

Studies in Exodus No. 33

Exodus 28:1-43

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We are in the midst of the elaborate liturgical instructions (that is, instructions regarding Israel's worship of Yahweh) the Lord delivered to Moses during the latter's sojourn on the top of Mt. Sinai. We have considered so far the construction of the ark, the table, the lampstand – all furniture for the tabernacle sanctuary – the sanctuary itself with its covering tent and courtyard, the altar, and the oil to be used in the lampstand placed in the Holy Place. The sacrifices to be offered on the altar will, of course, be offered and that sacrificial worship will be superintended by the priests. So next we come to the priests: their clothing first and then the ceremony of their ordination. Tonight we take up their clothing, instructions for the manufacture of which, we are given in the lengthy chapter 28. We are given the instructions for Aaron's clothing in vv. 1-39, for his sons in vv. 40-43. The disparity of attention paid to Aaron's clothing and that of his sons reminds us of the immense importance of the office of high priest, of which there was but one. Aaron was not only God's representative to Israel, but Israel's representative to God. The NT book of Hebrews will elaborate both the similarities and the differences between Aaron and Jesus Christ who were both high priests. In any case, remember, we are attempting to demonstrate that these "boring parts" of the Bible are, in fact, intensely relevant to our circumstances today and bear on questions of trans-national and trans-temporal importance. No minister dresses as Aaron did, but there are general principles here.

Text Comment

- v.4 As with the details of the architecture of the tabernacle, there are terms in this description of the priestly garments the meaning of which is by no means certain. For example, we do not know for sure what an *ephod* was. Proof of that is furnished by the fact that the word *ephod* is not a translation; it is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew word, a reproduction in English of the *sound* of the Hebrew word. That's what translators do when they don't know what a word means. We don't even know for sure what part of the body the ephod covered. Was it a kind of jacket, covering the chest, or was it a kind of kilt with shoulder straps to hold it up – a kind of lederhosen without the individual pant legs.
- v.12 "Memorial stones" or "stones of remembrance" indicate that Aaron is to identify himself with the people of Israel in all of his work as High Priest. He is representing *them* to God as well as God to them. He is bearing them on himself when he is before the Lord.
- v.15 Literally it is the "breastpiece of judgment," a function that will be explained later when we learn that the Urim and Thummim are placed in it.
- v.20 Though it seems all plain and obvious in translation, the identification of most all of these precious stones is by no means certain. The twelve stones stand for the twelve tribes of Israel – as did the two onyx stones with the names of the 12 tribes that were attached to

the shoulder pieces of the ephod – and are some indication of how precious Israel’s tribes are to God.

- v.28 The breastpiece seems to have been a cloth bag attached to the front of the ephod.
- v.30 The Urim and Thummim were apparently stones of some sort, perhaps precious stones, that, in some way, when cast, gave a “yes” or “no” answer to a question. In 1 Sam. 28:6 we learn that it was possible to get no answer from them. These stones disappeared relatively early in Israel’s history – their use is not mentioned after the early monarchy through the remainder of the OT – and seem to have been rendered superfluous by the rise of the prophets.
- v.31 The “robe of the ephod” was, it seems, a long undergarment over which were worn the ephod and the breastpiece. The description coming after that of the garments worn over it may be explained by its being of less importance than the pieces worn over it.
- v.32 Since the garment was slipped on and off over the head this was a sensible precaution. There were not to be torn and tattered garments on the Lord’s priest when he was in God’s presence.
- v.35 It is impossible to say what, if any, symbolism attaches to the blue or violet color of the robe, or the pomegranates. The bells indicate, once again, how careful men must be with the presence of Almighty God. You are ushered into that presence, you don’t come barging in unannounced! Remember, this is, of course, symbolic. The Israelite knew very well that God knew where each of them was at all times! He didn’t need us to wear bells! We need the bells, not him. We might say that the *Call to Worship* at the head of our worship services serves in some fashion as did the gold bells on Aaron’s robe. We don’t come barging into God’s presence as if he should be glad for us to arrive on his doorstep at any time. “Try that on the governor...” as Malachi would say. We come before the majesty when we are invited, or better, when we are summoned.
- v.36 In John’s vision of heaven we read several times in Revelation that the saints bear the Lord’s name on their foreheads (14:3; 22:4). Here “Holy to Yahweh” would be a perpetual reminder to him and to the people of his and their position and the sacred obligations of it.
- v.38 Once again the holiness of the Lord is the backdrop of this instruction. It is problematic that our offerings in worship are not perfectly holy. The Israelite may have offered an animal that had some blemish or defect. There may have been a half-hearted attention to what all this meant, we know how often our worship is half-hearted or we have shaved our tithe or are praying for forgiveness from some sin while, at the same time, contemplating the committing of that same sin again. There is imperfection, but God has provided for its forgiveness so that the gifts may still be received as real worship.

