

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

# SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND THE REFORM DRESS

D. E. ROBINSON



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# **Seventh-day Adventists and the Reform Dress**

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**Ellen G. White**

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Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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## Chapter 1—A Plea for Women

In the literature of that period there is abundant evidence of the truthfulness of Mrs. White's arraignment of the current fashions in women's dress. About three years earlier a spokesman for the unfortunate sex, when addressing a large audience in Washington, D. C., made the following plaint regarding the disadvantages and tortures of women:

“Women's clothing is arranged with such an eye to inconvenience and burdensomeness, that if they go out at all it is under great disadvantage. if they should cross the threshold, they may dampen their feet and soil their skirts on the steps, and have their unprotected limbs chilled by the wind. If they wish to walk, they must wait till the dew is off the grass, and a sultry summer sun detracts from the benefit of it. If they work in the garden, more strength is expended on account of the dress than with the plants, for it not only is so arranged that they cannot make a motion easily, but it must be gathered up in their arms while they work with their hands. If they go to market they must carry skirts as well as a basket, for dew, dust, mud, or snow has to be cleared. If they ride they must be lifted in and out of the carriage, while they take care of their skirts, and even then they are often caught, and have to be extricated from them; and if, by accident, any danger comes to life or limb in carriage or on horseback, it is tenfold greater on account of such shackling garments....

“If they turn to the leafy adorned temple of nature to recreate, they must zigzag their way around every bush and log, in spending all their care on muslin instead of enjoying nature; and if they come to a fence the field beyond is forbidden ground to them, though it be all

abloom with choicest flowers.”—Ellen Beard Harmon, *Dress Reform: Its Physiological and Moral Bearing*, (a lecture delivered at the Y.M.C.A. Hall, Washington, D. C., February 10, 1862, pp. 10, 11; New York: Davies and Kent, 1862).

For more than a decade voices of protest had been heard against the barbarous, health-destroying styles of dress imposed upon women by those who regulated the fashions. Eleven years earlier the Honorable Gerrett Smith, a member of Congress, declared:

[2] “A reformation in the dress of woman is very much needed. It is indispensable to her health and usefulness. While in the prison of the present dress, she is, and ever will remain comparatively unhealthful and useless.”—Quoted by Mrs. M. Angeline Merritt in *Dress Reform, Practically and Physiologically Considered*, pp. 169, 170 (Buffalo: Jewett, Thomas, and Co., 1852).

## Chapter 2—Distinguished Ladies Lead Out

With such pronounced opposition to the prevailing styles of dress, it is not surprising that the congressman gave his hearty approval when his daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Miller, adopted a dress somewhat on the style of the Turkish costume. Mr. Miller also approved, and vigorously defended his wife's startling but sensible dress in the United States. The costume made a news feature for the press of that time.

After wearing the dress for about three months, Mrs. Miller went to Seneca Falls, New York, to visit her cousin, Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the honored ladies of the nation because of her efforts in the cause of women. Evidently the advantages in freedom and comfort of the costume worn by Mrs. Miller made a strong appeal to her cousin, for she very soon donned a dress made in the same style.

Mrs. Amelia Bloomer then entered the scene. She lived in Seneca Falls, and edited *The Lily*, a monthly paper for women. Seeing the novelty, she admired it, and soon became the third member of a triumvirate of dress reformers. In the issue of her journal for March, 1851, she described and praised the costume, and in the following month she announced her personal adoption of it, saying:

“Readers ours, behold us now in short dress and trowsers, and then, if you please, give free vent to your feelings on the subject—praise or blame, approve or condemn, as might suit you best. We have become used to both, and are indifferent as to your opinion.”—*The Lily*, April, 1851.

## Chapter 3—Mrs. Bloomer Given Publicity

Mrs. Bloomer at that time had no thought of permanently adopting the new style of dress, no thought that her action would create an excitement throughout the civilized world, or that her own name would be given to the costume. She always declared that such credit should have gone to Mrs. Miller. The public press spread the innovation far and wide as a spicy news item. Writing later an account of the event for the *Chicago Tribune*, Mrs. Bloomer commented:

“I stood amazed at the furor I had unwittingly caused. The *New York Tribune* contained the first notice I saw of my action. Other papers caught it up and handed it about. My exchanges all had something to say. Some praised and some blamed, some commended, and some ridiculed and condemned. ‘Bloomerism,’ ‘Bloomerites,’ and ‘Bloomers’ were the headings of many an article, item, and squib....

