

Why Does the Pastor Wear a White Robe?

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*For Aaron's sons you shall make tunics and sashes and headbands;
you shall make them for glory and beauty.*

— Exodus 28:40

The minister officiating in Christian worship ought to be dressed in a way that identifies him as the representative and spokesman of Jesus Christ. This is his calling and the congregation should be visually reminded of his responsibilities and place in the Sunday service. Traditionally, this means that the minister wears a white tunic or robe. These two sentences will likely raise all sorts of questions. Is this biblical? Or is this something that has just always been done that way? Isn't this too "Catholic"? Does the robe mean that the pastor is better than me? Closer to God than I am? Is he a priest? Why does the pastor lead the entire worship service anyway? These are the kinds of questions that I will attempt to answer in this little pamphlet.

Office Over Personality

First, the white robe, among other things, helps emphasize the *office* of the pastor and de-emphasize the *personality* of the man in the pulpit. Sometimes it is hard to be led in worship by an elder or pastor who is a good friend or a peer or even (especially) one who is younger. To help us get over this feeling, the church has traditionally placed special robes on her ministers when they conduct worship. This helps the people to remember that it is not just good old Jeff Meyers up there; rather, the Lord's ordained minister is leading us into God's presence and speaking God's Word to us. Strictly speaking, the worship service is not conducted by Jeff Meyers anyway, but by the robe of office that Jeff Meyers happens to be filling at the current time. We submit to the office, not to the man, during worship. (The concept of submission to church office is eminently biblical: Acts 20:17, 28-35; 1 Cor. 12:28; 16:16; Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Thess 5:12, 13; 1 Tim. 3:1ff; 4:14; 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17; & 1 Pet. 5:1-7).

These truths are reinforced when the pastor wears something that reminds the people of his special calling on the Lord's Day. In the Bible clothing and calling are often connected; a person's calling or office, together with whatever authority is connected with the office, is often visually symbolized by the clothing the man wears (Gen. 9:20-27; 39:1-13; 37: 3-11, 23; 41:1-44; all of the references in Exodus and Leviticus to the clothing of the priests; 1 Sam. 2:19; 15:27; 18:4; 24:4, 5, 11, 14; Ezra 9:3-5; Esther 8:15; Isa. 22:21; Jonah 3:6; Matt. 22:11ff.; 27:31; Mark 16:5; Luke 15:22; Rev. 1:13; 4:4; 6:11; 19:13, 16). The purpose of the robe is to cover the man and accent his God-ordained office or calling.

From the Reformation until comparatively recently Presbyterian ministers wore robes or some dress of office when serving in the sanctuary. The biblical support for this is straightforward enough. A. "And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty" (Exod. 28:2). This is the only rationale ever provided (i.e. these are not vestments in the traditional sense). Would you want the contrary: your minister, as he is leading worship and preaching God's Word, to be without dignity and honor (again v. 40)? B. When is it worn? See Exodus 35:19 and 39:1. C. These are timeless considerations and have usually been thought to be so in the history of the church (Robert S. Rayburn, "Worship From the Whole Bible," in *The Second Annual Conference on Worship: The Theology and Music of Reformed Worship*, February 23-25, 1996 [Nashville, TN: Covenant Presbyterian Church, 1996], p. 25).

Putting the Minister in His Place

Second, the minister who leads the worship plays a *symbolic* role during worship. When he leads the congregation in prayer before God, he symbolizes Christ leading the church in prayer before the Father. When he reads and preaches the Word, he symbolizes Christ, the Husband, speaking to his holy Bride (which is, by the way, one of the main reasons why women cannot be pastors: they cannot publicly symbolize Christ the Husband to his bride, the church, 1 Cor. 11:2-10; 14:33-38; Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Tim. 2:11-15). When the minister baptizes he symbolizes and represents Jesus who baptizes by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; John 1:33; 1 Cor. 12:13). When the pastor stands behind the Lord's Table he serves bread and wine on behalf of Christ (Luke 22:26-27; John 13:15; Rev. 3:20). Of course, we might reverse this way of speaking and say that Jesus speaks, baptizes, and serves at the Table by means of his ordained Ministry.

The symbolic, representative role of the pastor in corporate worship is crucial. The pastor acts and speaks for Christ to his Church. When this symbolic dimension of the pastoral office is lost strange conceptions take its place. Without this understanding the reasons for differentiating the minister from the people may become bizarre. One minister recently told his congregation that the only reason he is up front and leading the congregation on Sunday morning is because "I am farther along in my walk with Jesus" than the rest of the congregation. Oh, really? How does one gauge who is walking closest to Jesus? It seems rather presumptuous for a forty-year old man to claim spiritual superiority over the grandmothers and grandfathers in his congregation. Furthermore, if liturgical leadership is tied to subjective spirituality, then it may be appropriate to have a different man or woman lead worship every week. After all, someone may have spiritually raced past the pastor during the week. How does one measure and determine which member is farthest along and therefore qualified to be up front every week?

