

Clothing Matters: What We Wear to Church

Why what we put on may be more important than we think.

By Duane Litfin, in "Christianity Today" January 11, 2012

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The so-called "worship wars" of recent years may have produced a winner. Many congregations remain divided between traditional and contemporary styles, but in most places the contemporary appears to have gained the upper hand.

What's more, our worship services have become increasingly relaxed and informal affairs. You can see it in what we wear. Church for today's worshipers is not a dress-up event. Whatever is clean and comfortable seems sufficient. Christian students in particular have been taught by their seniors — or has it been the reverse?— that when it comes to church, attire doesn't much matter. They understand there is nothing particularly spiritual about a dress or a coat and tie. God is scarcely impressed by such things. "People look at the outward appearance," we are reminded, "but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

I do not intend to wade into the broader debate over worship styles; that's a different discussion. In any case, I'm content with either traditional or contemporary if they're done well. But I do wish to raise a question about this last notion: namely, that when it comes to public worship, our clothing

doesn't matter. This common assumption, it seems to me, deserves more scrutiny than it typically receives.

Over the last several generations, American attire in general has lurched dramatically toward the informal. A feature that quickly dates an old photograph, for instance, is the men wearing fedoras; most today wouldn't know where to find one. Those who are old enough can remember when travelers got spiffed up to board an airplane. Today's travelers think nothing of flying in duds they might wear to the gym. Or consider the rise of the term "business casual." In most parts of the country, though not all, even the corporate setting has grown less formal.

These changes are part of a broad shift toward the convenient and comfortable. It's a shift we see on display every week in our worship services. In many churches casual wear is *de rigueur*. It's easy to imagine how one might look over-dressed there, but less easy, short of immodesty, to imagine being under-dressed. Jeans or shorts, tee shirts or tank tops, flip-flops or sandals: these draw scarcely any attention, while full dresses or a suit and tie appear strangely out of place. Relaxed, even ruffled informality is in; suiting up in our "Sunday best" is out. The question I want to raise here is, *What should we make of this shift in worship attire?*

Many seem convinced it's a good thing, because, again, it's the heart that counts. Yet precisely for this reason—because it's the heart that counts—I want to suggest that what we wear in our public worship may matter more than we think. To grasp this connection, let us draw on some helpful insights from the field of communication.

Verbal and Nonverbal

Verbal behavior refers to all those ways we use language to communicate: speaking, writing, sign language, etc. Nonverbal behavior focuses on all those ways we communicate without words: facial expression, gesture, posture, eye behavior, vocal inflection ("paralanguage"), our use of space ("proxemics"), or touch behavior. Some experts estimate that in our everyday relationships only a small percentage of what we communicate is conveyed via verbal channels. The rest is conveyed nonverbally.

Of special interest here is that avenue of nonverbal communication we will call physical appearance and dress. Here are seven observations drawn from the literature on this aspect of our human interaction:

1. *The wearing of clothing is exclusively a human characteristic.* We share many attributes with other creatures, but the inclination to clothe ourselves is not one of them. Those who know the account of Adam and Eve will understand why this is so. There is a moral and even spiritual dimension to human clothing.
2. *Our clothes serve a variety of practical, social, and cultural functions.* Protection and modesty spring first to mind, but our clothes do far more. We sometimes dress to conceal or deceive. More often our clothes serve to reveal. We use clothing for decoration, for sexual attraction, for self-expression and self-assertion. By our attire we display our gender, our religion, our occupation, our social position, or causes with which we identify (e.g., sports jerseys). Our apparel may express our group membership or our role in society (e.g., company or police uniforms). Many dress to impress, while others choose the reverse: they express their rejection by intentionally flouting accepted clothing norms.
3. *Our clothing is one of our most elemental forms of communication.* Long before our voice is heard, our clothes are transmitting multiple messages. From our attire, others immediately read not only such things as our sex, age, national identity, socio-economic status, and social position, but also our mood, our attitudes, our personality, our interests, and our values.
4. *We constantly make judgments about one another on the basis of clothing.* Common wisdom has it that you can't judge a book by its cover. But this is only partly true; we regularly read one another's covering. What's more, we're better at it than we think. Research suggests that if you stand someone before an audience of strangers and ask them to draw inferences merely on the basis of what they see, the audience's inferences will tend toward consensus, and those inferences will tend to be more or less accurate. Why should this be? We spend our lives making judgments based on appearance and then testing those judgments in our subsequent relationships. In this way, we become rather adept at the process. Judgments based on appearance are scarcely infallible, of course, and we are wise to hold them tentatively. But it's almost impossible to avoid making them in the first place.

