

Letter From Prof. Finney to Miss a.e. of Vermont.--No. 2.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney emphasizes the principle of benevolence in determining appropriate dress for Christians, advocating for modesty and simplicity while avoiding worldly conformity.

Scripture: 1 Timothy 2:9

Topics: "Christian Modesty", "Benevolence in Choices"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the topic of dress in his letter to Miss A.E. of Vermont, emphasizing that the guiding principle should be universal, disinterested, and perfect benevolence. He acknowledges the struggle between conforming to worldly fashion and maintaining a Christian standard of modesty and appropriateness. Finney encourages individuals to consider their circumstances, health, and the impact of their choices on others when deciding on their attire. He warns against judging others based on personal standards and stresses the importance of dressing in a way that reflects a heart focused on glorifying God. Ultimately, he advocates for a balance between personal expression and adherence to Christian values in dress.

Transcript

Dear Sister A:

Your second inquiry relates to the subject of dress. "After having received the blessing of which I have spoken, I was very sensitive in relation to dress--about conforming to the fashion of the world, and felt that I never would change my form of dress. In this too, I have departed, but have not returned to my former course. This, however, is one point which has been a source of much pain to me."

Now, my sister, this is a much agitated question, and the only way in which it can be decided, is by reference to the law which I before mentioned: namely, that of universal, disinterested, and perfect benevolence. This is the rule and the only rule by which all our actions are to be governed. Benevolence is good willing, or willing the good or happiness of being. Our own happiness is a part of the good of being, and should always be estimated according to its relative value. As an illustration of this: Suppose there are before me two kinds of food, or two baskets of fruit: other things being equal, it is lawful for me, and even my duty to choose that which is most agreeable to me, simply because it is a greater good to me and no evil to any body else, and therefore is so far conducive to the highest good. So if I were providing food or

fruit for another, it would be my duty, other things being equal, to provide that which is most agreeable to him.

Now apply this principle to dress. By a law of our being, more or less variety seems to be demanded; that is, our highest enjoyment can be promoted only by considerable variety. Now God is benevolent. In our original constitution he planted capacities for enjoyment, and constantly adapts his providence and works to these capacities, that he may promote our happiness. Hence the variety with which his works abound. For us to refuse this variety in our diet and in other things, is to reproach the wisdom of God, and trample down the laws of our being. There is, however, be it remembered, a reasonable variety in every thing, and there is a fanciful, unreasonable, luxurious, self-gratifying variety. Suppose you have for a long time worn one form and color of dress. It becomes necessary for you to have a new one. You feel inclined to change the color, and in some respects the form. Now observe, all things else being equal--the expense, the manner in which the change will be regarded by others--every thing, in short, being equal, it is no doubt proper for you to follow this impulse, that is, it is in accordance with reason for you to do so, and it is demanded by reason. It is a law of your being, and if it will promote your happiness, and impair the happiness of no other being, your duty in this case becomes plain, just as in choosing between different kinds of food. But observe that when the fashion of the day or other circumstances might give this change the appearance of conforming to the world, it should be abstained from, under that rule of the Apostle--"Abstain from all appearance of evil."

2. A great variety of circumstances are always to be taken into the account in determining the dress suitable for different individuals and at different seasons: such as the age, the sex, the health, the circumstances, the position in which providence has placed you. All these things should be well considered in deciding what is becoming, modest, healthful, Christian. Certainly no universal rule can be laid down but that already mentioned; namely, universal disinterested, perfect benevolence. It is easy to see that the practical application of this rule would naturally introduce a great variety, according to the climate, the seasons, the health, and various other circumstances.

There is no need of persons being stumbled upon this subject. A holy heart--in other words, a single eye to the glory of God in all things, will enable persons to learn their duty on this as on all other subjects.

My sister, let it be remembered as of great importance, that Christians should not judge one another upon such subjects as these, and apply their own rules and notions to every body, and insist upon making their own conscience the rule of another's duty. I have no right to judge another man by my light, and denounce him if he will not comply with my views upon this or any other subject. where the thing is manifestly neither right nor wrong in itself, but only right or wrong according to the circumstances. In this there is a great evil in the church and the world. Men overlook the fact upon which I insisted in my first letter, that but one thing in the universe is right in itself--that is, benevolence; and that every thing is right or wrong as it does or does not accord with the law of benevolence.

I have been several times requested by my sisters abroad to give my opinion in relation to the rule by which especially females are to be governed in the regulation of their dress. Now to this I answer:

(1.) That the rule is that of universal and perfect benevolence.

(2.) That what is upon the whole benevolent in every case must be decided by a sober, honest, and earnest consideration of all the circumstances of the case. Every thing is of course to be avoided that will appear to be conformity to the world, because we are required to avoid all appearance of evil.

Again, all extravagance of every kind is to be avoided, and also all forms and modes of dress that are inconsistent with the best health; and again, whatever is inconsistent with a pure and correct taste. Every thing immodest, uncouth, or slovenly should be rejected. Christian women would do well to dress always just as they would if they expected to receive a visit personally from the Lord Jesus Christ. My sister, always dress so as to have reasons to believe that the Savior, if personally present, could not say--I am sorry to see you have so much regard to your personal appearance, or I am sorry to see you have so little. Dress in such a manner that you suppose he would have nothing at all to say about your dress, or about your state of mind respecting dress. Indeed, females would do well to dress always so as to attract no attention at all to their dress. Remember this, my sister. Few ladies would err if they would follow this rule. I say few, because I can conceive of circumstances in which there might be an exception. Some ladies are providentially placed in such circumstances that most of their associations are with those who dress most extravagantly. Now a lady thus situated must either dress extravagantly, or be noted for Christian simplicity and plainness. In such cases it is well for a lady to become notorious, and to depart so far from the extravagance of those around her, as to rebuke the gay and fashionable multitude. In this case she should by no means go to an opposite extreme, and pay so little regard to her dress as to be necessarily offensive; but let her observe the rule of the Apostle; adorn herself with modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with gold or pearls or costly array; but with such apparel as becomes a woman professing godliness.

Inasmuch as benevolence is the rule, we are always to remember that the expensiveness of dress is much to be taken into the account in deciding upon the propriety of any article of apparel. The wants of the world, the numerous demands upon our resources for aid to benevolent objects, should always be duly considered in all our expenditures, and of course for dress. The error is almost universal on the side of extravagance; but there may be error on the other side. Persons may not sufficiently consult their health, the climate, and all the circumstances of the case, and may for the sake of a present good, forego a greater and more remote good.

A great deal may be said on this subject. Not so much however really needs to be said as many suppose, because the law of benevolence is simple, and generally of very easy application. I have thought that many fail to distinguish between scrupulousness and conscientiousness in regard to questions of this kind, and that Satan often has very much to do in troubling the minds of many Christians on this subject. Your health is feeble and your nerves delicate; perhaps you are not sufficiently careful to discriminate between scrupulousness and conscientiousness. When the Holy Spirit shall have taught you how to make this just discrimination, I think you will be relieved of your trouble on this subject. I may resume this topic at some future time.

Yours in the Lord:

C.G. FINNEY

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