“As soon as it became known that I was wearing the new dress, letters came pouring in upon me by hundreds from women all over the country, making inquiries about the dress and asking for patterns—showing how ready and anxious women were to throw off the burden of long, heavy skirts.”—Quoted by her husband, Dexter C. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, p. 68 (Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1895).

[3] In June, Mrs. Stanton, Mrs. Bloomer, and four or five other ladies appeared in the costume while attending a health convention at Dr. Jackson’s health institution, which was then at Glen Haven, New York. The new style of dress was placed on the agenda for discussion, and Dr. Harriet Austin, an associate physician at the institution, became a convert. She and Dr. Jackson were won

as ardent and enthusiastic advocates of the reform. As editors of the *Water Cure Journal*, and its successor, the *Laws of Life*, they were in a position to give wide publicity to it. For several years scarcely an edition of their journal failed to urge its adoption, or to print testimonials from enthusiastic readers who had received health benefits from it. The style, however, was considerably modified by Miss Austin, and soon became generally known as the "American Costume."

Praise and commendation on the one hand, and reproach and sarcasm on the other, were the lot of the dress reformers. This makes it possible for later commentators on the movement either to heap contumely upon it and to represent it as unpopular and ridiculous, or to comment upon it as meritorious and worthy of the praise which it received in many quarters. Dr. Jackson tells how its adoption by his wife, at a time when she had become a hopeless invalid, not only saved her life, but restored her to health, and speaks thus of the severity of the criticism he received from some:

"No one can tell what we all have suffered in public estimation for our conviction of the need of a change of a style in dress for our country women if they are to have health as a rule and sickness as an exceptional condition of life. I do believe that no representation of villainy supposed possible for a man to be capable of committing, and yet be luckily free from liability to be hung, has not been made against me, simply because I advocated a reform in dress of women and a vegetarian diet for invalids."—*Laws of Life*, November, 1860.

## Chapter 4—Dress Reform Gained Favor

There was a steady increase year by year in the number of women who changed to the new style. In June of 1863, about twelve years after Mrs. Miller had initiated the reform, an annual meeting of the Dress Reform Convention was held in Rochester, New York. In her opening address Dr. Austin stated that she invariably included as a part of the prescription to her patients, the words “Adopt the American Costume,” and she claimed credit for having thus influenced at least a thousand women to follow her advice. As to its general adoption, she said further:

“No reform, so truly conservative as this, ever made more progress, during the first years of its existence, than this has done. In all the Northern States it has hundreds of representatives; and in number of them it has thousands. It is known and worn in California, Canada East and West, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. Thousands of women in this State are wearing the American Costume. There are many neighborhoods, in central and western New York, where it is the common dress worn. There are counties in Ohio, Michigan, Iowa, and other of the Western States, where its wearers can be counted by hundreds.”—*Laws of Life*, August, 1863.

In this same address before an audience of 1,700 people, Dr. Austin gives us a picturesque arraignment of the style of dress against which the “American Costume” was a protest. Personifying “lank, sallow Disease,” she graphically pictured the results of his clutches upon wives and mothers, and added:

## Chapter 5—Dr. Austin’s Powerful Plea

“How he delights in the apparel they wear! He sits in their dressing rooms, and nods and chuckles and grins in gratified maliciousness, as the process of dressing goes on; and ever and anon, as some articles specially adapted to his hateful purpose is appropriated, he holds his sides and twinkles his eyes in merry satisfaction. “Those shoes—yes, those suit him precisely! How beautifully they pinch the toes, and press upon the veins at the ankles! Dear madam, what a loyal subject you are! I will stand by you till your dying day. And these bands about the waist—adjust them carefully. There, make them a little tighter. Cut off the action of the abdominal muscles entirely. Tis vulgar to let your breath descend so low.

