



CALVIN ON CLOTHING

PROF. CORY GRIESS

professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

INTRODUCTION

Last time we focused on John Calvin's important sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5 (the Bible's condemnation of cross-dressing). In that sermon Calvin had important things to say that apply to transgender behavior and transgender activism in the church. Among many other important points Calvin made, one was that the ninth commandment demands *honesty* in clothing. Therefore, a person must not use his clothing to lie to others about the sex and gender he has been created by God to be.

Does that same ninth commandment have anything to say to the rest of us about how we dress? What does it mean for all of us to be honest with our clothing? In addition, does Calvin see any other biblical principles that speak to how we dress? Calvin developed a biblical doctrine of predestination. Did he also develop a biblical doctrine of clothing?

In his sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5 Calvin took the occasion presented by the text to teach about clothing in general, why we wear clothing, what to consider before we dress, and how to be truly honest before God and others in our dress (in a way very different from the way our age thinks of being honest with our dress). In addition, in many other places throughout Calvin's voluminous writings he spoke about clothing. And since Calvin was at once biblical, theological, and pious, he spoke about clothing in such a way that united the head, the heart, and the behavior. In this article I give five main aspects of Calvin's doctrine of clothing.

BEAUTY IS GOD'S GIFT

Calvin believed and taught that God created many things in this life not only for necessary use (utility), but also for our delight (beauty). In fact, Calvin said, some things God created even "seem to serve delight

more than necessity."¹ But how does one know which sorts of things God intended to be used not only for necessity, but also for aesthetic enjoyment? Calvin's answer was that the natural qualities of the things themselves indicate God's created purpose. Thus, things that contain colors, smells, textures, sounds, and tastes can be used also for their delightful beauty.

Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble, with a loveliness that renders them more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use?²

Calvin explicitly applied this to clothing. God commands that we wear clothing, and He also created the products out of which clothing is made. Though clothing was certainly given to us as a necessity, for Calvin it had a function beyond necessity. "The purpose of clothing, apart from necessity, was *comeliness* and decency."³ "Comeliness" here means what is pleasant to the eyes, that is, attractive; as well as what is well-ordered and appropriate. According to Calvin, it is a good thing to have clothing that is made up of colors and textures that are delightful and ordered well if one is able. Being dowdy is not in itself holy. Among the other things we need to consider when we think about our clothing, we ought to thank and praise God for the gift of beauty that

1 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.10.1.

2 *Institutes*, 3.10.2.

3 *Institutes*, 3.10. 2.

can be expressed in clothing. Has anyone reading this praised God for the beauty of colors and textures well-ordered and appropriate when shopping for clothing, whether at a department store or at Goodwill?

THE FALL AFFECTS OUR APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY

Yet, God's good creation of beauty that can delight us is not the only principle that ought to inform our thinking about clothing. The reality of the fall means that other principles beyond the notion of enjoying the beauty God has created must "hedge in" our clothing choices. Dressing ourselves must take into account the evil desires of our own hearts as well as those of our neighbors. In a different context, Calvin connects this depravity to our appreciation of beauty and faithfully explains how our depraved natures so quickly ruin God's good gifts:

Our nature is so corrupted that we cannot look upon anything that is termed fair and beautiful, but that instead of being provoked to love God and to praise him for his goodness, and for bestowing of so many benefits upon us; we offend him.⁴

One offense is idolatry and another is self-love, and we will get to those. But what springs to Calvin's mind first here is sexual lust. While Calvin did not forbid a man allowing the "elegance of her form"⁵ to play a part in a man's choice of a wife, he understood that the eye, "provoked by an evil mind," so often affected men's gazing upon women in general, that the eyes became "enticers to beguile us and work our destruction."⁶ Calvin is thinking of males at this point of course. Yet he does not pass over the females when it comes to sexual lust, even if they are not as prone in this direction. Says Calvin,

Rather than using our clothing to express our own sinful desires or to illicit sinful desires in others, we ought to use our clothing to mute these desires in ourselves and others.

"nine women out of ten who possess it [beauty] are proud, and fond of men, and unite lust with elegance of form."⁷ Whatever you think of Calvin's percentages there, let us acknowledge that the depravity within makes it difficult to look at a beautiful woman rightly, as it makes it difficult to be a beautiful woman with a pure heart—that is, without desiring the attention of men or puffing oneself up over less attractive women.

