

Sunday Morning Costumes Covering Up the Problem Chapter 6

“Beware of [those] who like to walk around in long robes.” – Jesus Christ in Luke 20:46, NASB

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.” - Paul of Tarsus in Colossians 2:8

EVERY SUNDAY MORNING, millions of Protestants throughout the world put on their best clothes to attend Sunday morning church. But no one seems to question why. Hundreds of thousands of pastors wear special garb that separates them from their congregants. And no one seems to care.

Admittedly the dress has become more casual in a number of churches over the past few decades. A person dressed in denim can walk into the sanctuaries of many churches today without getting dirty looks. Yet dressing up for church is still a common practice in many churches. In this chapter, we will explore the origin of “dressing up” for church. We will also trace the roots of the clergy’s special attire.

DRESSING UP FOR CHURCH

The practice of dressing up for church is a relatively recent phenomenon. It began in the late-eighteenth century with the Industrial Revolution, and it became widespread in the mid-nineteenth century. Before this time, “dressing up” for social events was known only among the very wealthy. The reason was simple, Only the well-to-do aristocrats of society could afford nice clothing! Common folks had only two sets of clothes: work clothes for laboring in the field and less tattered clothing for going into town.

Dressing up for any occasion was only an option for wealthiest nobility. From medieval times until the eighteenth century, dress was a clear marker of one’s social class. In places like England, poor people were actually forbidden to wear the clothing of the “better” people.

This changed with the invention of mass textile manufacturing and the development of urban society. Fine clothes became more affordable to the common people. The middle class was born, and those within it were able to emulate the envied aristocracy. For the first time, the middle class could distinguish themselves from the peasants. To demonstrate their newly improved status, they could now “dress up” for social events just like the well-to-do.”

Some Christian groups in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries resisted this cultural trend. John Wesley wrote against wearing expensive or flashy clothing. The early Methodists so resisted the idea of dressing up for church that they turned away anyone who wore expensive clothing to their meetings. The early Baptists also condemned fine clothing, teaching that it separated the rich from the poor.

Despite these protests, mainstream Christians began wearing fine clothes whenever they could. The growing middle class prospered, desiring bigger homes, larger church buildings, and fancier clothing. As the Victorian enculturation of the middle class grew, fancier church buildings began to draw more influential people in society.

This all came to a head when in 1843, Horace Bushnell, an influential Congregational minister in Connecticut, published an essay called "Taste and Fashion." In it, Bushnell argued that sophistication and refinement were attributes of God and that Christians should emulate them. Thus was born the idea of dressing up for church to honor God. Church members now worshipped in elaborately decorated buildings sporting their formal clothes to honor God.

In 1846, a Virginia Presbyterian named William Henry Foote wrote that “a church-going people are a dress loving people.” This statement simply expressed the formal dress ritual that mainstream Christians had adopted when going to church. The trend was so powerful that by the 1850s, even the “formal-dress-resistant” Methodists got absorbed by it. And they, too, began wearing their Sunday best to church.

Accordingly, as with virtually every other accepted church practice, dressing up for church is the result of Christians being influenced by their surrounding culture. Today, many Christians “suit up” for Sunday morning church without ever asking why. But now you know the story behind this mindless custom.

It is purely the result of nineteenth-century middle-class efforts to become like their wealthy aristocrat contemporaries, showing off their improved status by their clothing. (This effort was also helped along by Victorian notions of respectability.) It has nothing to do with the Bible, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit.

SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT?

What's the big deal about "dressing up" for church? It is hardly a burning issue. However, it is what dressing up for church represents that is the burning issue.

First, it reflects the false division between the secular and the sacred. To think that God cares one whit if you wear dressy threads on Sunday to "meet Him" is a violation of the New Covenant. We have access to God's presence at all times and in all circumstances. Does He really expect His people to dress up for a beauty pageant on Sunday morning?

Second, wearing attractive, flashy clothes on Sunday morning screams out an embarrassing message: that church is the place where Christians hide their real selves and "dress them up" to look nice and pretty. Think about it, Wearing your Sunday best for church is little more than image management. It gives the house of God all the elements of a stage show: costumes, makeup, props, lighting, ushers, special music, master of ceremonies, performance, and the featured program.

Dressing up for church violates the reality that the church is made up of real people with messy problems-real people who may have gotten into a major-league bickering match with their spouses just before they drove into the parking lot and put on colossal smiles to cover it up!

Wearing our “Sunday best” conceals a basic underlying problem. It fosters the illusion that we are somehow “good” because we are dressing up for God. It is a study in pretense that is dehumanizing and constitutes a false witness to the world.

Let’s face it. As fallen humans, we are seldom willing to appear to be what we really are. We almost always rely on our performance or dress to give people a certain impression of what we want them to believe we are. All of this differs markedly from simplicity that marked the early church.

Third, dressing up for church smacks against the primitive simplicity that was the sustaining hallmark of the early church. The first-century Christians did not “Dress up” to attend church meetings. They met in the simplicity of living rooms. They did not dress to exhibit their social class. In fact, the early Christians made concrete efforts to show their absolute disdain for social class distinctions.

In the church, all social and racial distinctions are erased. The early Christians knew well that they were a new species on this planet. For this reason, James levels a rebuke to those believers who were treating the rich saints better than the poor saints. He boldly reproves the rich for dressing differently from the poor.

And yet, many Christians are under the false delusion that it is “irreverent” to dress in formal clothing when attending a Sunday morning church service. This is not dissimilar to how the Scribes and the Pharisees accused the Lord and His disciples of being irreverent for not following the tradition of the elders (Mark 7:1-13).

