Sacred places

May 14, 2005, p. 16.

In the 35th chapter of Genesis we find the account in which Jacob instructed his household and all who were with him to “be clean, and change your garments” in preparation to going to Beth-el and building an altar unto God (see verses 2-3).

In the Bible Dictionary, Beth-el, or Bethel, is listed as another name for “House of God,” and one of the most sacred spots in Israel (see 1979 LDS edition, King James Bible, p. 621).

From this ancient book of scripture and on through revelations to modern-day prophets, we are taught that how one dresses is part of showing reverence for a sacred place. That the scriptures contain many references to the topics of dress or raiment indicates the importance the Lord places upon proper attire on certain occasions and in sacred places. Latter-day Saints understand that “the House of the Lord” is a temple; we also regard a ward or branch chapel as a sacred place, a house of worship.

While fashions have changed over the years, the prescribed manner of approaching a sacred place has remained much the same as it was in Jacob’s day: we are to be clean and wear appropriate clothing.

People in previous generations knew that “Sunday best” meant the best clothing they owned. As styles have become more casual in the world, some members have become more lax regarding the selection of clothes they wear to Church. Such laxness often communicates that there is little regard or respect for the religious service or others who attend.

There is irony in the fact that some of the same people who might go to extra effort to find the right clothes to wear to an important social event at a famous place might give little thought to how they dress to go to a sacrament meeting or to enter a temple. Most likely, if they were going to a formal dinner or reception to meet a president, prime minister or a king or queen, or other dignitary, they would take extra care with their dress. Why not put forth the same effort to dress appropriately to enter a house of worship?

When people go to the beach or on a picnic, they usually wear clothing that allows them to enjoy that experience. Flip-flops and casual attire are among suitable clothing there. People don’t normally wear their “Sunday best” to the beach or on a family outing. Why, then, would they wear to Church attire that is more suited to the beach or a casual excursion?

When Church leaders give counsel regarding the importance of dressing in a manner that shows respect to the Lord at Church meetings, they are not judging members by their personal appearance. And, certainly, they have no intention of driving anyone away from attending Church. Instead, they are trying to help members understand that there is a relationship between how they dress and the showing of reverence to the Lord and to that which is sacred.

Appropriate attire for attending sacrament meetings or entering a temple isn’t about money; it is about respect. Some of the poorest members are among those who take the most care with their dress.

A search through texts of addresses delivered by presidents of the Church, members of the Quorum of the Twelve and other General Authorities and auxiliary leaders reveals that the topic of appropriate dress has been a major concern, especially during the past 30 or so years.

President Spencer W. Kimball addressed students at Brigham Young University, saying: “I assure you that all Church standards, both those relating to moral conduct and those relating to dress and grooming, are the result of intense, prayerful consideration by Church leaders. . . . Shakespeare had Polonius truly say, ‘The apparel oft proclaims the man’ (Hamlet, act 1, sc. 3). We are affected by our outward appearances. . . “ (Ensign, March 1980, p. 2).

In the priesthood session of the April 1996 general conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley counseled young men: “Be clean in dress and manner. I do not expect you to look like missionaries all the time. But let me say that the clean and conservative dress and grooming of our missionaries has become as a badge of honor recognized wherever they go. The age in which we are living now has become an age of sloppy dress and sloppy manners. . . . Whenever you administer or pass the sacrament, look your very best. Be sure of your personal cleanliness.”

As we enter sacred places, let us show our respect to the Lord by being clean and appropriately dressed.

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