spoke to a thousand as though he spoke to one. If you can do that, if you can just talk to people in normal ways, they will long to hear you.

Third, speak to particular situations rather than to particular people. Come into their lives. Know them. Love them. Remember the way the Westminster Divines said it. They said, "By your conversation and residence with your people, know what you should be addressing."

Fourth, use the word "we" often. It is the "we" of direct address. Say, "We struggle with... We understand... We will be helped by..." To identify with people is a very personal style. That is not the

“royal we” of referring to yourself in the plural. Do not say, “Last week, we spoke to you about.” It sounds very arrogant. In order to involve people, say, “Last week, we understood that although we struggle with this, God has provided help.”

Use conversational speech. The rule of thumb is clarity increases as sentence length decreases. We cultivate a plain style by speaking in plain terms. I encourage you to look at 2 Corinthians 3, which says, “Seeing that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech.” I love that statement. Our hope is so important that we use great plainness of speech. It is entertaining to simply say things cleverly. It is impressive to say important things in a complex way. Yet it is ministry to say profound things in simple ways. It is also the greater intellectual task to say profound things in simple ways. It is not difficult to say profound things in complex ways, particularly using the vernacular that you learn in seminary. The greater intellectual task is to say profound things in very simple and graspable ways.

There are some principles for plain speaking. Use regular words. Remember that the Westminster Larger Catechism says in Question 159, “We are speaking to the necessities and the capacities of the people.” We are not speaking to the necessities of the people and the capacities of the preacher. The necessity and capacities of the people should guide us in our style.

Ultimately, we are trying to speak naturally. That does not mean we speak ungrammatically. If people are jarred by the language you are using, they will not hear you. Yet they are not looking for a formal essay. They are looking for you to be conversational, even as you speak with authority. That natural speaking is typically what is most wanted these days. It is being conversationally articulate.

We had some fun today in thinking about some aspects of delivery that are fun and even funny at times to think about. The reason I did that is I want you to remember something. We could have turned this whole course into a classroom on delivery and style. I want you to recognize that those are the lesser matters of preaching. They really are the lesser matters. What God calls you to do is to communicate well. Yet He says, “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth.” That is our primary calling. It is to recognize that it is not our delivery, but rather it is the Holy Spirit working by and with the Word in peoples’ hearts. That is the profound task to which we are called.

Think about this: the angels are looking on, along with the departed saints. The Holy Spirit is present and working. Christ is interceding before the Father on behalf of you and the people. The Father Himself is listening to what you are saying, for the sake of His children. It is a profound task and a very good one. May God bless you in it as you, for the sake of His people and His Word, preach the Word. The Lord bless you.