In short, to say that the Lord expects His people to dress in fine clothing when the church gathers is to add to the Scriptures and speak where God has not spoken. Such a practice is human tradition at its best.

THE GARB OF THE CLERGY

Let's now shift gears and look at the development of the clergy attire. Christian clergy did not dress differently from the common people until the coming of Constantine.

Contrary to popular opinion, clergy apparel (including the "ecclesiastical vestments" of the high church tradition) did not originate with the priestly dress of the Old Testament. It rather has its origin in the secular dress of the Greco-Roman world.

Here is the story: Clement of Alexandria argued that the clergy should wear better garments than the laity. (By this time the church liturgy was regarded as a formal event.) Clement said that the minister's clothes should be "simple" and "white."

White was the color of the clergy for centuries. This custom appears to have been borrowed from the pagan philosopher Plato who wrote that “white was the color of the gods.” In this regard, both Clement and Tertullian felt that dyed colors were displeasing to the Lord.

With the coming of Constantine, distinctions between bishop, priest, and deacon began to take root. When Constantine moved his court to Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople in AD 330, the official Roman dress was gradually adopted by the priests and deacons. The clergy were now identified by their garb, which matched that of secular officials.

After the Germanic conquests of the Roman Empire from the fourth century onward, fashions to secular dress changed. The flowing garments of the Romans gave way to the short tunics of the Goths. But the clergy, wishing to remain distinct from the laity, continued to wear the archaic Roman costumes.

The clergy wore these outdated garments during the church services following the model of the secular court ritual. When laymen adopted the new style of dress, the clergy believed that such dress was “worldly” and “barbarian.” They retained what they considered to be “civilized” dress. And this is what became the clerical attire. This practice was supported by theologians of the day. For example, Jerome (ca. 342-420) remarked that the clergy should never enter into the sanctuary wearing everyday garments.

From the fifth century onward, bishops wore purple. In the sixth and seventh centuries, clergy garb became more elaborate and costly. By the Middle Ages, their clothing acquired mystical and symbolic meanings. Special vestments were spawned around the sixth and seventh centuries. And there grew up the custom of keeping a special set of garments in the vestry to put over one’s street clothes.

During the seventh and eighth centuries, the vestments were accepted as sacred objects inherited from the robes of Levitical priests in the Old Testament. (This was a rationalization to justify the practice.) By the twelfth century, the clergy also began wearing street clothes that distinguished them from everyone else.

WHAT THE REFORMATION CHANGED

During the Reformation, the break with tradition and clerical vestments was slow and gradual. In the place of the clergy vestments, the Reformers adopted the scholar's black gown. It was also known as the philosopher's cloak, as it had been worn by philosophers in the fourth and fifth centuries. So prevalent was the new clerical garb that the black gown of the secular scholar became the garment of the Protestant pastor.

The Lutheran pastor wore his long black gown in the streets. He also wore a round "ruff" around his neck that grew larger with time. It grew so large that by the seventeenth century the ruff was called "the millstone ruff." (The ruff is still worn in some Lutheran churches today.)

Interestingly, however, the Reformers still retained the clerical vestments. The Protestant pastor wore them when he administered denominations. Just like Catholic priests, many pastors will put on their clerical robes before lifting the bread and the cup.

The garb of the Reformed pastor (the black gown) symbolized his spiritual authority. This trend continued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pastors always wore dark clothing, preferably black. (This was the traditional color for “professionals” such as lawyers and doctors during the sixteenth century.)

Black soon became the color of every minister in every branch of the church. The black scholar’s gown eventually evolved into the “frock coat” of the 1940s. The frock coat was later replaced by the black or grey “lounge suit” of the twentieth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many clergymen wore white collars with a tie. In fact, it was considered highly improper for a clergyman to appear without a tie. Low church clergy (Baptists, Pentecostals, etc.) wore the collar and necktie. High church clergy (Anglicans, Episcopalians, Lutherans, etc.) adopted the clerical collar—often dubbed the “dog collar.”

The origin of the clerical collar goes back to 1865. It was not a catholic invention as is popularly believed. It was invented by the Anglicans. Priests in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries traditionally wore black cassocks (floor-length garments with collars that stood straight up) over white garments (sometimes called the alb).

In other words, they wore a black collar with white in the middle. The clerical collar was simply a removable version of the collar. It was invented so that priests, both Anglican and Catholic, could slip it over their street clothes and be recognized as “men of God” in any place!

Today, it is the dark suit with a tie that is the standard attire of most Protestant pastors. Many pastors would not be caught dead without it! Some Protestant pastors wear the clergy collar as well. The collar is the unmistakable symbol that the person wearing it is a clergyman.

IS SPECIAL CLERGY ATTIRE HARMFUL?

A specially attired clergy is an affront to the spiritual principles that govern the house of God. It strikes at the heart of the church by separating God's people into two classes: "Professional" and "nonprofessional."

Like "dressing up" for church, clerical clothing-whether it be the elaborate vestments of the "high church" minister or the dark suit of the evangelical pastor-is rooted in worldly culture. The distinctive garb of the clergy goes back to the fourth century when clergymen adopted the dress of Roman secular officials.

The Lord Jesus and His disciples knew nothing of wearing special clothing to impress God or to distinguish themselves from God's people. Wearing special garb for religious purposes was rather a characteristic of the Scribes and Pharisees. And neither Scribe nor Pharisee could escape the Lord's penetrating gaze when He said, "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets" (Luke 20:46, niv)