““And this *dress* is capital—excellent! The flowing sleeves will allow the cool, damp, evening air to play easily about the white arms. Whalebones in it? Ah, yes, that will do. Now hook it, madam. Draw a little tighter. Exhaust your lungs, and contract your chest into the smallest compass. Bravo! One hook is fastened! No sensible woman would wear corsets. They are injurious, and, what is worse, they are out of date. But a dress just fitting closely and beautifully can do no harm....

““Stop, madam, and pant a moment. There, now, proceed. Oh, what a model of a dress! Stand now, and examine its length in a mirror. Elegant! It just sweeps the floor so gracefully. And your hoops are of the most genteel size. Ha! Ha! ... won’t the wind find easy access to her limbs? And won’t she be harassed, and hampered, and hindered, in every step she takes, in the midst of all this drapery? By the time she is ready to lay it off, won’t she feel nervous and weary and exhausted? And

shall I not have gotten a faster hold upon her?’’—*Laws of Life*, August, 1863.

Among the persons selected at this gathering to serve as officers of the convention for the ensuing year, were seven physicians, three ministers, one minister’s wife, and one professor. Joshua V. Himes, a former co-worker with William Miller in connection with the Advent Movement, was a member of the executive committee. His name found frequent mention in the *Laws of Life* as one of those interested in, and approving of, the various reforms for the maintenance and restoration of health.

## Chapter 6—Dress Reform Principles Prevailed

Because the popular agitation over dress reform was carried forward for only two or three decades, and because the costumes they designed and advocated were later discontinued, it might seem that the cause of these reformers was lost. But the principles for which they valiantly contended have prevailed. This is well set forth in an editorial in a popular journal, from which we quote:

“The cause for which the early dress reformers labored and suffered martyrdom has triumphed in almost all points, but in a very different way than they anticipated. They considered only health and convenience. They cared little for beauty, knew nothing of art. Their attempts to introduce the bloomer and other costumes of equal ugliness fortunately failed, but their efforts were not altogether wasted....

[5]

“The chief points in the indictment of woman’s dress of former times were that the figure was dissected like a wasp’s, that the hips were overloaded with heavy skirts, and that the skirts dragged upon the ground and swept up the dirt. Nowadays the weight of a woman’s clothing as a whole is only half or a third of what it used to be. Four dresses can be packed in the space formerly filled by one. In the one-piece dresses now in vogue the weight is borne from the shoulders, and the hips are relieved by reducing the skirts in weight, length, and number. The skirt no longer trails upon the street.... The women who, for conscientious reasons, refused to squeeze their waists, and in consequence suffered the scorn of their sex, now find themselves on the fashionable side. A 32-inch waist is regarded as permissible, where formerly a 20-inch waist was thought proper. A fashionably gowned woman of the present day can stoop

to pick up a pin at her feet.”—*The New York Independent*, October 23, 1913.

It is possible for womanhood today to be clothed neatly, modestly, inexpensively, and healthfully, without the necessity of a wide divergence from accepted styles.

## Chapter 7—The Quest for Moderation

Having noted the fashions of the time, and the movements of the dress reformers, we should consider the attitude of Seventh-day Adventists to these questions.

Between 1840 and 1844, when the believers in the Advent Movement were looking for the imminent coming of Christ, they sought earnestly for such a preparation of heart and of life as would enable them to meet Him with a conscience void of offense. Many of them felt as did the youthful Ellen Harmon, who, in recounting later the experience of herself and her sisters, wrote:

“We talked the matter over among ourselves, and decided to earn what money we could, and spend it in buying books and tracts to be distributed gratuitously. This was the best we could do, and we did this little gladly.... I had no temptation to spend my earnings for my own personal gratification. My dress was plain; nothing was spent for needless ornaments, for vain display appeared sinful in my eyes.... The salvation of souls was the burden of my mind.”—[Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 47, 48.](#)