In contrast to this ridiculous notion, the Christian church has always ordained men to speak and act for Jesus Christ in an official capacity. To be sure, they ought to be men of mature spirituality, but their ministry is not entirely based on this. Many members of the congregation are often older, wiser, and more mature than their pastor. Nevertheless, the minister is called to serve them as the representative of Jesus Christ. The

robe need not set him *above* the congregation, but only apart from them because of his unique office as pastor during the Lord's Day worship service. Here is what the French Calvinist theologian Richard Paquier says about this:

It is natural that the man who officiates in the worship of the Church be clothed in a manner corresponding to the task assigned to him and expressing visibly what he does. Moreover, whoever leads in the act of worship does not perform as a private party but as a minister of the church; he is the representative of the community and the spokesman of the Lord. Hence, an especially prescribed robe, a sort of ecclesiastical "uniform," is useful for reminding both the faithful and himself that in this act he is not Mr. So-and-so, but a minister of the church in the midst of a multitude of others (*Dynamics of Worship: Foundations and Uses of Liturgy* [Fortress Press, 1967], p. 138).

Paquier goes on to insist that the minister wear a white, not black robe. The traditional black Genevan gown worn by so many traditional Presbyterians is an academic gown. Today it is even worn by secular judges. The minister, however, does not demand respect or a hearing because of his academic credentials. Furthermore, the corporate worship of God's people is not the place for pastors to show off their academic achievements by wearing academic doctoral chevrons on their Genevan Gowns. A simple white robe is sufficient. After all, the Bible says, "Let your garments be always white" (Eccl. 9:8). Here are Paquier's strong words:

The Genevan gown, this anti-liturgical, secular vestment, which appears in the color of the shades of darkness, this clothing which is comparable to the sack cloth and ashes of mourning in the old covenant, is the negation of the right of the church to rejoice and be consoled in the presence of the heavenly Bridegroom. Perhaps for the synagogue, in its tribulation, to wear such a vestment would be the normal thing. But in modern Protestantism it is a depressing sign that we are not more aware of the nuptial joy of the Eucharist and that we do not believe in the victorious struggle Christ led against the world (*Dynamics of Worship*, p. 138).

Businessman or Minister of the Word?

Third, think about who the pastor is and what he is doing. The pastor is not a businessman. He is not the CEO of the ecclesiastical corporation. I always feel a little uncomfortable in a starched shirt, suit and tie. It tends to contribute toward a very real problem in our Presbyterian churches—we tend to attract upper-middle class people. Upper middle class people are comfortable around a pastor whose uniform is a suit and tie. People in other economic strata, however, sometimes find it hard to relate to a pastor who dresses like and acts like a country-club capitalist. When I dress like this I often sense that what I wear erects unfortunate barriers in certain situations.

Just because a congregation doesn't have its pastor wear a robe doesn't mean that they escape the idea of a uniform. In most American Protestant churches, for example, there is an expectation that the pastor dress conservatively, with a black or dark suit, a white starched shirt, a conservative necktie (no Mickey Mouse ties!), etc. In our culture

this is the weekday *uniform* of a lawyer or middle to upper management businessman. This has become *de facto* the American Evangelical clerical garb. I think this “uniform” often communicates precisely the wrong message in our churches and the communities in which we minister. Our pastors too often seek to conform to the patterns and symbols of authority prevalent in American culture. It is simply not possible to escape the symbolism of clothing. When the minister of the Word wears a robe, it helps to focus the congregation on the work of Christ and the Apostles, because the minister has no authority outside of his connection to them.

Reactionary Reasons

I should answer some possible objections. Some might think that white robes smack too much of Roman Catholicism. Protestants may easily overreact to anything that looks or sounds like Catholicism. But even though the Roman Catholics are wrong in many areas, we need to be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. Just because Roman Catholics do something does not automatically make it wrong or undesirable. Reformed pastors in the past actually wore uniforms of some kind not just in worship, but during the week as well. That holds true for continental Reformed churches and even for many of the English Puritans. Pictures and portraits that we have of these pastors show them in clerical or academic garb.

Take for example the painting on the cover of James Bannerman’s *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974). James Bannerman was one of the most respected Scottish apologists for the Presbyterian form of government. You might call him a super-Presbyterian. The painting on the cover of this volume is by John Lorimer, and it is called “The Ordination of Elders.” The minister in the picture is wearing a black gown, and he also has a peculiar collar—you’ve probably seen pictures of these before—with two white tabs sticking out from it. No one else is dressed that way in the service. Scottish Presbyterian ministers, who traditionally have been fiercely anti-Catholic, have historically worn clerical uniforms. There is nothing characteristically Roman Catholic about pastors wearing distinctive clothing during the worship service.

Formality in Worship

A second objection: the formality will turn people off. Years ago, before I began wearing a robe, a visitor to our church (from another denomination) commented on the beauty and solemnity of the service, but then asked why the pastor was wearing a suit and tie rather than a robe. She said that looking at the pastor in his own suit and tie was awkward and distracting. It seemed too casual. Why didn’t he wear something appropriate to his calling and duties on Sunday morning? Modern people often mistakenly think that avoiding formality and ceremony is evidence of simple faith and humility. C. S. Lewis said, “The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the worshiper’s inability to forget *himself* in the rite, and his readiness to spoil for everyone else the proper place of ritual.”