5. *Because our clothing is one of the fundamental ways we communicate with others, what we wear is never a purely personal matter.* Our attire exerts a social influence on those around us. One famous study, for example, discovered that unwitting subjects were significantly more willing to jaywalk when following individuals wearing "high status" clothing than when following individuals wearing "low status" clothing. What we wear can shape patterns of communication around us, depending on what messages people are picking up. Consider, for example, the varied cues we send by the way we dress: "I want people to notice me." "I'm very confident." "I want to hide." "I care only about comfort." "I want to look seductive." "I repudiate you and your expectations."
6. *How we dress not only affects others; it also affects us.* This dynamic is often circular: how we feel influences the clothes we put on, and the clothes we put on in turn shape how we feel. Changes of clothes can generate a change of mood; the soldier feels different in his uniform than he does in street clothes. In some settings our choice of attire can make or break us. If we like the way we look for a job interview, for instance, it will tend to strengthen our confidence. We feel better about our chances, as reflected in improved posture, more fluent speech, more dynamic gestures. On the other hand, inappropriate dress can sap our confidence. We have all experienced the uncomfortable effects of feeling under-dressed in a particular social setting.
7. *Much of the social meaning of our clothing is contextual.* The appropriateness of our dress is often dictated by the situation. Dress that would send a given message in one setting might send a very different message in another. Picture, for example, a young woman dressed in hiking boots, sweatshirt, and shorts. Around a campfire the message might be, merely, "I'm ready for the trail." Choosing that same outfit for her aunt's funeral would say something rather different. Regional variations and issues of local dress loom large. Times change, values change, situations change; what was proper ten years ago may not be proper today, or vice versa.

All of the above is why we should not conclude too quickly that because God looks on the heart, what we wear to church doesn't matter. Our internal and external states cannot be so easily disentangled. The fact is, when it comes to how we clothe ourselves, our external appearance is often an

expression of our internal state. Thus our worship attire may matter more than we think.

The Meaning of Worship

What is worship, after all? It's the act of acknowledging and praising God as God; indeed, as *our* God. It is the adoring response of grateful creatures to their Maker. In worship we come before God with awe and reverence, focusing on him in loving contemplation, celebrating him for who he is and what he has done. We willingly bow before him in surrender, delighting in the privilege of extolling his worthiness. In worship we join our small voices with the celestial choirs in a grand chorus magnifying the Creator and declaring his excellencies: his purity, his power, his beauty, his grace, his mercy, his love.

From the beginning, God has called his people to public worship. It's everywhere in the Bible, and with good reason: our corporate worship pleases God. What's more, we need it as well. Everyone who has ever built a campfire knows how quickly lone embers cool and die. But gather those embers and they create a furnace effect that burns hot. Corporate worship is designed to generate that furnace effect in God's people. Those around us warm our spirits, encourage our faith, and hold us up when we're faltering. As Martin Luther famously put it, "At home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through."

"Do not neglect the gathering of yourselves together," says the writer to the Hebrews (10:25). We come to faith as individuals, but Christ places us instantly into his body, and we require that body for the purposes of worship. There are aspects of worship we cannot fulfill alone. The Lord's Table, for example, belongs to the community; celebrate it when you "come together," says the apostle (1 Cor. 11:18, 33). So also baptism, corporate prayer, the public reading of Scripture, the teaching of Scripture, the corporate confession of sin: all these and more are designed for corporate worship.

