

JUDSON'S LETTER ON DRESS

To the Female Members of the Christian Churches in United States of America. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.6}

DEAR SISTERS IN CHRIST: Excuse my publicly addressing you. The necessity of the case is my only apology. Whether you will consider it a sufficient apology for the sentiments of this letter, unfashionable, I confess, and perhaps unpalatable, I know not. We are sometimes obliged to encounter the hazard of offending those whom, of all others, we desire to please. Let me throw myself at once on your mercy, dear sisters, allied by national consanguinity, professors of the same holy religion, fellow pilgrims to the same happy world. Pleading these endearing ties, let me beg you to regard me as a brother, and to listen with candor and forbearance to my honest tale. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.7}

In raising up a church of Christ in this heathen land, and in laboring to elevate the mind of the heathen converts to the standard of the gospel, we have always found one chief obstacle in that principle of vanity, that love of dress and display (I beg you will bear with me) which has in every age and in all countries, been a ruling passion of the fair sex, as the love of riches, power, and fame has characterized the other. That obstacle lately became more formidable, through the admission of two or three fashionable females into the church; and the arrival of several missionary sisters, dressed and adorned in that manner which is too prevalent in our beloved native land. On my meeting the church after a year's absence, I beheld an appalling profusion of ornaments, and saw that the demon of vanity was laying waste the female department. At that time I had not maturely considered the subject, and did not feel sure what ground I ought to take. I apprehended also, that I should be unsupported and perhaps opposed by some of my coadjutors. I confined my efforts therefore to private exhortation, and with but little effect. Some of the ladies, out of regard to their pastor's feelings, took off their necklaces and ear ornaments, before they entered the chapel, and tied them up in a corner of their handkerchiefs, and on returning, as soon as they were out of the mission house, stopped in the middle of the street to array themselves anew. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.8}

In the mean time I was called to visit the Karens, a wild people, several days' journey to the north of Maulmein. Little did I expect there to encounter the same enemy, in those "wilds, horrid and dark with o'er-shadowing trees." But I found that he had been there before me, and reigned with a peculiar sway, from time immemorial. On one Karen woman I counted between twelve and fifteen necklaces, of all colors, sizes, and materials. Three was the average. Brass belts above the ankles, neat braids of black hair tied below the knees, rings of all sorts on the fingers, bracelets on the wrists and arms, long instruments of some metal perforating the lower part of the ear, by an immense aperture, and reaching nearly to the shoulders, fancifully constructed bags, inclosing the hair, and suspended from the back part of the head, not to speak of the ornamental parts of their clothing, consisting of the fashion and the ton of the fair Karenesses. The dress of the female converts was not essentially different from that of their country women. I saw that I was brought into a situation that precluded all retreat - that I must fight or die. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.9}

For a few nights I spent some sleepless hours, distressed by this and other subjects, which will always press upon the heart of a missionary in a new place. I considered the spirit of the religion of Jesus Christ. I opened to 1Tim.ii,9, and read these words of the inspired apostle: "I will also that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broidered hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array." I asked myself, Can I baptize a Karen woman in her present attire? No. Can I administer the Lord's supper to one of the baptized in that attire? No. Can I refrain from enforcing the prohibition of the apostle? Not without betraying the trust I have received from him. Again I considered that the question concerned not the Karens only, but the whole Christian world; that its decision would involve a train of unknown consequences; that a single step would lead me into a long and perilous way. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.10}

I considered Maulmein and the other stations; I considered the state of the public at home. But, "What is that to thee? follow thou me," was the continual response, and weighed more than all. I renewedly offered myself to Christ, and prayed for strength to go forward in the path of duty, supported or deserted, successful or defeated, in the ultimate issue. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.11}

Soon after coming to this conclusion a Karen woman offered herself for baptism. After the usual examination, I inquired whether she could give up her ornaments for Christ. It was an unexpected blow! I explained the spirit of the gospel. I appealed to her own consciousness of vanity. I read the apostle's prohibition. She looked again and again at her handsome necklace (she wore but one), and then with an air of modest decision, that would adorn beyond all outward ornaments any of my sisters whom I have the honor of addressing, she took it off, saying, I love Christ more than this. The news began to spread. The Christian women made but little hesitation. A few others opposed, but the work went on. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.12}

At length the evil which I most dreaded came upon me. Some of the Karen men had been to Maulmein, and seen what I wished they had not. And one day, when we were discussing the subject of ornaments, one of the Christians came forward in my face, and declared that at Maulmein he had actually seen one of the great female teachers wearing a string of gold beads around her neck!!! {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.13}

Lay down this paper, dear sister, and sympathize a moment with your fallen missionary. Was it not a hard case? Was it not cruel for that sister thus to smite down to the ground her poor brother, who, without that blow, was hardly able to keep his ground? But she knew it not. However, though cast down, I was not destroyed; though sorely bruised and wounded, I endeavored to maintain the warfare as well as I could. After some conflict the enemy left the field, and when I left those parts, the female converts were, generally speaking, arrayed in modest apparel. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.14}

