

Thoughts About Wearing Our "Sunday Best"

I've been thinking about clothes lately. (*Just to be clear, I've been thinking about plenty of other stuff, too – but clothes are definitely in the mix.*)

Part of that comes from watching my children's clothing struggles. For the young ones, there's the challenge to match clothing with climate. (Apparently it's not self-evident that sweaters are a bad idea when it's 80 degrees and sunny.) When the climate hurdle has been hopped, the color-matching issue arises. ("No, sweetie, orange and pink don't really go together.") And don't get me started on the challenge young ladies face in finding modest swimwear.

I also have been noting what attire folks regard as appropriate for various occasions. As you might expect, older generations tend to select more formal attire than is chosen by the younger set. But each generation has been growing more and more informal. "Casual" isn't just for Fridays anymore.

My own clothes have gotten more casual in recent years. Unless I intend to make formal visits, unexpected guests are likely to find me in jeans and a polo shirt. It's neat, comfortable, and at least as formal as what others are wearing.

But all of that also has me wondering: what impact should our culture have on how we dress for worship? If the culture as a whole is wearing ever-more casual clothes, is it OK for us to do likewise at church? Or should we stick with our "Sunday best"? And if so ... why?

A while back, a friend of mine wrote in a pastor's page that nobody *really* believes we should wear the "best" clothes to church. We only find people wearing the "best" at weddings, inaugurations and televised award ceremonies.

Since most of us don't get invited to the latter two occasions, let's consider weddings for a moment.

At a wedding, the bride wears a dress flattering and glorious. Its dazzling whiteness symbolizes the bride's purity. The delicate finery presents her to her husband as a treasure. Likewise, the groom wears a tailored tuxedo – its stylish lines, sharp creases, and dark colors emphasizing his strength and prosperity.

Bridesmaids and groomsmen, the parents of the bride and groom, the flower girl, the ring bearer – all wear clothing perfectly fitted, properly coordinated, and purchased specifically for the occasion.

Those are our *best* clothes, often purchased specifically for the event.

No one wears such clothes to church. Nor should they. Church is a different occasion, calling for different clothes.

Our lives encounter a variety of events, each of which calls for slightly different attire. While working on my van last week, I wore clothes that had stains and a few holes. Later I ran an errand to the courthouse in Luverne – but first, I changed clothes. Just as it would have been foolish to wear formal clothes to work on the van, it would have been disrespectful to wear work clothes to the courthouse.

Different occasions call for different clothes.

For members of a wedding party, a wedding calls for our *best* clothes. The bride's gown should emphasize her glory, because she represents the Bride of Christ – the Church. The groom's clothes should emphasize his manliness and competence, because he represents Christ (Ephesians 5). Taking part in such a divinely ordained representation calls for the very best clothes.

But when we attend worship, the very best would be inappropriate. People would be focused on *you* – on the glory *you* display – rather than on God, who calls us to worship with a focus on *Him* and *His* glory.

However, neither should we attend worship in *casual* clothes.

Let's say you spent the day weeding the garden or cleaning the basement. If a friend invited you over for a barbecue, you would first put on something clean and neat. Attending in grimy work clothes would communicate disrespect.

Likewise in worship. Our clothes should communicate respect for God.

What does that look like? Well, that depends. The formality of some urban areas makes it seem disrespectful for a man to enter the presence of God without at least a tie, if not a coat. In other areas (like ours), the culture as a whole is more casual, and very few people wear coats for anything in the summer months. So a coat might not be necessary – but neither would it be appropriate to wear an old t-shirt and shorts.

If you had plans to meet with an important figure – the governor, perhaps; or the CEO of a large corporation – what would you wear to show *respect*? What clothes would convey your intention to *honor* that person? You probably wouldn't wear a tuxedo – but neither would you wear faded jeans and flip flops.

Now: how will you convey respect and honor to the Lord?

Of course, this discussion requires one major caution: the counsel is for judging one's own conduct. I mustn't condemn a visitor who attends in casual clothes; nor may I judge my neighbor as I judge myself.

I had a friend in Indiana whom I invited to church at least once every two weeks. After two years, he came. Now, the Chicagoland URCs tend to be more formal in what they wear. Few men show up without a tie, and most wear coats.

But my friend didn't even own a tie. So in he walked, wearing his best jeans and a clean denim shirt.

To this day, I'm proud of our Indiana church family for how warmly they received him. Not a word was heard about his lack of a tie or his jeans. They recognized: he's here, and we should celebrate that. What was lost has been found (Luke 15)!

The point is, we each need to ask *ourselves* what clothes will honor God. To be sure, parents need to teach this lesson to their children. Husbands and wives should discuss it. But on the whole, each one needs to make the judgment in his own heart, based on his convictions and his faith.

We're not called to judge what the other folks are wearing. We *are* to judge one another with regard to sins (1 Cor. 5:11-13) – but *not* with regard to clothing styles and other matters of conscience (like food and drink).

In such areas, we should heed the counsel of Romans 14. Let each one search his heart concerning what is honoring to God (Rom. 14:5), wearing what he wears to the glory of God (14:6-8) – neither judging others for what they wear (14:10-13a), nor wearing that which would offend others (14:13b-19).

But above all, we should *think* about what we wear when we enter the presence of God and His angels. His greatness deserves nothing less.