Worship Pointers

So what sort of clothing might befit such an exalted occasion? Observers in the gallery of the United States Supreme Court are forbidden to wear hats. Out of respect for the importance of what's taking place there, the Court's

firm rule for visitors is, "Inappropriate clothing may not be worn." If this is so for a merely human institution, what might be suitable attire for God-honoring worship?

Readers will be relieved that I have no dress code to propose. Yet the Scriptures do suggest a few pointers. And each of them is concerned, ultimately, with the heart.

The first is derived from God's instructions regarding holiness. The core idea of holiness in both the Old and New Testaments is "set-apartness." Whether it be food, days, vestments, utensils, places, offerings, or God's people themselves, to be holy is to be peculiar, dedicated to the Lord. To sanctify something is to set it apart as special for God. The "unholy" is thus not only what is profane but also what is ordinary or "common." God is holy and he desires his people to be holy. Everything we offer him is to be marked by its holiness. He expects us to demonstrate in every aspect of our relationship to him the special regard he deserves.

A second consideration is the biblical idea of "the firstfruits." As Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke says, this "does not refer to any specific type of thing placed on the altar; rather it is a description of the quality of the offering: the choicest of the fruits, the firstborn" (*An Old Testament Theology*, p. 466). God demands that we give him our best. The people of Malachi's day dishonored the Lord by bringing him inferior worship offerings. They sniffed at God's expectations and said, "What a nuisance this is" (Mal. 1:13). Not surprisingly, God was incensed by their contemptuous, "anything will do" attitude toward worship. "Cursed is the cheat," he warned them, who has a suitable sacrifice but offers up something less. God requires our best in everything we bring him.

A third consideration is costliness. This has nothing to do with dollar amounts. The impoverished widow offered the Lord a tiny sum, but in Christ's estimation it amounted to "more ... than all the others" (Mark 12:41–44). The point here, rather, is our willingness to expend ourselves sacrificially for the Lord's sake. This spirit of sacrifice was famously modeled by King David when he approached Araunah about purchasing his threshing floor as a place of worship (the future site of Solomon's temple, as it turned out). Araunah offered to donate not only the land but also his sledges and yokes for the wood and his oxen for sacrifices. But the king refused his gift. David would not offer to the Lord, he said, that which "cost

me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24). Instead, he bought the land at full price and then dedicated it to the Lord. It was a costly gift, one that proved acceptable to God.

New Testament Worship

That which is special, that which is our best, that which is sacrificial: We may be tempted to think such standards made sense in the context of Israel's ancient worship but have little to do with us. After all, none of us shows up at church on Sunday morning bearing sacrifices.

Or do we?

In the New Testament, the ancient offerings are replaced by the worshipers themselves. Worship is quite literally the act of offering ourselves to God. This was the apostle Paul's point when he urged us "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). When we gather with other believers to "offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb. 13:15), we are offering ourselves to him anew, body and all. It is precisely the sort of wholehearted offering Jesus had in mind when he said that the Father is seeking those who will worship him "in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23–24).

In the Old Testament, the place of worship and everything about it was considered holy. Worshipers were taught to approach that "sacred space" with awe and reverence. Today, God's people, both individually and corporately, do not *visit* that sacred space; they *constitute* that sacred space. Paul instructed the Athenians that God does not live in temples made by human hands (Acts 17:24), but his point was not that God has no earthly dwelling place. God dwells in a temple made with his own hands; he dwells within his people. Their bodies have quite literally become his earthly abode (1 Cor. 3:16–17).

Casual Worship

The question for us, then, is this: When we gather for worship, does this sacred event generate within us any similar sense of "awe and reverence"? As Richard Foster says, when the early believers in Acts met for worship,

they were keenly aware that the veil had been ripped in two and like Moses and Aaron they were entering the Holy of Holies. No intermediaries were needed. They were coming into the awful, glorious, gracious Presence of the living God. They gathered with anticipation, knowing that Christ was present among them and would teach them and touch them with His living power. (Celebration of Discipline, p. 141)

Is this how we come to worship?