## Chapter 8—Adoniram Judson’s Appeal

And so it was also with most Seventh-day Adventists from the earliest days of their experience as a separate people. While neatness and durability of dress were regarded as in harmony with the mind of Christ, unnecessary adornment was shunned as being sinful. From time to time articles appeared in the *Review and Herald* counseling simplicity in dress, though the consideration of the matter from the standpoint of health was for some years subordinated to the thought of the scriptural injunctions against pride and display. In 1855 the editor of the *Review and Herald* inserted as a leading article the pronouncement of John Wesley on dress in his “Advice to the People Called Methodists” (July 10, 1855); and “Judson’s Letter on Dress” appeared in 1859. In this letter Adoniram Judson had appealed, from his mission in Burma, to the ladies of the home churches, because [6] of the difficulties and embarrassments created when the Christian natives of Burma, having discarded their ornaments, would see similar decorations worn by the wives and daughters of those who came to his field as missionaries.

On May 27, 1856, at a conference of believers in Battle Creek, Michigan, a very solemn message was given for the church through the Spirit of Prophecy, deploring the “conformity of some professed Sabbathkeepers to the world.” It was pointed out that these “have a disposition to dress and act as much like the world as possible and yet go to heaven.”—[Testimonies for the Church 1:131](#).

## Chapter 9—Mrs. White’s Remarks on Dress

Concerning the view given her at that time, Mrs. White wrote:

“I saw that some professed Sabbathkeepers spend hours that are worse than thrown away, in studying this or that fashion to decorate the poor, mortal body. While you make yourselves appear like the world, and as beautiful as you can, remember that the same body may in a few days be food for worms. And while you adorn it to your taste, to please the eye, you are dying spiritually.... I saw that the outside appearance is an index to the heart. When the exterior is hung with ribbons, collars, and needless things, it plainly shows that the love for all this is in the heart; unless such persons are cleansed from their corruption, they can never see God, for only the pure in heart will see Him.”—[Testimonies for the Church 1:134, 136.](#)

Thus for a time were set forth general principles that should govern the Christian who seeks to follow the injunction of the apostle against the “love of the world.” The first word of opposition found in our denominational literature against a specific style of dress is in the [The Review and Herald, August 5, 1858](#), where Elder J. Byington makes the following innuendo in the form of a question and a conclusion:

“Are sleeves which are largest at the little end, and round tires like the moon, or hoops ([Isaiah 3:18](#)), articles of dress that are modest apparel? [1 Timothy 2:9](#). If so, let them be recommended to the church generally.”—[The Review and Herald, August 5, 1858.](#)

Only four ladies, apparently ventured to respond to the question, with its implication. All these were agreed in condemning the first

style, and three agreed that the wearing of hoops was a practice “unbecoming women professing godliness.” One, however, expressed her opinion that the hoops were unobjectionable and might be “recommended to the church generally in this season of the year, when used with moderation.”—[The Review and Herald, September 23, 1858](#).

In the latter part of 1861, Mrs. White said of this oddity, “Hoops, I was shown, were an abomination, and every Sabbathkeeper’s influence should be a rebuke to this ridiculous fashion, which has been a screen to iniquity.”—[The Review and Herald, August 27, 1861](#).

[7] Hoops continued to be frequently denounced in the church paper, both by ministry and laity. The general stand of the church against them is reflected in a letter from a lady correspondent who wrote of her experience in accepting the message. At a tent meeting she asked one good sister if she could be an Adventist and continue wearing her hoops. A negative reply caused her to assert that she could not become a member if that were the case. However, after hearing a lecture on dress by Elder Waggoner, she decided that she “could lay them off forever if it would be pleasing in the sight of the Lord.”—[The Review and Herald, April 28, 1863](#).

## Chapter 10—Deplorable Physical Effects

The deplorable physical effects of the fashionable dress of that period began to receive attention about this time. Under the heading “Talks About Health,” two articles appeared, both selected from the writings of Dr. Dio Lewis of Boston. In the first (November 25, 1862) he pointed out the evil effects of insufficient clothing for the limbs, and in the second (May 25, 1863) he condemned the corset and recommended a “full and loose” dresswaist to be supported from the shoulders instead of the hips. The “dress reformers” who advocated the “American Costume” exerted but little influence, however, upon Seventh-day Adventists, and only a few of them adopted it.

