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Trading Ashes for Beauty in Christian Dress

by David Kidd

With nearly every advantage in our favor, and after years of unprecedented opportunity to produce young people of the highest spiritual, moral, and distinctive Christian character, Christians continue to shoot themselves in the foot by allowing the world's patterns and styles to define them and their children. Like the children of Israel, we have corrupted ourselves with the gods of Egypt.

This is an urgent appeal to Christians, particularly homeschoolers. It will not apply equally to everyone, but I am afraid it applies to far too many. There are many good and wonderful Christian people who may bristle at this, but there is a fire burning and someone must yell. I trust this admonition is gentle, but also firm and clear.

In Isaiah 61 God is speaking through the prophet of his intentions to bring salvation to his people, to comfort the mourning, and to give them beauty for ashes. In chapter 62, referring to His people, He says, "Thou shalt also be a crown of glory unto the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.

I have visited many homeschool conventions around the eastern part of the country and know many fine homeschooling families. I work with their boys, fellowship with the parents, and observe their young ladies. There is no other group of people I would rather be around than Christian homeschoolers. However, each event I attend, whether regional or local, leaves me with burning questions: "What are we doing wrong?" "Why do so many of our young people look, act, and talk like the world?" "How can it be that we shelter our youth from public school influences, yet in language, appearance and conduct one could never tell them apart?"

We have traded the beauty of being a peculiar people; pure, innocent, distinct, and separate, for the ashes of the world's fashions and foolishness. Please understand, I realize there is plenty of room for differences in styles of dress and preferences in appearance. I am not suggesting we adopt a "uniform," but I am asking that you honestly evaluate this intensely personal area in the light of God's Word and His call for us to be "royal diadems.

I said I would be gentle, but clear. Allow me to be very clear so there can be no misunderstanding by providing a literary montage describing a typical homeschool event:

A young man, perhaps 15, walks through the door of the meeting room. His pants are baggy, dragging on the floor, his outer shirt is open and oversized, with the shirttail dangling mid-thigh. On his head a baseball cap is turned backwards. After

a few moments he is reminded that hats should not be worn inside and he removes it, revealing gel-spiked hair. A single earring dangles from his left ear. He fingers it as he scans the room for friends. His eyes brighten as he spots one. An outstretched hand, oddly crooked at the wrist, with a single pointing finger is acknowledged by another similarly attired young man. They greet each other with a handshake. Not a gentleman's handshake, but some variant form, first with fingers enclenched, then a bumping of the fists. They talk for a minute. It is apparent they are admiring each other's necklaces. Gel-spike's is delicate, perhaps of Indian origin. His friend's is bold and brash, a linked chain, heavy enough to harness a pit bull. Their body language exudes a suave coolness.

From my vantage point I look for the parents of the two lads. There in the corner is the heavy-chained one's mother. Her hair is short, though not cropped off in a feminist statement. Loosely fitting blue jeans and a wool pullover sweater complete her outfit. As the styles of the day would have it, she looks pretty normal.

Across the way is heavy-chain's father. He is talking with an older gentleman who is neatly dressed in a button down shirt and beige colored Dockers. His own cut-off jeans, a stark contrast to the neat casual Dockers of his conversation mate, looked liked they lost a fight with his son's pit bull.

Gel-spike swaggers across the room to a smartly-dressed middle-age woman. My lip reading skills are adequate enough that I know he called her mom. They converse for a minute. She smiles and pats him on the head as he walks away. Her friend laughs and offers her a napkin to wipe her now gelled hand.

As I continue my stealth surveillance, I take mental inventory: 12 women wearing blue jeans, 2 women in long dresses or skirts, 5 boys with gelled hair, 3 with necklaces or earrings, 9 girls in blue jeans, 2 in short shorts, 2 in long dresses. Before I complete my analysis, I notice two young ladies, both perhaps 14. They are not together, except in the sense they are both here. The one stands out because her dress is long and flowing. She approaches a lady that I suspect must be her mother. She is dressed in similar style. Mom long-dress hands car keys to daughter long-dress and whispers something to her. She quickly moves across the room and approaches a young man, perhaps 17 years old, who was just hanging up his coat and depositing his hat on the top of the coat rack. "Her brother, I bet," I think to myself. Sure enough he takes the keys and goes outside, apparently to fulfill an errand for mom.

I wait for him to return to add him to my mental notes: Cowboy boots, jeans, pull over shirt, no gel-hair, no necklace, no earrings. I scan the crowd. There were a few others in similar, benign attire. I was struck by the contrast in appearance. Everything was here, from a near Mennonite look, to those who appeared to have popped out of "People" magazine.

