

Of Vessels and Vestures: “The Lord Pondereth the Hearts”

RORY R. SCANLON

On these cold winter mornings I am reminded of an early winter morning a number of years ago when one of my teenagers headed for the front door with his backpack slung over one shoulder. He was in an obvious hurry to get to the school bus. I noticed out the front window that snow was rapidly coming down and that my teenage son was about to step out into the dead of winter in a T-shirt, jeans, and Nikes—an outfit more in tune with a warm spring day.

“Where is your coat?” I asked, reacting in my typical fatherly manner.

“Dad, nobody wears coats!” was his simple reply. And with that, the front door swung open and off he went into the cold, snowy day with very little between himself and the elements. I continued watching through the front window as he tiptoed through the piling snow, trying to keep the slush from slipping down into his low-cut sneakers. I worried as he pushed his hands deeply into his pants pockets, trying to cover as much skin as possible with the single layer of cotton denim.

And then, there they were—all those brave teenagers standing at the corner waiting for the approaching yellow bus, and most without the needed winter coat. I knew the garment well. With its waterproof outer fabric; its sleek,

smooth inner lining; and its thick, body heat-capturing interlining, it hung readily in the front closet of each of their homes. But apparently this generation had decided that while this garment offered needed warmth and protection, it would be an embarrassment to actually wear a winter coat to school. Does this sound familiar?

Because I didn’t take the time that morning to stop my teenager and offer a lecture, may I take this opportunity to voice my concern—not only as a parent but also as a costume historian? To aid my argument, let me offer a brief lesson or two from Clothing 101, a mythical class in which I have just officially enrolled each one of you. Welcome to class. And, yes, there will be a quiz at the end of the lecture!

In his 1952 book *Clothes*, James Laver—a well-known sociologist, writer, critic, and fashion designer—offered three principles that help determine why people wear clothes. In 1984 Barbara and Cletus Anderson, in their book *Costume Design*, summarized Laver’s three principles this way:

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1. Clothes “are selected to counteract the effects of the cold or damp.”
2. Clothes are assembled “because they lend social status to the wearers and display their importance to the world.”
3. “Clothes are donned to make the wearer look as attractive as possible, within the framework of what is considered attractive at any particular time in history.”¹

We might note that Laver’s principles are chronologically ordered by the developmental steps of human maturity. For most of his life, up until my son became a teenager, principle 1 ruled his life, and he was content to wrap up in hat, scarf, mittens, boots, snow pants, and winter coat before heading out into a snowstorm. But somewhere between grade school and middle school, principle 2 came into play. His desire for social status suddenly ruled out the wearing of all his winter attire. I knew that had to be the main reason he was not wearing a coat that morning, because principle 3 had not yet kicked in for this young man—girls were of some interest in his life, but only from a distance, and he still grunted his disapproval at movies whenever the hero and heroine decided to advance their relationship with a kiss.

Based on Laver’s second principle, my teenager had offered a strong statement in support of his motivation for not putting on a needed layer of warmth that cold winter morning: “Nobody wears coats!” In his world, to wear a coat would have made him a “nobody.” Now, I knew that was not true; after all, that very same day I wore my winter coat! But at an age when being part of the group was so crucial to his self-worth, the possibility of a bad cold or even pneumonia was a small price to pay.

The Greek word *polis* means “city” or “community.” Our word *politics*² is derived from *polis*, referring to the close-knit society of the Greek world. One was born into and lived within the structure of one’s *polis*, and it was within this group that one enjoyed moral sup-

port and physical protection. In the Greek play *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, when the lead royal character comes to realize the great sin he has committed, he condemns himself to be banished from his polis.³ He knows that no other polis or community will accept him, and he will be left to wander the land without community and without the unity of society. In the Greek mind, this was a fate worse than death itself. To my teenager, his polis was important enough to him that he would suffer the pains of being very, very cold the rest of that day.

Let me, however, point out that before my teenager left that morning a bit unprepared for the weather, our family had helped prepare him in other, more important ways. It is a family tradition in our home for the entire family to get out of bed in support of whichever member of the family has to leave the house the earliest so that we can have family scriptures and prayer. Sometimes the practice is short, and maybe even hurried, but my wife and I, as parents, sense that a light jacket is better than no coat at all.