A perceptive observer of our contemporary church scene might be forgiven for scratching her head over such a question, wondering whether we have grown oblivious to the significance of our own gathering. How often, she might ask us, do you prepare for Sunday as if it mattered, guarding, for example, Saturday nights so as to be fresh and focused the next morning? How come our pre-service gathering so often sounds more like a bowling alley than a people meeting to offer themselves anew to their God? How is it we are we so susceptible to the lure of personality and entertainment up front, obscuring the God-centered purpose for which we have met? How prevalent is the notion that we can worship just as well at home, or on the golf course, or before a TV screen—or perhaps forfeit worship altogether due to inconvenient weather, the priority of other things, or who may be preaching that week?

I recall hearing one pastor, for example, exhorting members of his summer congregation to join their "no-commitment choir." All it requires, he said, is to show up a little early on Sunday morning. This pastor is a good man with a good church, but also with a common blind spot: he saw no problem in appealing to such low motives in his people, much less bringing God such a substandard, it-will-cost-you-nothing musical offering. Is there anything in the Scriptures to suggest that our inferior worship offerings waft toward heaven with a sweet aroma, "a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God?" (Phil. 4:18)? As one contemporary observer put it, "Too many of us today have got it backwards: we worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship."

What's going on here? Could it be that our delight in the security of our standing before God—that is, that all who have "put on" Christ (Gal. 3:27) stand *fully accepted* in him—has blinded us to a different issue: the acceptability of our *worship offerings*? It would be the cheapest of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" to suppose that because we are

secure in Christ, whatever we bring to God in worship, however inferior or mediocre, pleases him (Eph. 5:10).

Not just anything will do when we come before God. He is still honored by what is holy, what is our best, what is sacrificial. The kingdom to which we have come, says the writer to the Hebrews, requires us to "offer to God *acceptable* worship with reverence and awe," because "our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Heb. 12:28–29, emphasis added). A blasé, casual attitude toward worship may indicate that we have failed to grasp this important point, a sign of our being more conformed to this world" than so transformed in our minds that by testing we are able to discern what is the will of God, what is good and *acceptable* and perfect" (Rom. 12:2, emphasis added).

Worship Attire

And what of our worship attire? We deceive ourselves when we breezily claim that God does not care what we wear to church. God cares about our hearts, and what we wear is often an expression of our hearts. So what does our relaxed worship attire say about us?

A bride would be insulted if we cared so little as to show up for her lovely wedding in cut-offs and sneakers. Instead, we "dress up" for her wedding to express our regard for her and the significance of the event. What, then, are we saying when we see no need to treat our corporate worship with similar or even greater regard?

"Give unto the LORD the glory due his name," says the psalmist; "worship the LORD in the beauty of his holiness" (Ps. 29:2). Surely the "holiness" of our public worship should influence how we dress for the occasion. There is nothing remotely "casual" about the worship taking place in heaven, where appropriate clothing seems to matter (Rev. 7:9–12). What internal disposition are we revealing when we dress no differently for church than we do for a trip to the mall or hanging out with friends around a barbeque grill? Could it be that our casual dress, chosen merely for our own comfort and convenience (that which "cost me nothing"), is a reflection of an equally casual, can't-be-bothered ("what a nuisance this is!") attitude toward worship itself?

Concern for Others

What about those around us? What message is my choice of clothing sending them as we gather for worship?

A few years back a championship team of women's lacrosse players was invited to the White House for a private meeting with the President. When a group photo of the meeting went public, it created quite a stir: Several of the women in the front row were seen to be wearing flip-flops. Their defenders argued that the women should be able to wear whatever they like, that offending grown-ups is a rite of passage for the young, or that the flip-flops were less a statement of rebellion than a desire for comfort. Critics argued that wearing such informal footwear was insulting to the office of the President. Said one, "You would hope that when you were going to meet the commander-in-chief, it was special enough to get dressed up for." This debate went on for days in the blogosphere. But whatever one may think of flip-flops in the Oval Office, the greater significance of this dust-up was that it took place at all. Like it or not, those around us are constantly reading our appearance. Our clothing choices bear inevitable social implications.

