

Book Review
David P. Stevens

Why Do They Dress That Way? by Stephen Scott, Intercourse, PA, Good Books, c. 1997, 160 pp. ISBN: 0-934672-18-0. \$7.95.

Why Do They Dress That Way? is book no. 7 of the People's Place books. There are twelve titles in this series listed on the inside front and back covers. This series of books covers life among the Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren.

Stephen Scott has authored several books on the Amish way of life. He grew up between Dayton and Xenia, Ohio on the outskirts of the largest community of Old German Baptist Brethren. He was impressed with the beliefs and practices of the plain people and in 1969, at the age of 21, he affiliated with the Old Order River Brethren in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania where he has remained to the present. Consequently, his insights come from the viewpoint of an insider rather than outside the fellowship. Mr. Scott was educated at Cedarville College located in Cedarville, OH.

The book consists of thirteen chapters with notes, an extended bibliography, and an index along with a brief note about the author. Also, chapter eight contains a brief account of the author's pathway to plainness.

Chapter one affirms that "Dress is a Language." The way we dress can make a statement about our occupation, ethnic identity, religious beliefs, social and economic status or personal tastes. Clothing does tell something about us. The phrase "plain people" describes different groups of Amish, Mennonite and Brethren. These people dress "plainly" in comparison to the culture in which they live (American). They believe ornaments and finery are contrary to biblical principle (p. 4). Three things are stressed by Scott. Plain dress indicates separateness, identity and commitment. For these people, dress indicates a belief in God that causes them to desire to live separate from the world, identify themselves as believers, and conform to church teachings.

Chapter two discusses the Scriptural basis for the beliefs plain people have about the clothes they wear. Plain people do not believe that plain clothing is essential for salvation. However, they do believe that plain clothes indicate separateness from the world which is in harmony with God's will. Nonconformity is the primary religious principle that guides the plain people in the matter of dress. Both humility and modesty are stressed as distinguishing aspects of Christian living. Also, plain people believe that cleanliness is an important aspect of Christian discipline. The chapter concludes by considering eleven passages of Scripture under four different headings: pride, worldliness, nonconformity and modesty. In addition to the Scripture passages mentioned in the chapter, the notes section gives a dozen more. This fact shows that the type of dress worn is an indication of faith affirmed. The problem arises whenever specific applications are made of the Scriptural principles and then those specifics are legislated into church law. The conformity is not merely to the Scriptures. It is conformity to man-made laws.

Chapter three attempts to relate the history of the development of the plain clothes pattern. Scott relates that early Anabaptists of the 16th and 17th centuries wore distinctive dress (p. 19). Menno Simons (from whom the Mennonites are named) and George Fox (founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers) preached simplicity of dress and against pompous dress. Written rules and regulations are sparse. Early confessions of faith said little about dress. Plain dress was

associated with the common man. Simplicity in dress was associated with humility. Once this concept was given Scriptural sanction, plain clothes were associated with religious piety. Plain people have traditionally opposed fads in fashion. Rejection of fads gives the image of stability. The type of clothing one wore was symbolic of one's sobermindedness and desire to be distinct from the world. Short hair became a symbol of piety (p. 26). Plain clothing indicates a more conservative outlook on life. Immodesty and immorality were associated with more liberal tendencies in culture and in religion. The more revealing the fashions, the more plain people were determined to maintain their simplicity and plainness.

Plain clothing has undergone change. There are two primary ways in which this is accomplished. Change in clothing articles such as shoes or eyeglasses that have not been used as a primary religious symbol or badge of group identity is acceptable. Change, known as "drift" by the plain people occurs when symbolic plain clothing is replaced with stylish clothing. This change is unacceptable. Would all types of "stylish clothing" be immodest? Of course, it would depend upon your definition of modesty.

Chapter four addresses the struggle to maintain distinctiveness in dress. According to Scott, there are 100,000 people (in America) that, for religious reasons, continue to uphold distinctive dress standards for men and women (p. 32). As cultural pressures increase, some groups make changes in dress to align themselves with the cultural norms. Mennonites have experienced this type of change. Scott identifies nine steps defining changes in the Midwest Amish Pattern showing variations in hats, beards, haircuts, pants, shirts, coats, etc. among men and variations in head coverings, dress lengths, aprons, stockings, etc. for women. The fight against fads and fashions is especially seen among the youth. Scott states, "The youthful need for singularity and peer group recognition has done much to bring about changes in dress in every generation" (p. 40). Some groups have become "plain dress" on Sunday only. Some women have protested that they have had to be much more nonconformed than men. The double standard has led to change to more fashionable styles for women.

Chapter five examines the Mennonites in regard to changes in dress styles that have been made through several decades. The historical survey begins in 1943 and continues through 1990. The changes in dress were documented by personal observations, yearbooks and individual accounts of students and teachers attending the Lancaster Mennonite School (LMS) which had its beginning in 1942.

Chapter six takes a look at groups other than Mennonite, Amish, or Brethren who continue to dress plain. Scott mentions a few plain Quakers, some Holiness and Pentecostal groups, and some Catholic and Jewish traditions.