The Apostle Paul taught the Ephesians:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

*Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*⁴

Note that just as Laver gave us three principles for the wearing of clothing based on maturity and understanding, Paul offers us here three principles of progression in the gospel based on maturity and understanding. First we read the list of Church offices in verse 11. Next the three standards that deal with Church organization are enumerated in verse 12. Then we arrive at verse 13. Within this verse are the

three crucial principles of spiritual maturity that are key to our individual development and are the main purposes for the Church and all its offices:

1. A “unity of the faith”
2. A “knowledge of the Son of God”
3. A development into “a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ”

Please note that Paul’s list, like that of James Laver, is also chronologically ordered by the developmental steps of human maturity. When we initially participate in Christ’s Church, we discover a crucial unity, or community of faith, wherein we are morally and physically sustained by a group of peers in whom we trust and by whom we are trusted. Combining our infant testimonies with this community, we gain strength. We learn at what point we might need the added layering of others’ testimonies as we progress through the cold temptations of life. And as our testimony grows, principle 2 takes effect. Through the strengthening of our testimonies and the trials of our faith, our knowledge of the Son of God grows. Within this unity of faith, we find His countenance in those around us. We find His principles exemplified in the actions of those with whom we associate. And as we reciprocate, suddenly we begin to find in ourselves the very traits we admire in others. We increase in our personal knowledge of the Son of God. And, through this knowledge, we begin to become more like that perfect man or woman promised in Paul’s principle 3—one who is a “measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

In regard to my teenager, I knew the importance of our family unit as a community of faith that would shield his infant testimony. As a couple, my wife and I had prayed that our example of faith would help strengthen his testimony as he grew more and more in the knowledge of the Son of God. We understood

then, as we do now, that such growth is a life-long process, and we hoped that every environment in which we allowed him to associate would offer the polis of faith he truly needed.

I assume that this might be at least partially why many of you have chosen to be a student or a faculty member or to fill a staff position at Brigham Young University. This campus offers you a community—or “unity of the faith”—in which you can ask the educational questions you need to ask and stretch the spiritual muscles you need to stretch as you try out that growing testimony you are developing. For many of you, this might be the first time in your life that you have been in such an incredible spiritual polis. This might be a unique opportunity to be around so many members of a community who have the same ideals, the same beliefs, and the same faith you possess.

To you students, let me add that I believe your parents are also glad you have chosen this particular polis in which to grow. As a parent, I am concerned with any environment in which my own children choose to participate. I know that such participations will become an integral part of each child’s progression toward the Apostle Paul’s principle 2 and eventually toward principle 3. I have always hoped and prayed that the people my children associate with will help them mature in their knowledge of the Son of God. I wish them to select friends whose countenances likewise reflect the teachings of Christ.

Yes, I admit that many of those shivering, yet fashion-conscious teenagers at the bus stop were young Christians, just like my son. And that was probably why I didn’t worry as much about their lack of winter coats. But, as a costume historian, I did realize that my son’s choice to follow the fashion crowd during this crucial time of his life was part of a maturing process that would lead him through another set of principles—those presented by James Laver. I also knew enough about Paul’s principles to know how influential one’s external

expression could become on one's internal spiritual progression. I knew fully well the link between Paul's and James Laver's lists of principles, and I worried a bit, as any parent would.

I am sure you are asking yourself, "How could not wearing a coat to school denote a process of spiritual decline for this young man?" And I would agree with your initial reaction. But I must mention that at that specific time, I had more than one teenager in my home. In that same house, another young adult was much more involved in Laver's cycle of fashion maturity. The decisions of this individual were well past the lack of a winter coat and had advanced to experimentation with slashes and gashes cut in clothing to creatively reveal the skin beneath; wording and images applied across the chest for the purpose of shocking the viewer; and extremes in hair coloring and fingernail polishes a bit out of the ordinary for the "unity of the faith" in which I had strong beliefs.

I knew enough about fashion history to acknowledge that my second teenager's internal spiritual progression could be damaged by such external fashion expression.

In their book *Costume Design*, the Andersons state:

Social pressures can be very strong influences on behavior and a way to remain socially superior is to dress properly according to the unwritten rules of society. For many years what was considered "socially proper" would keep the members of society in their appropriate niches independent of laws. . . .

Fashion dictates with no regard for the individual and no concern for how the style will look on many who copy it. It declares what will be considered beautiful and therefore what will be thought ugly by reason of no longer being fashionable. . . .