Can Christians who gather for worship afford to ignore what their church attire may be saying to those around them? "Let each of you look not only to his own interests," says the apostle, "but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3–4, ESV). We are to be "love one another with brotherly affection," outdoing one another "in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10). Does our choice of clothing communicate to others that this gathering is an important occasion, thereby encouraging them to see it as important as well? Or does it send them in the opposite direction?

We all understand that the wrong clothes can distract our fellow worshipers. Elaborate, showy attire may reflect a prideful, elitist, egocentric display of wealth, status, and power (Mark 12:38; Luke 16:19; James 2:3). Or it may serve as a mask, a facade behind which lurks a very different reality (Matt. 23:27). In this way and others our choice of clothing can be sinful. But this does not render our everyday ("common"), come-as-you-are attire "spiritual" or "honest." If we care for our fellow worshipers as we ought, we will take them into consideration as we dress for worship. We will clothe ourselves in ways that edify them and strengthen their own worship. We will attempt to avoid the nonchalant attitude that says this event is entirely routine; that it merits nothing special from me; that my only consideration in what I choose to wear is what is easiest and most convenient. Such a self-centered attitude is corrosive to a true spirit of worship. Instead, the goal in our choice of

clothing should be to express to the Lord and those around us that this event matters, that I view it as a holy occasion, one which deserves our highest regard. If the first audience for our nonverbal messages is God himself, and secondarily, our fellow worshipers, dress that best suits these first two audiences may also serve a third: outsiders who join our public worship.

Evangelistic gatherings can in many ways be designed to fit the unbelievers we are trying to reach. But this is harder to do with our corporate worship. The church must first shape its worship to honor God, a goal to which all else must be subordinate. But thankfully, watching believers do what they do can have its own evangelistic effect. When Christians are worshipping as they should, says the apostle, and "and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:24–25). Attire that genuinely reflects a God-honoring attitude toward worship may well contribute to a similar result.

Now We See In a Mirror

None of the above leaves us with a dress code for public worship. It certainly does not translate automatically into coats and ties for men and fancy dresses for women. Idealizing bygone eras won't work here; the meaning of human clothing is too contextual for that. It varies too widely from place to place and time to time, and there are too many other variables to consider. We are left having to judge for ourselves what is appropriate for worship and what is not.

But all of the above should at least warn us away from the glib assumption that God does not care about what we wear to church; or that what I choose to wear for worship doesn't matter; or that how I dress for church is a purely personal affair; or that my own convenience and comfort are all that need concern me. The truth is, one of the ways we express ourselves as human beings is by the way we dress. Wittingly or unwittingly, our clothing gives us away. God certainly does not need this expression to know our hearts. But as for the rest of us, we do indeed look on the outward appearance, even when peering into our own mirrors. In this way the clothes we choose for church may have things to tell us about our hearts that God already knows, but that we need to hear.

Perhaps the best way to think of our church attire is to place it in the context of the spiritual disciplines. As Dallas Willard says, "One of the greatest deceptions in the practice of the Christian religion is the idea that all that really matters is our internal feelings, ideas, beliefs, and intentions" (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 152). The classical spiritual disciplines—for example, prayer, fasting, service, and worship—are about bringing the internal and external together. Says Willard, we must "guard against the view of spirituality as something 'wholly inward' or something to be kept just between the individual and God." The inward and the outward are not "two separate things, but *one* unified process in which those who are alive in God are caught up in their embodied, socialized totality" (pp. 77–78).

We express this embodied totality in corporate worship through our shared symbols, rites, and rituals; through our posture and gestures as we bow, kneel, or lift our hands; through our actions when we stand or sit in unison or pour out our hearts musically in congregational song. And our clothing belongs on this list. By it we express to God and those around us what this occasion means to us. This is why, when we come to church, our clothing matters.