The other 14 year-old girl that caught my attention was still where I had first spotted her. Her jeans were tight, as though they had been bought just before her last growth spurt. Her shirt was also tight, and short, advertising the fact she was no longer a little girl. Another girl approached, dressed in similar form-fitting, flesh-exposing fashion. Their apparent willingness to flaunt their developing physiques made my heart sink. “What could their parents possibly be thinking?”

“She can really kick b__t.” I snapped my head around to see where that had come from. Another young lady, perhaps 15, was talking with some boys. I listened for a moment, enough to hear the slang term a few more times. She obviously liked using that word. Her mother stood nearby, either oblivious to the street slang or unconcerned.

“You’re being too sensitive” a voice in my head was trying to shake me into reality. I could not help but notice the contrast. The other two girl’s attire was tight and revealing, hers was loose and obviously, intentionally sloppy. Both were outside my “box” of appropriate Christian attire. I resisted the urge to pass judgment any further.

For the remainder of the evening I mingled with the group, discussing a variety of topics. Mr. Cut-offs mentioned that he needed prayer for a job. Gel-spike told me about his work with children in a child evangelism program. Miss short-shirt seemed to be a loner. The other short-shirt was on the prowl, trying to make herself appealing to any interested boys in the group. None were.

As the evening concluded and we prepared to leave, I scanned the gathering one last time. Heavy-chain was tying his little brother’s shoes. Gel-spike was helping heavy-chain’s Dad set the chairs in straight rows. These boys did not wear the characteristic scowl of a rebellious heart, yet their appearance screamed it loud and clear. The confusing images spun cobwebs in my mind. I had watched the two of them all evening. They seemed polite and pleasant, even somewhat spiritual. “The look of the world with an apparently spiritual heart. How does that work?” “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” The verse spontaneously erupted from my subconscious. “I wonder if what I can see matches what God can see,” I thought.

Miss short-shirt had her coat on now, concealing the bold statement she had been making all evening. The younger long-dress had her coat on too. She was leaving just behind loner short-shirt. Their coats were nearly identical. But for the fringe of her dress gently flipping around her calf as she hurried outside, you might have thought they were sisters.

“That could never be,” I concluded. Two girls, with such different values and standards instilled in them, and whose outward appearance bears such striking differences could never be from the same family. I was sure of that. They did appear to be leaving together though. I watched as the other mom long-dress came outside

carrying one tired little bundled up baby. Short-shirt and younger long-dress were headed for the same van! “It can’t be!” I thought. I strained to see. At the large van, I noticed young long-dress get in. Soon mom long-dress arrived, handing a sleeping bundle to her older son in the van. Miss short-shirt paused for a moment, “coming Mom,” I heard her call, and ran across the lot to the family car. “I was right,” I thought proudly. “Such conflicting values could never co-exist in the same household.

As I traveled home, my mind felt like it had been twisted into a snarled knot. Like watching a movie that has no plot, or reading a book that attempts to weave so many conflicting images into the story that you finish not knowing what it was all about. I was confused and dismayed. “How can it be?” I wondered. Here was a group of Christian homeschooling families. In addition to our common bond of faith in Jesus Christ, we also had a common bond of insulating our children from the worldly influences and a desire to raise a distinctive generation of Christian youth who will one day establish Godly homes of their own.

At least, that’s what everyone says.

“I do believe these people love the Lord.” “Why do so many of the children, and even some parents, look so much like the world?” “Where are the distinctive marks?” “Is it only a spirit of holiness we are after, or should there be a visible evidence of that inner spirit?” “Is purity and innocence an inner quality which may be disguised behind a worldly façade of popular fad and fashion?” Questions swirled in my mind trying to make sense of the confusing menagerie of images I had seen. “Is it possible for such opposing values to co-exist in the same household of faith?

“You’re judgmental!” “Legalism!” “Man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart.” “We have freedom in Christ!” “You are in bondage.” “God accepts us as we are.” The accusations and defenses exploded from my memory banks as I involuntarily recalled past debates with others who see the issues differently than I.

