



WORSHIP DRESS CODE¹

It can be challenging for traditional churches to think through long engrained church practices. One of those practices in the West is the idea of “wearing one’s Sunday best.” This has traditionally referred to the essential requirement that men wear a suit and tie to church services and ladies their best dresses. The idea behind the thinking was honorable—to maintain a high view of public worship. “What would you wear,” follows the reasoning, “if you had an audience with the President or with the Queen?”

The expectation, however, creates a tension in terms of seeking to be an open community to which unchurched visitors feel welcome to attach themselves. Suits and ties are not necessarily owned these days, and in areas of poverty they cannot be afforded.

Insisting, then, that we not diminish a high view of worship—the worship of God is the greatest privilege we have as mortals—how might we justify biblically a more relaxed dress code in public worship? This is an important question to ask since any change of practice in church life becomes a teaching moment.

Theologically, the change may be explained in terms of the biblical teaching of Christian liberty. As the Bible nowhere mandates the specific style of clothing to be worn in worship (other than for the priesthood in the Tabernacle—an old covenant order now obsolete), neither should we. Nowhere do we read, for instance, that worship attendees wore special Sabbath/Lord’s day robes to enter the synagogue or first-century church. At no point in the qualifications of leadership is the example of the elders and deacons attached to their dress in worship. When worshipers in biblical

times, and elders and deacons in particular, gave their best to the Lord, they did so in terms of the matters of the heart. That was their concentration. God, we tend to forget, looks on the heart and not on the outward appearance (1 Sam. 16:7).

Now, what is in the heart inevitably impacts how we approach worship. Whereas one heart in poor shape may, through indiscipline, dress slovenly and uncleanly, another more religious than Christian may dress up to impress. We have tended to frown on the former, but not on the latter. Yet, Scripture likely expresses more disapproval of the person well-dressed in worship than the person dressed poorly (Matt. 23:5; James 2:1–7). This observation, however, is not to press the issue. It is, rather, to afford individual liberty to decide the matter according to one’s own personal conviction. An usher, elder, or deacon may go without a coat and tie, but they are not instructed to. Let each person decide the matter in accordance with his own understanding and preference.

This freedom expresses the balance of Scripture and is more easily worn the further we mature in Christ (Rom. 14:1–23). It must be a biblical rather than a cultural conservatism which must lie at the heart of our churches. More flexibility in dress code, being built on a biblical understanding of Christian liberty, is merely one application of biblical conservatism.

Practically, the change in understanding of worship dress code may be explained in terms of the advancement of the ministry of the church. God affords us liberty in Scripture not ultimately for our personal comfort, but for the service of others. Whereas some fairly conclude from a heart right with God that the giving of our best in worship includes dressing our smartest, others conclude that

¹ This piece was first written for the congregation of Seventh Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, on behalf of the Consistory. It is here modestly editing for the sake of a broader readership.



dressing casually (but always presentably) is the best way we can serve visitors to worship, whether Christian visitors unaccustomed to more traditional practices and those new to church life.

While Lord's Day worship is not first and foremost for the person on the street, but for the person in the pew—public worship entailing the assembly of God's called out ones (hence *ekklesia*)—nevertheless, it is evident that the early Christians were conscious of how they came across to unconverted visitors to worship (1 Cor. 14:16–17, 22–25). They understood that while purity of heart is essential in worship, there are nonessentials in regard to which we must “try to please everyone in everything,” adding, “not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved” (1 Cor. 10:33).

If this is still an issue for you, pray for a response guided by Scripture and influenced by grace. Whatever your response, there should arise from it a reminder of the high view the Bible places on worship on the one hand and on the liberty of the Christian on the other. These two concerns find their common ground not in the fashions we wear to worship, but in ensuring we come to worship in clean, modest, and presentable dress, esteeming our neighbor better than ourselves and thinking the best of their motivation in his or her choice of clothing (formal or casual).

At the end of the day, our worship to God and our service to our neighbor are worthless if our hearts are not right before God. It is their state rather than the dress we wear which governs the quality of the welcome we accord visitors to worship. A relatable dress sense may be undermined by a cold or indifferent heart, while a dress sense out of the ordinary to the visitor may quickly be overcome by an authentic welcome and a loving heart.

Paul's words are a fitting way to end: “Brothers do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature” (1 Cor. 14:20).