

HOW TO DRESS FOR CHURCH

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.

When I was a kid, Saturday night meant spreading newspaper on the living room floor, getting the shoeshine kit out of my parents' closet, and collecting everybody's shoes. While my parents watched The Lawrence Welk Show, I would carefully polish the shoes for church the next day, just as my dad had taught me. On Sunday morning, I would stand in front of the bathroom mirror while my dad rubbed Vitalis Hair Tonic on my head and carefully parted my hair. Then he would help me clip my tie on. As I got older, he would stand behind me and help me learn how to tie my tie. Once everybody was dressed for church, we would all get in the station wagon and head out.

When I Googled "How to Dress for Church," I got 711,000,000 results! That's hard to imagine, isn't it? The #2 site listed was "How to Dress for Church: The Proper Clothes and Accessories to Wear." Here's the introduction: "Whether you attend church every Sunday or you're planning to go to a church near you for a special occasion, it's important to understand the appropriate attire. If you're wondering how to dress for church, there are a few important guidelines to keep in mind before you head out for a visit. Read on to discover a few helpful hints and tips that will ensure you look your best while feeling confident and putting your best church-going foot forward." The different sections of the article are: Enhance Your Outfit with Jewelry; Layer with Shrugs and Shawls; Can You Wear Jeans to Church?; and What Not to Wear to Church. The final section is "Sunday Best" and advises, "From shrugs and shawls to beautiful jewelry, knowing how to dress for church will make you feel more confident whenever you attend. Ask your church about their particular dress code so you can make sure you're staying within their guidelines. Use gorgeous jewelry to give your church clothing a touch of class and style. From pearl necklaces to delicate bracelets, your jewelry can be the star of the show."¹ In case you're wondering, that article is posted on the domain www.romadesignerjewelry.com. Surprise, surprise!

I certainly didn't read all 711,000,000 results of my search, but among the sites I did scan, I didn't find any articles about the apostle Paul and how to dress for church. Perhaps if I had changed my search parameters to something like "How To Dress **To Be** The Church" I would have found the following: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:12-14)

In the very early church, converts to the Christian faith would be instructed in the faith as they prepared for baptism. On the Saturday night before Easter, the candidates for baptism and the members of the church would hold an all-night Easter vigil. While it was still dark, the converts would face the darkness in the west, strip off their old clothes, and renounce Satan and all his ways. Then they would face east as the sun rose, make a threefold profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and be immersed in the water three times, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. After the new believers came up from the waters of baptism, they were dressed in new, white robes.²

In his 1905 short story, “The Czar’s Soliloquy,” Mark Twain writes about the czar’s morning habit of meditating for an hour before getting dressed. As the czar looks at himself in the mirror without his royal clothes on, he realizes, “Without my clothes I should be as destitute of authority as any other naked person. Nobody could tell me from a parson, a barber, a dude. Then who is the real Emperor of Russia? My clothes. There is no other.” Then the narrator comments, “What would man be — what would any man be — without his clothes? As soon as one stops and thinks over that proposition, one realizes that without his clothes a man would be nothing at all; that the clothes do not merely make the man, the clothes are the man; that without them he is a cipher, a vacancy, a nobody, a nothing.”³

Mark Twain didn’t invent the phrase “clothes make the man.” Erasmus, a Catholic priest and theologian of the Middle Ages, wrote the same thought four hundred years before Twain. Erasmus quoted Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, a Roman educator and rhetorician, who himself cited the writings of Homer from 7 or 8 B.C. And, of course, in Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, as Laertes packs for his trip to Paris for his education, his father, Polonius, advises him to buy high-end clothes that are not too gaudy and says, “The apparel oft proclaims the man.”

Interestingly, researchers at Northwestern University have described what they call “enclothed cognition.” In one experiment, students who wore white lab coats scored better on cognitive tests than students who didn’t wear coats. One of the study’s co-authors described “the influence your clothes can have on the way you think, feel, and behave,” and explained, “Many pieces of clothing carry a symbolic meaning. For example, the robe of a judge signifies justice, an expensive suit signifies power, and a white lab coat signifies a scientific focus and attentiveness. Our research indicates that wearing clothes exerts influence through this symbolic meaning.”⁴

I seriously doubt the apostle Paul knew anything about the term “enclothed cognition,” but he certainly understood the importance and power of the concept, at least when it comes to putting on the clothes of the new life in Christ. Once again, we have a perfect example of how Paul structures his letters. First, he tells us what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and who God has made us to be and calls us to be in Jesus Christ. Then Paul, in so many words, says, “Since that’s who you are, live like it!”