*Clothes express people's attitudes toward themselves and their society, both what they wear and how they wear it.*⁵

May I repeat the final statement? "Clothes express people's attitudes toward themselves and their society." While many may argue that "clothes really do not make the man" or that "one cannot judge a book by its cover," I reply with the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "What you *are* stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary."⁶

The fact remains that clothes really do affect the way in which we judge one another. While the Lord has the profound ability to look past the external and "pondereth the hearts"⁷ of His children, we as human beings are very much influenced by the look of the outer vessel. And we are certainly affected by the vestures each individual selects to present him- or herself. The clothing you choose to wear makes a strong statement about your attitude toward yourself and your society. It is one of the strongest statements you make about the polis in which you choose to dwell.

Incidentally, this is another concept for our Clothing 101 lecture. Throughout history, clothing has not only made the man, it has actually been used as a way for certain societies to control their active polis members. May I share some powerful examples?

Example 1: The Central American polis of the Aztec nation did not allow the common citizens to wear cotton fabric. This fiber was reserved for select leaders of the society. Further, the ruling kings not only dictated the fibers one could wear but also sanctioned certain garments to be worn only by those who had proved themselves on the battlefield or in other social proving grounds.⁸

Example 2: During the medieval period in Europe, sumptuary laws were passed by the ruling monarchs that dictated fabrics and garments to be worn by the varying classes of citizens. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Fur*, Julia Emberley states: "Sumptuary legislation . . . during the medieval period . . . was meant not so much to curb extravagance as to

preserve certain commodities for the wealthy, ensuring that symbolic displays of wealth were reserved to the property-owning classes."⁹

Example 3: In the British polis of World War II, support for the war effort extracted strong clothing regulations. In 1942 the Utility Clothing Scheme was placed into effect by the Board of Trade throughout Great Britain. This plan determined new clothing rations acceptable for men, women, and children during the war years. Regulations were specific enough to mandate that no woman's day dress could have more than five buttons, 160 inches of stitching, and two inches of hem.¹⁰ Men's suits had like restrictions, including no more than three pockets, no more than three buttons on the center front, and no cuffs allowed on trousers.¹¹

We today may not fully understand how much our own polis determines the clothing we choose to wear. I consider myself formally dressed as I stand before you today because I wear a coat and tie. The tie has no real purpose, but I wear it because in the world of my fifth great-grandfather, men had long hair. It was fashionable in his day for hair to be worn pulled back in a ponytail tied with a black satin ribbon. But when he rode his horse, that ponytail would flap up and down in the wind, slapping the back of his neck. Consequently, he learned to wrap that black ribbon around the front of his neck to hold the ponytail tightly in place. This fashion was called the *solitaire*, because it held the hair solitary.¹² As it turned out, my fifth great-grandfather's polis liked the look of this black ribbon at the front of the neck. So, when fads changed and men cut their hair, the black ribbon remained and evolved into what my contemporary polis calls a tie. And my polis tells me to wear one if I wish to consider myself formally dressed.

To complete the formal look, I must also wear a suit coat. If you look at the sleeves, you will note that part of this important garment is a row of buttons along each cuff. May

I point out that these buttons lack any apparent contemporary utility? That same fifth great-grandfather also wore a coat, yet his sleeves were cut much longer than mine. They were so long, in fact, that he had to fold them back and button them up so they would not fall down over his hands.¹³ My polis has decided that I must cut my sleeves to fit the length of my arms, but my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather's buttons are still present! Oddly enough, many of you wear the same fashion each Sunday without much regard to your ancient progenitors who created the original fashion out of necessity but later maintained the fad because of their polis.

We may not fully understand why our own polis demands certain looks. Yet, as Lord Chesterfield observed, "Dress is a very foolish thing, and yet it is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed, according to his rank and way of life."¹⁴ Perhaps we should be more conscious of the outer symbols we wear and why we wear them, for these symbols strongly comment on our internal beliefs.

Each of you as students, staff, and faculty at Brigham Young University can easily relate to our fashion discussion because we are part of a campus community that has a university dress code. While our code does not mandate a campus uniform as some other campuses do, its guidelines are nonetheless binding on our respective polis.

I wish to point out, however, that while many may mock or even ignore our BYU dress code with apparent reference to principles outlined by James Laver, the BYU dress code we follow is based more effectively on the principles outlined by the Apostle Paul. The code by which you students, faculty, and staff select your daily wear is based in a unity of faith. It represents our commitment to a community in which we hope to grow in our knowledge of the Son of God. This makes our personal signature on a document that asks us to agree to abide by such a dress code a statement of

our support for the spiritual polis in which we choose to live. What's more, as Paul's ordered chronology of spiritual maturity would suggest, each of us who chooses to follow this code can increase in his or her knowledge of Christ and grow more effectively toward that perfect man as outlined by Paul.

