

A DRESS CODE FOR CHRISTIANS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Earlier this week, I e-mailed a friend in response to an invitation to an event and asked, “What is the appropriate dress for the occasion?” I didn’t want to show up in jeans and a Polo shirt if the other men were wearing coats and ties. On the other hand, I didn’t want to get all dressed up, only to find out I could have/should have dressed more casually.

Shortly after Nancy and I began serving as co-pastors of the Littleton Presbyterian Church in Littleton, North Carolina, the congregation had a covered dish supper on a Sunday night. Nancy and I fixed our dishes and headed down Highway 158 from Roanoke Rapids to Littleton. I had on a pair of khakis and an open-necked shirt. When we walked into the sanctuary, I looked at all of the other men and they all looked at me. All of them had on coats and ties. A few months later, we had another covered dish supper. Nancy and I fixed our dishes and headed down Highway 158 again. I had put on a coat and tie for the occasion. When we walked into the sanctuary, I looked at all of the other men and they all looked at me. Not a single one of them had on a coat and tie! So I said, “Look, guys, we need to settle this once and for all. Let’s decide what we’re going to wear to these dinners!” To this day, I’m convinced that all of those men went home that first Sunday night and said to their wives, “See, the preacher didn’t wear a coat and tie!”

What should you wear to church? Is there a dress code for Christians? Should there be a dress code for Christians? I have vivid memories of my daddy standing behind me in front of the mirror on Sunday mornings, tying my tie for me and putting Vitalis in my hair as we got ready to go to church. Over the years, styles and customs have changed, both in the church and in the workplace. Still, even though some businesses have “casual Friday,” there are guidelines about what is appropriate or inappropriate to wear to the office. Certainly there must be some Christian traditions that have specific dress codes for worship. Beyond that, many churches have unwritten dress codes that are assumed and can even become characteristic of particular churches or denominations. Occasionally you might hear somebody say, “Oh, I could never attend that church. I don’t have the right kind of clothes.”

Today’s sermon is not about what to wear **to** church, but what to wear **as** the church of Jesus Christ. Nancy and I used to watch a TV show called “What Not to Wear.” The hosts, Stacy and Clinton, surprised an unsuspecting person with a wardrobe and style makeover, on the recommendation of the person’s family and co-workers. At the beginning of each episode, the person had to dress in her old clothes

and stand in front of the dreaded 360 mirror while Stacy and Clinton critiqued her fashion choices. Then the person literally had to throw out most of her old clothes before going on a shopping spree and trying to follow the hosts' fashion suggestions. At the end of each show, the fashion-transformed person would talk about the difference the new clothes and new look made in her life.

The outline of each episode of "What Not to Wear" could have been taken straight from what Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians. Everything Paul says about the new Christian life is based on his opening statement in verse 1: "Therefore since you have been raised with Christ . . ." Paul then tells the Christians to stand in front of the 360 mirror and evaluate their lives in light of what God has done for them in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in their baptisms into Christ's death and resurrection: "strip off the old self with its practices and clothe yourselves with the new self."

The "old clothes" that need to come off the rack and go into the trash can are fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene language.

The "new clothes" that are appropriate for the occasion of new life in Christ are compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and, most of all, love.

Many times, when parents present their child for the sacrament of infant baptism, they will do one of two things: (1) they will buy a new outfit for the baby to wear on that Sunday or (2) they will dress their child in a family heirloom — perhaps the baptismal gown or suit the mother or father (or even grandmother or grandfather) wore.

New clothes at baptism are an ancient tradition. Many Christian churches still provide a white robe for the newly baptized individual. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the newly baptized person is clothed with a white robe after coming up out of the water, while the priest calls the person's name and says this prayer: "The servant of God is clothed with the robe of righteousness; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Traditionally, the newly baptized person wears the white robe for eight days, which is then removed in another ceremony at the church. People who have been baptized as adults are often buried in their white baptismal robes, which represent the cleansing of sins in the waters of baptism and a new life in Christ.¹

This week Jenna Carriker posted an interesting article on FaceBook from The Deep Well Project of Hilton Head, SC. According to the group's website, "The Deep Well Project was founded in 1973. Since then, it has been supported by individuals, businesses, religious institutions, foundations, clubs, schools and various other organizations. It is the island's charity — truly islanders helping their neighbors in need — and reflects the caring community in which we live."