Clothing should be used in such a way so as not to exacerbate these evil desires in others or in ourselves. That affects how we think of beauty with our clothing. And honesty! In his sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5 it is precisely because of our twisted desires that Calvin appeals to the ninth commandment. The ninth commandment requires

honesty in our clothing; clothing should not lie. The contemporary mind hears that and immediately thinks of self-expression, being proud and unashamed of who I am inside by expressing that in my clothing. And while Calvin would allow a limited self-expression in clothing, he treats the outward appearance very differently. For Calvin, dealing *honestly before God* in our dress means dressing in such a way that we are honest about *how much sin lives in us that needs to be tamped down!* We need to be honest about the fact that we have disfigured God's image in us and dress in the light of that reality. "For as often as we put on either shirt or coat, we be put in mind

that our Lord commands us to hide ourselves, because his image is disfigured in us: and our clothing of ourselves ought to make us think upon the sin of our father Adam."⁸ Rather than using our clothing to express our own sinful desires or to illicit sinful desires in others, we ought to use our clothing to mute these desires in ourselves and others. This is honesty in dress for Calvin: dressing in such a way that we truly reckon with how easily sinful desires rise in all of us.

⁴ *Sermons on Job*, sermon 111.

⁵ Quoted in, Graeme Murdock, "Calvin, Clothing, and the Body," in *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society*, XXVIII (4), 2006, 484.

⁶ *Sermons on Job*, sermon 111.

⁷ Commentary on Ezekiel 16:15, T. Myers, transl. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948), 111.

⁸ *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, facsimile ed. 1583 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 774.

Applying these two truths to our clothing choices, 1) that we ought to appreciate God’s creation of beauty and delight in it, and 2) that we ought to deal honestly with our disfigured desires and those of the neighbor, demands careful thought and wise balance in the child of God. This is worthy of more thought and discussion.

MODESTY

Of course, to deal honestly with the wicked desires within us and others, we need to think about *modesty* when we consider clothing. As you might expect, Calvin points us here. God forbids us, he says, “to lay snares for our neighbor’s chastity by lascivious attire.”⁹

And if we immediately complain that we will have to go against the grain of our day to dress rightly, and that we will have to spend so much time looking for clothes that fit properly and are beautiful, and that sometimes we will look different from the world around us,¹⁰ Calvin figured as much. “Many people use the age as an excuse, or the place they live. ‘That is the way life is,’ they say. ‘What am I to do? Should I enter a conspiracy against public morals? Should I wage war on my country and on my age?’”¹¹ Calvin’s answer was, well, “yes.”

MODERATION

But sexual lust is not the only lust of the flesh that must be considered when we think about clothing after the fall. There is the lust of pride that carries with it the heart’s demeaning of others who are not able to purchase the clothing we are able to

purchase. There is also idolatry of the earthly so that in our love for clothing we (in the words of Calvin) “befog our minds” to the point that heavenly things can scarcely enter in. Calvin therefore also calls us to *moderation* with earthly goods, and with *clothing* in particular. Moderation is restraint from excess that would lead us away from God and righteousness rather than to Him and His righteous ways. Calvin asks, “Where is our gratefulness toward God for our clothing if in the sumptuousness of our apparel we both admire ourselves and despise others.... Where is our recognition of God if our minds are fixed upon the splendor of our apparel?”¹² If we are so concerned with how we look and are purchasing clothing constantly to

gaze at ourselves in the mirror while comparing ourselves to others, God is not in our thoughts. Instead, we must use clothing with moderation so that we do not fall in love with our clothing or ourselves. If we are tempted to adore the gift more than the giver, we need to give prayerful consideration to the question, “Am I exercising moderation here?”

Calvin reminds us that we must always live before the face of God and not forget that this God “has greatly commended abstinence, sobriety, frugality, and moderation, and has also abominated excess, pride, ostentation, and vanity.”¹³ God calls us to possess and use earthly things in such a way that we are able to love Him and others in the having and using of them. God give us wisdom and a right heart!