Jeffrey R. Holland, when he was president of Brigham Young University, emphasized this same concept with these words:

*Our individual and collective image has to do with the very mission of the university and the Church which sponsors it. By asking us to maintain a modest, neat, and clean appearance, our Board of Trustees are inviting us to aid them in making a deeper statement to the world about our beliefs, our convictions, our civility, and our discipline.*¹⁵

Truly your honoring of the dress code adds to the educational and spiritual polis of our unique university campus. The external expression of your testimony can help strengthen not only your own faith but also that of each member of this polis who expects to see in you a "measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

With this comment I have reached the end of our class today. "But Professor Scanlon," you might say, "we have not addressed Laver's third principle!" Unfortunately time does not allow a full discussion of the closely guarded secrets of Laver's third principle on the use of clothing to attract others. Those who wish to discuss this principle will have to take Clothing 102 next semester. But, just as a teaser: Men, spend more time on the cut of your hair and the cleanliness of your shoes if you want that all-important date. And women, while formfitting fashion and a little skin might turn a male head, most men tend to marry a female who leaves much more to the imagination in the dating and mating process.

As promised, our lecture ends today with a quiz. I ask each of you to apply the first two

principles in James Laver's list to the clothing you are wearing today. Where do you stand in this progression of maturity and understanding in relation to yourself and your society? Then, once you have answered question number one, please answer question number two. Apply the principles in the Apostle Paul's list to the clothing you are wearing today. Where do you stand in your maturity and understanding in relation to Christ? And let me point out that, as a faculty member at Brigham Young University and as a parent, I am a little more interested in your response to question number two.

I leave you my witness this day that while the cleansing of the inner vessel is a crucial and lifelong process, the manner in which we prepare and present our outer vessel will affect how others will perceive our contribution to our spiritual polis and our personal knowledge of the Son of God. I also recommend that each of you carefully select the polis with which you make allegiance, for its policies and practices will greatly influence your personal development. And since you currently have chosen to live in the polis of Brigham Young University, I highly recommend that you abide by its fashion consciousness. I testify to you that BYU's code was written under the inspiration of the most perfect of all men. To this I leave my sincere testimony, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Barbara Anderson and Cletus Anderson, *Costume Design* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 21; see James Laver, *Clothes* (London: Burke, 1952), 23.

2. See www.wordinfo.info/words/index/info/view_unit/1721 and www.wordinfo.info, which cites *Robertson's Words for a Modern Age: A Cross Reference of Latin and Greek Combining Elements*, comp. and ed. John G. Robertson (Eugene, Oregon: Senior Scribe Publications, 1991), 123.

3. See Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, final scene.
4. Ephesians 4:11–13.
5. Anderson and Anderson, *Costume Design*, 22, 25, 35.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Social Aims,” *Letters and Social Aims* (1876).
7. Proverbs 21:2.
8. See Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Indian Clothing Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 16, 27; Margot Blum Schevill, *Costume as Communication: Ethnographic Costumes and Textiles from Middle America and the Central Andes of South America* (Bristol, Rhode Island: Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, 1986), 9; Ralph Whitlock, *Everyday Life of the Maya* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987, 1976c), 43.
9. Julia V. Emberley, *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 44.
10. See www.floralfrocks.org/Dress_45_themes.html, which cites Anne Scott James, *Picture Post*, August 1942.
11. See Virginia S. Wimberley, University of Alabama, 2004 lecture notes for History of Costume: 1940s, www.ches.ua.edu/departments/ctd/faculty/wimberley/ctd448/materials/1940srevised.pdf.
12. See Carolyn G. Bradley, *Western World Costume: An Outline History* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954), 223; Frederick William Fairholt, *Costume in England: A History of Dress* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1846), 384.
13. See Douglas Gorsline, *What People Wore: A Visual History of Dress from Ancient Times to Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Viking Press, 1952), 100; Erhard Klepper, *Costume Through the Ages: Over 1,400 Illustrations* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1999), 56.
14. Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, *Letters to His Son*, 29 November 1745.
15. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Dress and Grooming Standards at Brigham Young University,” unpublished memo, 10 April 1981; in “Virtus et Veritas,” BYU devotional address, 8 September 1981.