Since for Americans there is often an in-built negative reaction to any mention of formality in worship, proper attention should be paid to passages like Hebrews 13 and

Revelation 4-5. Hebrews 13:22-24 describes a New Covenant corporate, Lord's Day worship service (contrasted with the Old Covenant worship of vs. 18-21). When the church gathers on the Lord's Day she enters into heaven (by faith) to worship God with all of the angelic host and departed saints. It is as if the roof of the church building is torn off when the pastor calls the people to worship. Notice that the worshipers are all *organized* around the throne of God. The worship service does not merely provide an opportunity for private devotional experiences. The church is a "city" and a "joyous assembly" or "festal array" (v. 22). The word translated "festal assembly" denotes an assembly of people gathered for a formal celebration or festival.

Later, when we are privileged with the Apostle John in the book of Revelation to peek into heaven, how is the worship conducted? What kind of worship is modeled for us in heaven? There are all kinds of liturgical lessons to be learned here. I only wish to highlight one aspect: the heavenly service is liturgical and formal. According to Revelation 4-5, heavenly worship is a formal, coordinated activity. There are cooperative, formal responses by groups of worshipers. Everybody responds *together* with the same words. There are no individual displays of spirituality. Angels, elders, and creatures respond antiphonally with responses that must have been learned! They have been trained. There is a pre-arranged *form* to the worship. They have rehearsed this event, and they are dressed accordingly (Rev. 4:4). In other words, heavenly, Spirit-guided worship is liturgical and formal (1 Cor. 14:26-33).

There is more than a little bit of irony in the fact that American Christians love the formality of weddings, but want informal cheeky weekly worship services. It seems we want to honor our sons and daughters with a beautiful service. But when it comes to the foretaste of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and the honor of the Bride of Christ we have little interest. Why is it that pastors wear robes during wedding services and not during Lord's Day worship services? At weddings the robe adds to the solemnity and glory of the event. The same ought to be true on the Lord's Day. Are wedding services more important than Sunday services? No, just the opposite. The Lord's Day worship service ought to be just as (or more) glorious and formal as a wedding. The robe adds dignity and reverence to our services; it glorifies and beautifies the representative of Christ (Exod. 28:1).

Is the Robe a Barrier or Bridge?

Others object that the robe will make the pastor unapproachable. Not so. It makes him *more* approachable *in his capacity as pastor*. It forces "Jeff Meyers" to recede and brings forward the office of pastor. The robe highlights the pastor's office and role. In fact, people may be more apt to address the pastor with spiritual questions and concerns. They will be reminded that Jeff is their pastor, the one whom Christ has given them as a gift (Eph. 4:8-13)!

After all, people want to be able to trust their pastors. They want their pastors to be different. People need to be able to place some kind of secondary confidence in the office of the pastor and elder (our *primary* confidence, of course, is in God's Word!). *An outward sign of that office helps people*. This is not too difficult to prove. Think about

doctors, nurses, judges, and policemen. People want them to wear something distinctive that reminds them of their expertise or calling. We are helped when our doctor wears a white uniform. The uniform assists us in remembering that we can place some confidence in him. This is his calling. The uniform reminds us of his training and commitment. The same ought to be true with our pastors.

Biblical teaching as a whole links clothing and calling. You are what you wear or you wear what you are. Just as judges, physicians, policemen, and auto mechanics wear clothing that befits their calling, so should the pastor, especially when he is performing the specific duties of his office during the Lord's Day worship service. Again, Rayburn's comments are helpful: "We do not obey them or listen to them [judges, mayors, congressmen, or policemen] as individuals, or because of their personal virtue or opinions. But because they hold office. The judge speaks for the law and the minister speaks for God! The man himself should fade into the background and the office come to the fore! What has happened over the last generation has been the reverse. The man has come to the fore and the office has been in full retreat from the view of the congregation."

In Christian worship, biblically and historically, the ministers wear distinctive garments to testify to their *office* as representatives of Christ. The robe serves to hide the *personality* of the man and highlight his special *calling*. The pastor represents Christ, the Husband, to the church, his bride. When the pastor leads worship, the robe helps remind us that it is not "my friend Jeff" up front. God in Christ calls us to worship, to confess, to hear his word, to give, etc., and he does so by means of his ordained servant. The pastor does not act for himself, but for Christ. A judge or a policeman wears a uniform because he does not act for himself.

The pastor's authority, therefore, does not derive from his economic or social status (expensive suits and starched shirts). It does not derive from his natural charisma (impressive hair or flashing dark eyes). It most certainly does not derive from the fact that he looks and acts like other leaders in the world (business suits), even though this is what happens too often in America. Therefore, by placing a robe on the minister during the Divine Service we are 1) taking a stand against the current American evangelical church's tendency to transform the Pastorate into something like an executive position (the CEO of the church!) by mimicking American corporate big business, and 2) seeking to bring our practice in line with what the Bible implies, back in line with what the historic Church has practiced, and in line with what other Reformed churches do worldwide.