In his writing on moderation and clothing Calvin also asks us if we are able to be content when we do not have the funds to purchase the clothing we desire:

They who have narrow and slender resources should know how to go without things patiently, lest they be troubled by an immoderate desire for them. If they keep his rule of moderation they will make

Calvin therefore also calls us to moderation with earthly goods, and with clothing in particular. Moderation is restraint from excess that would lead us away from God and righteousness rather than to Him and His righteous ways.

9 *Institutes*, 2.8.44.
 10 Does anyone else think Christians ought to stop wearing yoga pants in public?
 11 *Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice*, M. Beaty and B. Farley, trans. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 85.

12 *Institutes*, 3.10.3.
 13 *Institutes*, 3.10.5.

considerable progress in the Lord's school.... He who is ashamed of mean clothing will boast of costly clothing...let all those [who pursue piety]...learn by the Apostle's example, how to be filled and to hunger, to abound and to suffer want (Phil 4:12).¹⁴

We do not easily let go of our idols. If it would deeply pain us to have our nice clothing taken away so that the one watching our response “would think his very limbs had been taken away from him,”¹⁵ then we are not living in moderation and with a right heart before God. Is the heart set on God or on the clothes?

Similarly, it is worth asking ourselves whether or not the *amount* of clothes we are accumulating is affecting our hearts before God this way. Maybe our clothes are not ostentatious or inordinately expensive. However, are we buying more and more in an attempt to fill some hole in our heart? Calvin asks bluntly, “Do you think so many clothes are intended for one body?” And he asks if we are as concerned to “cultivate the soul” in many virtues and graces as we are to “cover the body” with many articles of clothing.¹⁶ Clothing is to help us; be careful clothing does not become a spiritual hindrance.

CLOTHING AND CALLINGS

Finally, leaving behind the effect of the fall on how we think of clothing, let's take note of Calvin's positive insight on how clothing relates to the callings God gives us. The doctrine of vocation (one's calling from God in life) is one of the great doctrines recovered in the Reformation. Strikingly, Calvin turned to it when he developed his doctrine of clothing. Calvin made two points here.

First, Calvin returned to the ninth commandment and honesty when he thought about station and calling. One ought to dress in such a way that his/her clothes honestly reveal the stations and callings God has given. In other words, we ought not attempt by our dress to act as though we have a place we do not have. A minister should generally dress like a minister, not a construction worker. A sixty-five-year-old grandmother should dress like a mature woman, not like a teenager. Someone with

little money should not attempt to dress “as though he went to play an interlude.”¹⁷ Now to be sure, Calvin and the society of his day had more rigid expectations of various classes, and we want to be careful in this age where there is more social mobility and where one can buy designer clothing at discount prices. Yet there still is a heart issue we can appreciate in our day as well. We ought not attempt to deceive others by our dress but be honest about the life God has given us.

Second, Calvin makes the point that our dress should not only reflect our callings, it should also *help us carry out our callings*. “The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly, and the head of the household will confine himself to his duty” if he also dresses in such a way that the clothing itself calls him to his duty.¹⁸ There was a time when I attempted to prepare to preach on Sunday mornings in sweatpants and a t-shirt, but it did not work very well. I had a harder time “getting into” my sermon, especially right away. But it helped to wear my suit even as I was preparing. While that might not be the case for all preachers, this is the kind of point Calvin is making here. It makes me wonder what kind of clothing helps students fulfill their calling at school.

CONCLUSION

As Christians, all our lives ought to be lived *coram Deo*, and few have done better than Calvin to call us to that and to help us think through how to do so from the head to the heart to the outward life. Calvin had a theology of clothing that was doctrinal, scriptural, and practical without being legalistic. In his reminding us that God created beauty and that it honors Him when His people love rightly ordered beauty; in his informing us that our recognition of beauty is warped by sin and so we have to be careful to keep our clothing from instigating wrong desires in ourselves and others; in his calling us to modesty, moderation, and to consider the calling and stations God has given us in life, Calvin helps us to consecrate even our getting dressed to the One who, before we even wake up and think about what to wear, has clothed us with the white robes of His righteousness.

¹⁴ *Institutes*, 3.10.5.

¹⁵ *Calvin's Ecclesiastical Advice*, 85.

¹⁶ *Calvin's Ecclesiastical Advice*, 84.

¹⁷ *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 774. An interlude is a play. His point is, one should not try to show himself in a different class than he is actually in by gaudy dress.

¹⁸ *Institutes*, 3.10.6.