Chapter seven is an interesting chapter containing twenty-five questions and their answers relating to plain dress. The questions feature objections to wearing plain clothing. The answers attempt to justify the wearing of plain clothes. One question related to finding modest clothing in stores (number 12). The answer reveals a lack of trust of the individual Christian to apply Scriptural principles to their own life. "The only way to avoid a drift toward unacceptable fashions is for the church to prescribe a uniform dress, and for most of that clothing to be made at home" (p. 62). The phrase, "the only way" indicates "no other way." This is where the doctrines of men have been elevated to the same status as Scripture. This is a key point in understanding the problem with plain clothes regulations. Jesus said the doctrines of men constitute vain worship (Matt. 15:9).

In chapter eight, the author, Stephen Scott, relates his own pathway to plainness. He first relates his conversion in a Baptist church as a teenager. He then states that he was disillusioned

by the hypocrisy of professing Christians who seemed to desire conformity to the world rather than distinctiveness from it. He was drawn to the simple clothing that gave the outward appearance of separation from the world. One of the first articles of clothing he got rid of was his necktie (p. 68). In 1969, at the age of 21, he affiliated with the Old Order River Brethren in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

In chapter nine the author addresses the question, “Will Plain Dress Survive?” He answers the question by connecting clothing to symbolism. If an item of clothing attains primary symbolic status, it is less likely to change (p. 70). Whenever the symbols become an important part of the identity of the group, they have permanency. On page 73, he gives a chart on the levels of symbolism in men’s clothing for five different religious groups of Amish, Mennonite, and Brethren. There are three levels of symbolism: primary, secondary, and minor. The primary symbols are required of all members. While the symbols may vary somewhat between the groups, when they have attained primary status, they contribute to the overall identity of the group. Isn’t there something wrong with a religion that derives its identity from dress and not from relationship to Jesus Christ? Even the names of these groups betray an alignment with men rather than Christ.

In chapter ten Scott discusses general clothing styles. Amish insist on only solid color fabrics whereas groups like Mennonites and Hutterites and some Brethren groups allow patterned fabrics. Black and grey are the preferred colors for men’s suits. Among Old Orders of Amish, “wideness” of the brims on hats represents conservatism. Narrowness of the bands on hats represents plainness. Nearly all plain churches exclude jewelry including wedding bands. You cannot wear a wristwatch, but you can have a pocket watch. Some Mennonite groups forbid gold on eyeglass frames. Do these restrictions seem extraordinary or extreme? Clothing guidelines extend to undergarments, maternity clothes, ministers who adhere the rules more closely to provide a model for others to follow. Children follow the specific rules of the church. There are even guidelines for dress when you die. Some groups follow the practice of dressing the dead in shrouds. In Lancaster County Amish groups, women are buried in white dresses.

Where do they get their clothing? Many of the plain people make their own clothes. However, some resort to buying factory made clothes.

Chapter eleven focuses on women’s clothing. Scott discusses the cape, the apron, the short gown, the skirt, mantels, shaws, coats, shoes, stockings, the bonnet, the cap, and woman’s hair. Some of the extraordinary features include: stocking color and weight of material is specified by the church; pantyhose are worn by some modern plain women but get in the way of foot washing ceremonies; many plain groups have dropped wearing bonnets and this is usually one of the first items to go when a church departs from the Old Order; conservative plain churches put the head covering on the equal basis with the doctrines of communion and baptism (p. 101); and finally, most plain woman do not cut their hair.

Scott discusses men’s clothing in chapter twelve. He describes the hat, hair, beard, coat, pants, suspenders, shirt, vest, necktie, shoes, work coats and winter coats. Some of the unusual features of these include: broad brimmed hats are closely associated with the history of Anabaptists; within church groups one’s age and status are often reflected by the dimensions of one’s hat; short hair is associated with the Scriptural sanction, “it is a shame from a man to have long hair”; virtually no plain church permits the mustache to be worn without the beard (p. 108); some Mennonite groups oppose the beard regarding it as a mark of fallen man after Adam’s sin (p. 109); most Old Order plain men wear pants with a flap all the way across the front called a broadfall; Swartzentruber and Troyer Amish require that the straps of suspenders form a “Y”

across the back rather than an “X”; for centuries the shirt was considered an item of underwear; and finally, most plain groups feel that the necktie is a useless ornament.

Chapter thirteen gives a detailed analysis of the features of plain clothes among the groups that require them. Scott takes up a discussion of Amish, Mennonite, Brethren and various others who follow the regulations involving plain clothes. He gives numerous illustrations and charts showing all of the details of the regulations concerning what clothes are to be worn by the individual groups. Many of the divisions among these groups into splinter groups are the direct result of these regulations concerning clothing.

Extensive notes are included for each chapter at the end of the book. A very nice list of readings and resources is also included. The book concludes with an index and brief statement about the author.

This book contains more information on Amish, Mennonite and Brethren dress than the average person would need to know. However, it gives an insight into the way that these religious people have attempted to keep themselves from being assimilated into a culture that has many features that do not conform to the teaching of God’s Word. The problem is that in their desire for nonconformity to the world, they have created a culture within a culture that is regulated by man-made rules and demanding of conformity to them. Somewhere in all these clothing regulations the Scriptures get completely lost!