

In the Bible's teaching about worship we find both main points and details. In previous installments of this series I have concerned myself with main points. But throughout church history and up to our own time details have often proved as controversial as the broader issues. One of them has been and is today the minister's dress.

Until quite recently in almost all Christian churches the minister wore some uniform of his office while presiding at the worship of the congregation. Earlier controversies turned on what uniform he ought to wear. Later in the 20th century however, and especially in America, it became common for Protestant ministers to wear suits, such as the other men would be wearing to church, and later still, as congregational dress became more casual, for ministers to wear casual clothes. These changes were instituted for various reasons, but perhaps primarily, at first, to lessen, if not eradicate, the difference between the minister and the congregation. American democratic impulses worked against the notion that the minister occupies a place apart from the congregation and that there is a role that only he can fulfill.

You find today in many churches, including Reformed and Presbyterian churches, the notion that the "clergy-laity" distinction is unbiblical or contrary to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Later, the movement to still more informal dress for ministers was made in hopes of making the church a less intimidating and more welcoming place for seekers and newcomers who, it was thought, might be put off by the perceived formality or simply the strangeness of a minister in a robe or clerical collar.

However, the connection between clothing and office, especially in the case of a minister leading worship, is taught directly in the Bible. In Exodus 28:2 we read that the robes of the priests were for the purpose of giving him "dignity and honor." That point is made several times and also the point that they are to wear these robes when they are "ministering in the sanctuary" (Ex. 35:19; 39:1). "Dignity and honor" are timeless concerns in Christian worship, as is the concern that the voice of God be heard and recognized in the worship of the congregation. Ordination to the Christian ministry confers precisely that authority: to speak on God's behalf to the people of God (1 Thess. 2:13). This is the point made in the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) where we read, "The preaching of the divine word *is* the divine word," and the point Calvin was after when he referred to the minister as a *nuda persona*, a bare person.

It is the Word of God in the minister's mouth that is the all-important thing. But, that all should understand it to be the Word of God, there has been from the beginning a ministry, a special office with a special authority to speak and act on God's behalf. There has been throughout Christian history the recognition, based on the biblical evidence and a natural instinct, that the authority of his office and the role the minister occupies in Christian worship should be conveyed by the special clothing he wears. It is a principle that even unbelievers recognize, which is why still today judges, policemen, doctors and the like wear a particular uniform of office. In heaven itself, this principle is still given explicit expression (Rev. 4:4).

These robes are not vestments, in the Roman Catholic sense of clothing specifically for the administration of sacraments. That notion is without biblical support. Rather the robes display the minister's office in general, give him "dignity and honor" in all that he does when presiding

at a worship service. The purpose of this clothing is to accentuate the office and its authority and, at the same time, to hide the man in his individuality. The private opinions or the personality of a minister are of no particular importance, especially when the congregation is gathered on the Lord's Day. But the Word of God in his mouth and the hand of God in his hand at the font and the table are matters of the highest conceivable importance.

Ministerial dress will always be a feature of that worship in which God's people really believe that they are in the presence of God (*coram Deo*) and that in their worship God speaks directly to them and acts immediately on their behalf. Formality or informality is not the issue. The issue is whether God or man is most prominent in the mind of God's people when the minister speaks and acts in worship. The particular robes worn by the ministers of this church are the traditional black robes, the standard dress of the Reformed minister since the time of Calvin.

Remember, a minister's clothes say something no matter what. They may say, as they do in some American churches, "If you believe in Christ, you too can wear \$800 suits and \$90 ties." Or, they may say, "I'm just one of you, sharing my thoughts about the Bible." Or, as throughout Christian history, they may say, "The Lord is here to speak to you and to serve you at his table."