As we traveled home, the streetlights of the little town we were passing through illuminated the youthful residents. Some were huddled in small groups, others hurriedly chasing to catch friends. Again my mind made a quick inventory as I scanned the scene. Three of four boys in a group to my left had gel-spiked hair. Two of the four wore earrings. A fifth approached the group. A thick chain around his neck sparkled in the street light. He greeted the others with a handshake like the one I had seen gel-spike and heavy-chain exchange earlier. Two girls from across the street were calling to the boys. They both wore blue jeans and form fitting shirts that were much too short to cover their middle as they raised their hands to wave to the boys. I quickly looked around while waiting at the red light; seven girls, all in blue jeans, and most wearing revealing shirts similar to the two we just passed, six

boys, three with gel-spiked hair, four wearing necklaces or chains, two with earrings.

I was paralyzed by the inescapable truth and my inability to reconcile with it. Considering the standard of appearance and action, these were no different than some in the group I just left. Perhaps, like some in our gathering, their heart does not match the look they project, but that I could not tell from my mobile vantage point. I only know that they looked and acted the same. There was one difference. On the streets, I did not see a little miss long-dress or any aspiring Dockers-pants or button-down shirts.

The scenes I just described for you, though not all occurring in the same place at the same time, are not fictitious, but a combination of observations I have made at various home school and other Christian events. If this is typical, and I fear that it is, it is a horrible indictment of our willingness to accept the ashes of the world's look, in exchange for the beauty of being a sparkling crown of glory and a royal diadem for our God.

When it becomes impossible on a city street to even guess which might be the lost sinner and which is probably the Christian teen, something has gone disastrously awry. There was a time I would have blamed the church, but it is not the fault of the church, except to the extent that it has served as an accomplice. No, my appeal is not to pastors first, but to Christian parents. Wake up and look at your children! Your daughters are exposing their bodies, either in flesh or form, presenting an image that reeks of worldliness, carnality and sensuality. Do you not see it? Do you not realize the nightmare that lies ahead for her if you do not require a standard that marks her as a diadem of God?

Your sons dress and adorn themselves in a fashion that would have shamed even the unsaved a generation ago, for such was reserved for only the most perverse segments of society. Yet today, the church and its Christian parents console themselves, mistakenly convinced that God does not care about outward appearance. Even the most casual reader of Samuel's evaluation of the sons of Jesse, from which this position arises, should recognize that God's admonition was not a license for man to overlook the outer flesh, but a limitation of his ability to see the heart, which only God is able to see.

My dear Christian parent, our children are an heritage of the Lord. Why do so many of our youth look, act and talk like they have been disinherited from the kingdom and forfeited to the world, and that without even a noble fight? A fountain cannot send forth both sweet water and bitter. No man can serve two masters. He/she will either love Christ and look like His, or love the world and look like it. You cannot serve God and mammon. Friendship with the world is enmity with God.

I appeal to you for the sake of the heritage God has entrusted to you. Look at your children, especially your youth. Do they look different from the world? Look at the

clothing of your daughters and ask yourself, “What message do the clothes she is wearing send?” Does your son look like an upright man of dignity and Christian character, or does he look like he stepped off the cover of a Backstreet Boys CD? What your children will be, they are now becoming.

By now, no doubt, you are in one of two states of mind; either in agreement, you grieve with me, or in disagreement, you have already begun to build a defense. If you are in the latter state, I issue a challenge to you. Build your defense from scripture. If dress does not matter, defend it with the Bible. Subject your view to the scrutiny of God’s truth. My standards need not be yours, but both should be His.

In conclusion, I add this disclaimer. It is absolutely true that dressing up the outside does nothing to purify the inside. A whitened sepulcher is still full of dead men’s bones. The inside must first be washed in the blood of Jesus. Once cleansed however, why would we continue to adorn ourselves in the rags of those who remain dead in their trespasses and sins?

Put on your biblical glasses and examine what you are permitting in light of Whom we represent. With every advantage and opportunity to raise up young ladies in modesty, and decency, and with such opportunity for our sons to model Christian manhood and dignified character, we have traded the beauty of being a glistening diamond of God, for the ashes of the world’s popularity and fashion, convincing ourselves that it is only the spirit that matters, but failing to understand that such a worldly façade masks the spirit, tarnishing its lustre, until finally it is unrecognizable. In our deal with the devil, we lose it all!

May God enable each of us to boldly uphold the glorious standard of our holy God, and may our children reflect that holiness both in spirit and substance. It is not too late. “Thou shalt also be a crown of glory unto the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.

David Kidd is pastor of Bethel Bible Fellowship. He and his wife homeschool their five children in Romulus, NY. The book entitled “The Fall and Rise of Christian Standards: Thinking Biblically about Dress and Appearance” is available from [Xulon Press](http://Xulonpress.com) (Xulonpress.com, 866-909-2665).