Here's one thing The Deep Well Project is doing: "When South Carolina mandated school uniforms in our public schools, the expense became an added burden on our client families. We quickly put in place a Uniform program. This year, through your

generosity, over 900 children were provided with vouchers which can be used by their parents to purchase approved uniform clothing at a pre-arranged provider's facilities. The \$50 per child voucher doesn't cover all costs, but goes a long way toward easing the strain on a family's budget."²

While The Deep Well Project of Hilton Head is providing vouchers so children can meet the requirements of their schools' dress code, the volunteers themselves are dressing according to the occasion. They are wearing the clothes of the new self — compassion, kindness, and, especially, love.

Sometimes you have to throw out your old wardrobe and get new clothes. If you've lost a good bit of weight and your old clothes are too big. If you've gotten a new job and you need a more professional wardrobe. If you (or, more likely, someone else in your family!) finally throw away that much-beloved, well-broken in shirt or pair of shorts. If Stacy and Clinton surprise you at the office one day and give you a makeover.

But those are a lot of "ifs" — those things may or may not happen to you. When it comes to a dress code for Christians, however, the apostle Paul isn't uncertain one bit. "**Since** you have been raised with Christ," he says, "therefore seek the things that are above, set your minds on things that are above, put to death whatever in you is earthly, get rid of all such things, strip off the old self, clothe yourselves with the new self, and above all else, clothe yourselves with love.

This is what Paul is getting at: the living, resurrected Jesus Christ provides the basis for all of our Christian conduct. In our everyday lives, we pay attention to wearing clothes appropriate for the occasion. That's what Paul is encouraging for our Christian lives: In a very real sense, Paul is telling us, "Be who you are. Who are you? You are baptized in Jesus Christ. You are raised with Jesus Christ. So, dress accordingly, by living in a way that shows other people who you have become. Live so others will see in your actions what the risen Lord is really like."

Paul's talk about "clothing yourselves with the new self" reminded me of Hans Christian Anderson's story about the emperor's new clothes. A vain emperor loved nothing better than wearing fine clothes. He would change his clothes throughout the day. Two hustlers caught wind of the king's vanity and hatched a plan. They convinced the emperor they had invented a cloth so fine and light that it looked invisible. Besides that, only those who were too stupid and incompetent would be unable to see to see the cloth's beauty.

The emperor gave the two men much gold and fine materials to begin work. He sent his trusted prime minister to check on their progress. Of course, the prime minister couldn't see anything, but was too proud and afraid to say so. He marveled at the workmanship and reported favorably to the emperor.

Finally the two scoundrels went to the emperor for his fitting. Obviously, the emperor saw nothing, but he wasn't about to admit that, so he oohed and aahed over the fine material. As the emperor stood in front of the mirror in his "new" clothes (though he was actually naked), he had to hide his embarrassment and confusion.

The two tailors convinced the emperor to parade through the town so everyone could admire his new clothes. At first the crowd clapped and cheered. Again, even though the emperor was stark naked, no one wanted to be thought of as stupid or incompetent. Finally, a little boy ran up to the carriage and cried out, “The emperor is naked!” His comment spread quickly, until soon everyone in the crowd was yelling, “The boy is right! The emperor is naked!”

Although he knew the people were right, the vain emperor decided to maintain the illusion that anyone who couldn’t see his new clothes was either stupid or incompetent. So, he kept right on riding through town in his carriage.

What will we wear? Not **to** church, but **as** a church. All of the “you’s” in these verses are plural. Paul is talking about what the community of faith will put on.

We could always keep on our old clothes of anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene language. But, Paul says, that’s not **who** we are as those who have been raised with Christ.

We could always strut through life like the vain emperor, taking off our old clothes, but not replacing them with anything at all. But, Paul says, that’s not **who** we are as those who have been raised with Christ.

Or, as a church, we can dress for the occasion as the people of God, raised with Christ through his death and resurrection. And the occasion is our transformation by God’s grace and our calling to do whatever we do, in word or in deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

So, church, let’s get dressed — with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and, most of all, love.

Let us pray (from St. Francis of Assisi)

Our Father, each day is a little life, each night a tiny death. Help us to live with faith and hope and love. Lift our duty above drudgery. Let not our strength fail, or the vision fade, in the heat and burden of the day. O God, make us patient and pitiful one with another in the fret and jar of life, remembering that each fights a hard fight and walks a lonely way. Forgive us, Lord, if we hurt our fellow souls. Teach us a gentler tone, a sweeter charity of words, and a more healing touch. Sustain us, O God, when we must face sorrow. Give us courage for the day and hope for tomorrow. Day by day may we lay hold of your hand and look up into your face, whatever befall, until our work is finished and the day is done. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Baptismal Clothing” at www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptismal_clothing

²www.deepwellproject.org