On arriving at Maulmein, and partially recovering from a fever which I had contracted in the Karen woods, the first thing I did was to crawl out to the house of the patroness of the gold beads. To her I related my adventures - to her commiseration I commended my grief. With what ease and truth too, could that sister reply, Notwithstanding these beads, I dress more plainly than most ministers' wives and professors of religion in our native land. Those beads are the only ornament I wear; they were given me when quite a child by a dear mother, whom I never expect to see again (another hard case); and she enjoined it on me never to part with them as long as I lived, but to wear them as a memorial of her! O ye Christian mothers, what a lesson you have before you! Can you, dare you, give injunctions to your daughters directly contrary to apostolic commands? But to the honor of my sister be it recorded, that as soon as she understood the merit of the case, and the mischief done by such example, off went the gold beads. She gave decisive proof that she loved Christ more than father or mother. Her example, united with the efforts of the rest of us at this station, is beginning to exercise a redeeming influence in the female department of the church. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 42.15}

But notwithstanding these favorable signs, nothing, really nothing, is yet done. And why? This mission and all others must be sustained by continual supplies of missionaries, male and female, from the mother country. Your sisters and daughters will continually come out to take the place of those who are removed by death, and to occupy numberless stations still unoccupied. And when they arrive they will be dressed in their usual way, as Christian women at home are dressed. And the female converts will run around them, and gaze upon them, with the most prying curiosity, regarding them as the freshest representations of the Christian religion, from the land where it flourishes in all its purity and glory. And when they see the gold and jewels pendant from their ears, the beads and chains encircling their necks, the finger rings set with diamonds, and rubies, the rich variety of ornamental head dress, "the mantles and the wimples and the crimping pins," (see the rest in Isa.iii), they will cast a bitter, reproachful, triumphant glance at their old teachers, and spring with fresh avidity to repurchase and resume their long-neglected elegancies. The cheering news will fly up to the Dahgyaing, the Laing-bwai, and the Sal-wen; - the Karenesses will reload their necks and ears and arms and ankles: and when, after another year's absence, I return and take my seat before the Burmese or the Karen church, I shall behold the demon of vanity enthroned in the center of the assembly, more firmly than ever, grinning defiance to the prohibitions of apostles, and the exhortations of us who would fain be their humble followers. And thus you, my dear sisters, sitting quietly by your fire-sides, or repairing devoutly to your places of worship, do, by your example, spread the poison of vanity through all the rivers and mountains, and wilds of this far distant land; and while you are sincerely and fervently praying for the upbuilding of the Redeemer's kingdom, are inadvertently building up that of the Devil. If, on the other hand, you divest yourself of all meretricious ornaments, your sisters and daughters who come hither will be divested, of course; the further supplies of pride and vanity will be cut off; and the churches at home being kept pure, the churches here will be pure also. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 43.1}

Dear Sisters, - Having finished my tale, and therein exhibited the necessity under which I lay of addressing you, I beg leave to submit a few topics to your candid and prayerful consideration. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 43.2}

1. Let me appeal to conscience, and inquire, What is the real motive for wearing ornamental and costly apparel? Is it not the desire for setting off one's person to the best advantage, and of exciting the love and admiration of others? Is not such dress calculated to gratify self-love, to cherish sentiments of vanity and pride? And is it not the nature of these sentiments to acquire strength from indulgence? Do such motives and sentiments comport with the meek, humble, self-denying religion of Jesus Christ? I would here respectfully suggest that these questions will not be answered so faithfully in the midst of company as when quite alone kneeling before God. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 43.3}

2. Consider the words of the apostle quoted above from 1Tim.ii,9: "I will also that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness, and sobriety, not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array." I do not quote a similar command recorded in 1Pet.iii,3, because the verbal construction is not quite so definite, though the import of the two passages is the same. But cannot the force of these passages be evaded? Yes, and nearly every command in scripture can be evaded, and every doctrinal assertion perverted, plausibly and handsomely, if we set about it in good earnest. But preserving the posture above alluded to, with the inspired volume spread open at the passage in question, ask your hearts in simplicity and godly sincerity, whether the meaning is not just as plain as the sun at noon-day. Shall we then bow to the authority of an inspired apostle, or shall we not? From that authority shall we appeal to the prevailing usages and fashions of the age? If so, please recall the missionaries you have sent to the heathen; for the heathen can vindicate all their superstitions on the same ground. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 43.4}

O Christian sisters, can you hesitate and ask what you shall do? Bedew those ornaments with the tears of contrition; consecrate them to the cause of charity. We shall soon appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to be tried for our conduct, and to receive the things done in the body. Will you then wish, that in defiance of his authority, you had adorned your mortal bodies with gold, and precious stones, and costly attire, cherishing self-love, vanity, and pride? Or will you wish that you had chosen a life of self-denial, renounced the world, taken up the cross daily and followed him? And as you will then wish you had done, do now.

Dear Sisters,
Your affectionate brother in Christ.
A. JUDSON.

Maulmein, Oct., 1831. {July 8, 1862 JWe, ARSH 43.5}