The fact that many Spiritualists had adopted the Bloomer, or “American Costume,” and wore it at their meetings gave it an unsavory reputation in the eyes of many sincere Christians. The costume as modified was now very much shorter than when first introduced, coming barely to the knee or even higher than that, and this tended to bring it into discredit as being immodest.

It was from the standpoint of modesty and propriety that the “American Costume” was first discussed by Mrs. Ellen G. White. In 1863, in writing of the “cause in the East,” where some had taken extreme positions and others had run into fanaticism, she stated:

“God would not have His people adopt the so-called reform dress. It is immodest apparel, wholly unfitted for the modest, humble followers of Christ.”—[Testimonies for the Church 1:421](#).

In presenting Scriptural arguments against this extreme style, she also wrote:

“I saw that God’s order has been reversed, and His special directions disregarded by those who adopt the American costume. I was referred to [Deuteronomy 22:5](#): ‘The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto

a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.'"— *Ibid.*

## Chapter 11—The Influence of the “American Costume”

Mrs. White wrote also of the influence that might be exerted against Seventh-day Adventists were they to adopt this extreme form of dress, pointing out that they might be mistaken for Spiritualists if they were to adopt it:

“Some who believe the truth may think that it would be more healthful for the sisters to adopt the American Costume, yet if that mode of dress would cripple our influence among unbelievers so that we could not so readily gain access to them, we should by no means adopt it, though we suffered much in consequence....

“Spiritualists have, to quite an extent, adopted this singular mode of dress. Seventh-day Adventists, who believe in the restoration of the gifts, are often branded as spiritualists. Let them adopt this costume, and their influence is dead. The people would place them on a level with spiritualists and would refuse to listen to them.... There is a great work for us to do in the world, and God would not have us take a course to lessen or destroy our influence with the world.”—[Testimonies for the Church 1:431, 422](#).

[8]

While the unfavorable features of the “American Costume” were opened to Mrs. White and she wrote against the adoption of it by our sisters, yet she was equally clear regarding the objectionable features of the prevailing styles of dress, and the need for reform. Her attention was directed to a medium position which our sisters should take, following neither the extreme mannish “American Costume” nor the health-destroying, action-impeding, long, heavy dresses of the time. Introducing a call for reform, Mrs. White said:

“We do not think it in accordance with our faith to dress in the American Costume, to wear hoops, or to go to an extreme in wearing long dresses which sweep the sidewalks and streets. If women would wear their dresses so as to clear the filth of the streets an inch or two, their dresses would be modest, and they could be kept clear much more easily, and would wear longer. Such a dress would be in accordance with our faith.”—[Testimonies for the Church 1:424](#).

“There is a medium position in these things. Oh, that we all might wisely find that position and keep it.”—[Testimonies for the Church 1:425](#).

## Chapter 12—Basic Principles

A fuller presentation of the subject of dress was prepared by Mrs. White for the concluding and sixth article as later presented in *How to Live*. In this we may discover the following basic principles upon which a true reform must be built:

1. “It is injurious to health, and, therefore, sin for females to wear tight corsets, or whalebone, or to compress the waist.”—*How to Live*, No. 6, p. 57.

2. “Many females drag down the bowels and hips by hanging heavy skirts upon them. These were not formed to sustain weights.... The female dress should be suspended from the shoulders.”—*Ibid.*, p. 58.

3. “Should not the people of God, who are His peculiar treasure, seek even in their dress to glorify God? And should they not be examples in point of dress, and by their simple style rebuke the pride, vanity, and extravagance of worldly, pleasure-loving professors?”—*Ibid.*, p. 58.

4. They should not, however, be “careless of their own apparel.... and dress without order and taste.” “Decency and neatness” are not to be classed “with pride.”—*Ibid.*, pp. 58, 59.

5. “It would be pleasing to God if there was greater uniformity in dress among believers.”—*Ibid.*, p. 58.

6. “The length of the fashionable female dress is objectionable for several reasons.... The dress should reach somewhat below the top of the boot; but should be short enough to clear the filth of the sidewalk and street, without being raised by the hand.”—*Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

7. “Whatever may be the length of the dress, females should clothe their limbs as thoroughly as the males. This may be done by wearing lined pants gathered into

a band and fastened about the ankle, or made full and tapering at the bottom; and these should come down long enough to meet the shoe.”—*Ibid.*, p. 64.