At the beginning of Colossians 3, Paul writes, “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have

died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Colossians 3:1-3) Paul warns believers what not to do as believers and followers of Jesus Christ. Then he describes what the new life in Christ looks like as he uses the imagery of putting on new clothes. As *The Handbook of Fashion, 1847* says, “Dress is a thing very significant to inward feeling, and very operative upon outward conduct.” One Bible commentator explains, “As ones God has chosen, set apart as holy and loved, they should make sure their behavior matches up with their identity; their outside should match their inside. Knowing who they are helps them to clothe themselves with behavior that fits. Just as ill-fitting clothes detract from the beauty of a person, so too do ill-fitting behaviors detract from the image of Christ that believers should exhibit.”⁵

Keep in mind that the apostle Paul wasn't writing about actual clothing believers should wear. In fact, that would be the last thing he would encourage, so that what you wear to church or to be the church would make you the star of the show, as that Google article so breathlessly and excitedly promoted. It should come as no surprise that these verses from Colossians 3 sound so similar to what we've heard the last three Sundays from 1 Corinthians 12-13, about the gifts of the Spirit, the one body, the many members, and the common good. If we are the many members of the one body of Christ, the Church, then our dress code for being the church must match who we are in Jesus Christ. The new life in Christ — the new clothes we put on as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved — is to be marked with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness. And the article of clothing that ties the whole outfit together is love — that still more excellent gift that Paul told the Corinthians was the greatest gift of all.

One time I told our son, Jackson, who is a furniture designer with a great eye for fashion, that I had thought about asking him to throw out all of my clothes and pick out all new clothes for me to wear. “What do you suppose they would look like?” I asked. Jackson said, “I'd probably pick pretty much the same things you already have.” Somewhat disappointed, I said, “Really, how come?” And Jackson said, “Because that's who you are. You wouldn't look right in something completely different.”

Another Google site suggests, “If you're having an issue defining your personal style, why not start by choosing a style statement?” The article says, “A style statement is an opportunity to dress for the person you want to be. Clothes communicate volumes about ourselves and influence the way we see ourselves. Attitude and mindset follow the lead of the clothes you are wearing. Style isn't about wanting to be someone else, or following rules, it is about knowing yourself, believing in yourself and working with what you have to create a visual representation of your soul on the outside for all the world to see.”⁶

That's who we are — God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. And Paul gives us some great fashion advice and clothing recommendations to express who we really are, to dress for the persons we want to be as God's beloved child. When we put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness, and tie it all together with love, we will create a visual representation of our souls on the outside for all the world to see.

Did you know that Mister Rogers of Mister Rogers’s Neighborhood was an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? Mister Rogers didn’t talk explicitly about God and Jesus on his shows, but for thirty-one seasons, Mister Rogers taught about compassion and humility and kindness and patience and forgiveness and, most of all, loving your neighbor. One preacher uses Mister Rogers as a good illustration of Paul’s teaching about putting on the new clothes of life in Christ: “If you ever watched Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood on TV, you’ll remember that Fred began each show with the same routine — he would come inside, take off his coat, take off his outdoor shoes, put on his inside shoes or slippers, and put on a cardigan. In the same way that Mister Rogers took off what he no longer needed and put on something new, let us clothe ourselves with the cardigan of compassion and kindness, the house shoes of courage and discipline, the eyeglasses of truth and humility, and above all, love for one another. That’s what it is all about, after all — the most important gift we can give one another is the knowledge that we are loved, and capable of loving.”⁷

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:17)

Let us pray: Thank you, Lord, that because we are in Christ, we have become a loved, chosen, and holy people. By the power of your Holy Spirit, let us live for you. May your Spirit help us to love like Jesus loves. Change our hearts to honor Christ in all we do, so the world will come to know your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹Deven Davis, “How to Dress for Church: The Proper Clothes and Accessories to Wear,” at www.romadesignerjewelry.com.

²This information about early Christian baptismal practices is from two sources: “Liturgy 6: Baptism and Eucharist (1) from the early Church to the Reformers,” at www.patrickcomerford.com and Philip Kosloski, “A brief step-by-step guide to the baptismal rite of the early Christians,” April 26, 2019 at www.aleteia.org.

³Full text of “The Czar’s Soliloquy,” Mark Twain 1905 at www.archive.org.

⁴Bari Lieberman, “Clothes Really Do Make the Man,” March 6, 2012 at www.menshealth.com.

⁵Amy L. B. Peeler, “Commentary on Colossians 3:12-17,” December 30, 2012 at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁶Suzanne Carillo, “Choose Your Style Statement - How to Define Your Personal Style,” January 18, 2016 at www.suzannecarillo.com.

⁷Kristen Rose, “Fred Rogers — The Good Neighbor,” March 10, 2019 at www.hanoverchurch.com.