

PERSONAL HABITS A MINISTER NEEDS TO BE DEVELOPING

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I. Cleanliness

Body odor and bad breath are highly offensive in American culture—more so than in many parts of the world. This situation is particularly bad because (a) people will rarely say anything to you about it. They may hold back until it makes them angry and then when they say something about it, it is probably too late for you to do anything about it in order to keep it from ruining your ministry. These problems are also bad because (b) you do not smell your own bad breath or your own body odor. Consequently, you have to do what it takes to prevent these problems even though you do not sense any need to do so. (c) Once your clothes and shoes have picked up body odor, you may not be able to get it out of them.

II. Appropriateness in Dress and Grooming

Whether you like it or not and whether it should be that way or not, ministers in our society are considered professionals. There are some expectancies for professional people in dress and the way they carry themselves. Even aside from the professional aspect of the question, leaders and "up-front" people do not go around with dirt under their fingernails, unpopped pimples and blackheads, uncombed hair and scuffed-up shoes, greasy and untrimmed hair, two- and three-day-old beards, clotted razor nicks, matter in the corner of their eyes, yellowed armpits, wrinkled clothes and clothes that do not fit right. People who insist on presenting an unkempt image lose status among fellow leaders and among those who might otherwise be inclined to follow them. Neat does not have to be "neat-nick" and neatness does not have to be extreme; a comfortable, natural look is all that is really called for. Distinguish between casual and sloppy.

This does not mean you should never "get in there" and "get your hands dirty" with the rest of them. Never be too good to sweat; just don't do it in your good clothes or forget to clean up afterwards. In order to identify more easily with some people, there will be times when you will want to "take off your tie" and make sure you do not have on a three-piece suit. That is fine and it is not being "two-faced" to dress in more than one way depending on the circumstance.

Do not misread any aversion you may have to wearing a tie, keeping your shirt tucked in, and the like. You may think you are correcting an unnecessarily rigid social expectancy. As a matter of fact, you are experiencing your inability to stand comfortably in an adult role. Trying to "buck the system" is the behavior of people who are weak, not strong; it is the behavior of people who do not have enough inner strength to "stand directly behind the pulpit" without feeling out of place.

In general, our society is indeed lessening the stress on special dress for "public" functions and public persons. It is probably not in your best interests or the best interests of

Christ and the congregation where you serve to be on the cutting edge of this trend. Simply remember that you will tend to draw those that your dress and demeanor identifies with.

Beards and mustaches are "in" even among professionals, but you will notice that professionals who wear them keep them trimmed and clean.

Avoid extreme items of dress: tennis shoes with a suit, red ties with a purple jacket, "funky" hairdos. Unusual styles relative to the surrounding culture tend to draw attention. People know that and frankly that is why they wear them. They communicate to other people that they want attention, which indicates that they are still immature enough that their self-identity is not secured in their own minds. To be perfectly honest, it is weakness behavior. Going around without a shirt on, for example, communicates that you are a fringe person, because it is "marginal" behavior.

You will need to watch newer fads like men wearing earrings. While many fads are not wrong in themselves, it is fair to observe that most of them communicate that the person thinks of himself as belonging in the youth culture rather than in the adult community. The related fact is that youth do not lead intergenerational systems. If you want to be a minister, you are wanting something that requires serving the whole range of ages. You can do that only from the stance of an adult.

Remember that you are not just expressing your own preferences. You are maintaining an image the church people expect of you and one that should be appropriate to you calling. You represent not only yourself, but the church and Christ himself. So be sensitive to what different kinds of dress communicate in the culture of your area, and wear what fits that situation and your role in it. Over-individualism destroys ministries because it destroys the relationships through which ministry has to occur; so do not demand to "be yourself." That was not Christ's or Paul's attitude toward their callings. There is no virtue in non-conformist particularly; preoccupation with not conforming probably says that you have not sufficiently established your own identity, and so you are being unnecessarily resistant to patterns and expectancies because you fear being "swallowed up" by them and made to be just another body in the masses. It may be nothing more really than attention-getting behavior.

III. Punctuality

People get in the habit of being late. They leave home when they should be arriving at the meeting. People will overlook exceptions, but habitual lateness will be taken as a lack of self-discipline or as a lack of respect for the other person. Punctuality is particularly important at more formal occasions like funerals and weddings. The range of punctuality in American culture is about five minutes. If you want to be perceived as a leader—someone responsible and able to be in charge of activities, you have to be there early enough to establish your priority in that event.

There are some benefits to getting places a little early. If it is a service you are leading, getting there early helps give you a sense of getting the situation in hand. (a) It gives you a chance to take of unforeseen problems (the light burned out of the slide projector, someone moved the music stand you planned to use). Furthermore, (b) it gives you a chance to personalize yourself to other people that come early. Feeling accepted by them is a big help in getting mentally prepared for leading them in activities. At some functions like funerals

(c) arriving ten minutes early relieves the other participants of any anxiety they may feel about what is about to happen.

IV. Body Language

There are many small mannerisms by which people unconsciously communicate who they feel themselves to be. Watch good leaders when they are leading well and see what they do that creates their leadership aura. Notice the way they handle their eyes, how much they smile, how they modulate their voice, how they hold their head, how they laugh and how much they laugh, the way they avoid slouching and leaning on things and shuffling when they walk, their more restrained gesturing, etc. Notice the absence of distracting “tics” and fidgety, nervous habits. Being “shifty-eyed,” overly talkative, or facially too expressive makes other people nervous and uneasy because they feel like they are putting you under pressure by looking at you. There are books on body language; reading one can be an eye-opening experience that may help you void weakness behavior.

V. Organization

Much of life and higher productivity is simply a matter of getting your life organized. Invoking structure is a primary mechanism for getting more done in less time with less expenditure of—physical and emotional energy. Of course, a person can so tightly pattern his life that he loses a sense of being a person and comes across to other people in an impersonal way. This possible extreme, however, does not justify a lack of planning and organizing your life in general terms. In the end you will have less stress by organizing your activities and plugging them into general slots in that organization than will come from trying to “live out of your hip pocket” all the time. “Spontaneity” does not justify disorganization. When you plot out responsibilities over a frame of time, you have the feeling that provision has been made for taking care of them and you can deal with them one at a time in sequence rather than feel burdened for all of them at the same time. Otherwise unfinished responsibilities keep calling for your attention at the same time, which is a stressful situation because it is demanding more of you emotionally and psychologically than you can realistically expect to handle. Extremes are not usually best, and extremes in organization or the lack of organization are no exception.

Learn to live by goals rather than by interests. Every vocation has some things about it that are much more interesting and enjoyable than others, and there will be things that you are better at than others. Unless you discipline yourself to do what you do not want to do, these other items will “slip through the cracks.” It is better to learn to like to do them than to try to get by without doing them.

VI. Miscellaneous

A. Watch your driving habits. The way a person drives implies something about his personality in general. Needlessly speeding around town and getting “aggressive” with other

people does not fit well with the mutual respect that forms one aspect of the love you preach about.

B. Be neat without being “neat-nick.” Keep your yard mowed reasonably well; keep your car washed, your office uncluttered, your house painted, and the like.