[9] To those who might object to such a costume on the grounds that it would be old-fashioned, Mrs. White replied:

“What if it is? I wish we could be old-fashioned in many respects. If we could have the old-fashioned strength that characterized the old-fashioned women of past generations it would be very desirable.”—*Ibid.*, p. 64.

She urged that womanhood should “manifest a noble independence, and moral courage to be right, if all the world differ from them.”—*Ibid.*, pp. 61, 62.

“Christians should not take pains to make themselves gazing-stocks by dressing differently from the world. But if, in accordance with their faith and duty in respect to their dressing modestly and healthfully, they find themselves out of fashion, they should not change their dress in order to be like the world.”—*Ibid.* p. 61.

Such were the circumstances when Elder and Mrs. White made their visit to Dr. Jackson’s institution at Dansville, New York. A definite stand had been taken against hoops. Mrs. White had spoken specifically against the adoption of the “American Costume” because of its immodesty, its resemblance to male attire, as being contrary to the scriptural injunction, and because of the prejudice it would raise against those who had a solemn truth to give to the world. She deplored the ultra-long dress, and recommended one short enough so that it would always clear the ground. And she was praying that God’s people might find the proper medium position in these things.

## Chapter 13—Close Observation

[10]

During their three weeks' stay at Our Home, Mrs. White and her husband had opportunity to observe at close hand the mode of dress that she had formerly declared to be unsuitable for Seventh-day Adventists. Through the lectures and the literature put out by Doctors Jackson and Austin, they had opportunity to become better acquainted with the reasons for its adoption. But they were not led to alter their former counsel that it was not suitable for Seventh-day Adventist womanhood. It is evident, however, that they did find in their hearts a deepening conviction that they should endeavor to find a dress pattern that would be healthful in every way and yet be free from the objectionable features of the "American Costume." Elder White expressed his views as follows:

"At Our Home, the ladies wear what is commonly called the short dress, which is so frequently worn in its ultra-style by brazen-faced and doubtful female Spiritualists. These things have a tremendously prejudicial influence abroad against the invaluable good of this institution. We recognize the principles from which arise the valid objections to the present fashionable style of women's dress, and look for a remedy that will have to the world her appearance as a woman, and save her from public ridicule, and to herself influence. But we have serious objections to woman's dress being so long as to constitute her a street sweeper, and we strongly incline to the opinion that existing evils in her dress can be fully removed without adopting those extremes which we sometimes witness."—*Ibid*, No. 1, p. 1.

## Chapter 14—The Need for a Reformed Dress

A similar recognition of the need for a reformed dress that might be adopted by Seventh-day Adventist women is voiced in a letter written by Mrs. White to friends during the time of her visit to Dansville. In a free and easy manner she said:

“They have all styles of dress here. Some are very becoming, if not so short. We shall get patterns from this place and I think we can get out a style of dress more healthful than we now wear, and yet not be Bloomer or the American Costume.... I am going to get up a style of dress on my own hook which will accord perfectly with that which has been shown me. Health demands it. Our feeble women must dispense with heavy skirts and tight waists if they value health....

“We shall never imitate Miss Dr. Austin or Mrs. Dr. York. They dress very much like men. We shall imitate or follow no fashion we have ever yet seen. We shall institute a fashion which will be both economical and healthful.”—[Letter 1a, 1864](#)

It is evident from this statement that up to that time, although Mrs. White had “been shown” certain principles that should govern a reform in dress, there had been no detailed, specified pattern revealed to her. Later she consulted with other sisters in Battle Creek, Michigan, in seeking for a costume that would be consistent with the faith and practice of Seventh-day Adventists. It seems probable that it was about this time, while they were endeavoring to find such a middle-of-the-road pattern, that the vision was given in which she saw three companies of women, each with a different length of dress. Regarding this she wrote, in 1867, in reply to a question:

“The first were of fashionable length, burdening the limbs, impeding the step, sweeping the street and gathering its filth; the evil results of which I have fully stated. This class, who were slaves to fashion, appeared feeble and languid.

“The dress of the second class which passed before me was in many respects as it should be. The limbs were well clad. They were free from the burdens which the tyrant Fashion had imposed upon the first class; but had gone to that extreme in the short dress as to disgust and prejudice good people, and destroy in a great measure their own influence. This is the style and influence of the ‘American Costume,’ taught and worn by many at Our Home, Dansville, New York. It does not reach to the knee. I need not say that this style of dress was shown me to be too short.

“A third class passed before me with cheerful countenances, and free, elastic step. Their dress was the length I have described as proper, modest and healthful. It cleared the filth of the street and sidewalk a few inches under all circumstances, such as ascending and descending steps, etc.”—[The Review and Herald, October 8, 1867.](#)

## Chapter 15—Mrs. White Tries the Dress

In September, 1865, Mrs. White put on such a dress, which she wore for a time “excepting at meetings, in the crowded streets of villages and cities, and when visiting distance relatives.”— *Ibid.* After a time she wore it in all places at all times.

[11] Her example was soon followed by several of the Seventh-day Adventist women in northern Michigan, and numerous letters of inquiry came from many quarters. When she saw that some were overemphasizing the question, as a matter of prime importance, she was led to protest:

“The dress reform was among the minor things that were to make up the great reform in health, and never should have been urged as a testing truth necessary to salvation. It was the design of God that at the right time, on proper occasions, the proper persons should set forth its benefits as a blessing, and recommend uniformity, and union of action.”— *Ibid.*

Mrs. White’s advocacy of the health reform dress came thirteen years after Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Stanton, and Mrs. Bloomer had initiated in the United States the movement in favor of dress reform. There was scarcely a section of the country in which the voices of its friends were not heard. It had found able and honored advocates in its favor, as well as critics and defamers. Thousands of women were rejoicing in new-found freedom and health. Yet with all that might well be said in its favor, Mrs. White presented adequate reasons given to her why it was unsuitable for Seventh-day Adventists, and she determined to help her fellow sisters to find and adopt a style of dress in harmony with that shown her, one that would avoid the extreme and unfavorable aspects of the popular reform dress and yet give freedom of action and be healthful in every way. She was not, therefore, introducing and initiating a style of costume that was so

ridiculous and strange as to merit the criticisms that some in later years have been led to present in a manner that seems plausible to those who are unaware of the circumstances which have been here presented.

## Chapter 16—At the Health Institute

The physicians at the Health Institute, from the very first, had seen the need for a style of dress that would conform to correct principles, saying that “it was not only desirable, but necessary in the treatment of some cases; and that being so it would be useless and wrong to receive such cases without adopting what they were assured was essential to effect cures.” They also saw that if a healthful dress was not adopted a certain class of people who most needed the benefits of the Institute would be led to go elsewhere to other institutions where they might be freed from the “cumbersome, prevailing fashion,”—[The Health Reformer, March, 1868](#).

At first, general principles of healthful dress were urged, and the individual wearers might consult their own taste and choice as to the length and appearance of the garments worn by them. While such a diversity had its disadvantages, yet it afforded an opportunity to observe and compare a number of patterns, and thus to select the best features in striving for a uniform style and length.

How this was done is related by Elder J. H. Waggoner.

[12] At his request the physicians at the Institute named a number of its inmates whose dresses they considered the best in make and appearance. He then “measured the height of twelve, with the distance of their dresses from the floor. They varied in height from five feet to five feet seven inches, and the distance of the dresses from the floor was from 8 to 10 1/2 inches. The medium, nine inches, was decided to be the right distance, and is adopted as the standard.”—*Ibid.*

It was the style of costume thus adopted at the Health Reform Institute that had become the prevailing pattern used not only by Seventh-day Adventist women there, but among the churches.

However, Mrs. White did not unduly urge the adoption of the dress reform. “None need fear,” she wrote, “that I shall make dress reform one of my principal subjects as we travel from place to place.... I shall urge none and condemn none. This is not the work assigned me.”—[Testimonies for the Church 1:523](#).

## Chapter 17—Dress Discussed in the Churches

The ministers, as they visited the churches, regarded the newly adopted healthful dress as an important feature of the health reform, and gave it a place in their discourses. As they reported their work, they frequently mentioned the favorable reception of this portion of their message. Hence, Elder D. M. Canright, in commenting on a special meeting in Portland, Maine, wrote:

“The modesty of the short dress is not the smallest thing to be considered.... With the reform dress on, all exposure is entirely avoided. After seeing it worn, I think it is the most modest dress I have ever seen, and I am not alone in this opinion.

“All these things were freely talked over here. Nearly all decided in favor of it, and other had but very slight objections to it.... Most of the sisters resolved as soon as consistent to adopt it. My wife, who wears one, has assisted them in preparing their dresses. They have adopted the health reform quite thoroughly.”—[The Review and Herald, June 18, 1867](#).

For about four years or more considerable was written in our denominational publications about the advantages accruing from the consistent use of the health dress. Many willingly and gladly adapted their garb to conform with the principles of health as well as of modesty, which prompted the designing of the “health reform dress.” But its acceptance was not general, and there was opposition and criticism. Some, forgetting “that none were to be compelled to wear the reform dress,” sought to control others’ conscience by their own. “With extremists, this reform seemed to constitute the sum and substance of their religion. It was the theme of conversation and the burden of their hearts.... Instead of prizing the dress for its real advantages, they seemed to be proud of its singularity.” So wrote

Mrs. White in 1881 in answer to the question, “why has this dress been laid aside?” And she continued:

“To those who put it on reluctantly, from a sense of duty, it became a grievous yoke. Still others, who were apparently the most zealous reformers, manifested a sad lack of order and neatness in their dress.”—[Testimonies for the Church 4:636](#).

Consequently, “because that which was given as a blessing was turned into a curse, the burden of advocating the reform dress was removed.”—*Ms 167*, 1897. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Endnotes

Note: Some may ask, “Does the Lord ever lower His standards to suit people’s tastes or ways?” Elder G. I. Butler, in speaking of the reform dress, answers this question as follows:

“The Lord does accommodate His requirements to people’s ways, even when He would prefer they should do some other and better way. Though He does not always do it, or do it concerning some of His requirements, or generally do it, yet in matters of lesser moment, and of expediency where He has recommended a better way, He sometimes permits them to follow their own choice, though it always proves less beneficial to them than if they had done as He directed. We propose to prove this too plainly for denial.”

Several instances are cited, such as:

God’s provision for flesh food for Israel when they murmured because of the manna (see [Numbers 11](#)), and His giving Israel a king when they requested it, although such was not God’s original design (see [1 Samuel 8](#)).]

## Chapter 18—“Adopt a Simple, Unadorned Dress”

Nevertheless, she still urged that Seventh-day Adventist women “adopt a simple, unadorned dress of modest length,” and suggested [13] “another, less objectionable style.” This consisted of “a plain sack or loose-fitting basque, and skirt, the latter short enough to avoid the mud and filth of the streets.” It was to be “free from needless trimmings, free from looped-up, tied back overskirts.”—[Testimonies for the Church 4:640](#).

Such a dress Mrs. White personally wore during her later life, but she deplored any attempt to urge a uniform style upon others. When in later years a few conscientious sisters in the faith felt that a move should be made to restore the “reform dress,” and to agitate for its general adoption, she earnestly counseled against this. She sought to correct a mistaken impression, saying:

“Some have supposed that the very pattern given was the pattern that all were to adopt. This is not so. But something as simple as this would be the best we could adopt under the circumstances. No one precise style has been given me as the exact rule to guide in all their dress.”—[Letter 19, 1897](#).

By this time, prevailing styles had changed and were more sensible and healthful, and there was no reason for departing widely from established custom in the matter of dress. In view of this fact, Mrs. White spoke decidedly against an issue “to divert the minds of the people and get them into controversy over the subject of dress,” and she counseled:

“Let our sisters dress plainly, as many do, having the dress of good material, durable, modest, appropriate for this age, and let not the dress question fill the mind.”—*Ibid.*