- v.39 The tunic was the usual garment of men of rank. The word used here, for example, is the same as that used to describe the beautiful robe that Jacob gave to Joseph that caused such jealousy among his brothers (Gen. 37:3).
- v.42 Linen is used for both beauty and hygiene. The purpose of this underwear is to secure modesty at all times. ANE priestcraft traded in immodesty so this is a clear contrast. That point was already made in 20:26. A failure of this magnitude would not be forgiven.

It is, perhaps, important to remember, as we begin our consideration of this chapter, that the Israelite priest did more than simply offer sacrifice. He was also what we would call today a preacher. He taught the Word of God to God's people. He superintended all parts of the people's worship: the Word, the prayer, and the sacred sacrifices and sacrificial meals. And he assisted the elders in rendering judgment, especially in difficult cases. When Moses describes the work of Levi and his descendants in his blessing of the Israelite tribes in Deut. 33:10-11 we read:

“He teaches your precepts to Jacob
and your law to Israel.
He offers incense before you
and whole burnt offerings on your altar.
Bless all his skills, O Lord,
and be pleased with the work of his hands.”

So that is the priest. Now this is important and relevant for us precisely because priests were in the ancient epoch what ministers are in the new epoch. The NT doesn't often use the term priest for a NT minister, no doubt in large part to maintain the distinction between them and Jewish priests. But Paul calls himself a priest in Rom. 15:16 because he was a preacher of the Gospel and the apostles, in Acts 6:4, indicate that they had taken over the priestly duties of supervising the worship of God's people, a duty eventually devolved upon ordinary Christian ministers as we learn in the Pastoral Epistles and elsewhere. OT priests and NT ministers held the same office; they had the same responsibilities.

But now, what about this clothing? It has not been a very long time – several generations only – since it became common in American evangelical Christianity for ministers not to wear any uniform of their office when presiding in the sanctuary on the Lord's Day. But it has been long enough for many evangelicals now to think that ministers wearing robes or a collar or some other clerical uniform represents some kind of movement toward Rome or some sinister seeking of status or privilege. I remember distinctly how unusual it seemed to me to find Mr. Still, our Presbyterian minister in Aberdeen, Scotland, appearing every Sunday in church in a clerical collar. That was not the dress of ministers in the churches in which I grew up.

It was in my youth, and still is in many places, that Presbyterian ministers wore business suits when presiding in the sanctuary. Nowadays more and more of them will be still more informally dressed – a sports shirt and Birkenstocks – and will dress that way *on purpose*, to make a point, to make a statement.

Justifying the rejection of a clerical uniform, whether a clerical collar or a minister's robe, the following arguments are used, either singly or together. I will give the argument in each case and offer a response before summarizing the rationale for such a priestly uniform as given in Exodus 28.

1. *First, while there was a professional priesthood in the Old Testament, in the New Testament we are all priests.* Therefore, minister and congregation should be dressed in the same way and no distinction made between them.

I mention this argument first because so many American evangelical Christians will make it, though I hope none of you. For the argument is entirely specious. The idea of the priesthood of all believers comes from the OT, not the NT; it comes, in fact, from a statement in Exodus 19:6 where the Lord says to Israel: "you shall be for me a kingdom of priests..." There is nothing distinctively New Testament about this idea or reality. The priesthood of all believers did not mean that there wasn't a special priesthood in the ancient epoch and it is never taught to mean that there isn't a special priesthood in the new epoch. The "priesthood of all believers" as it is taught in the Bible no more provides an argument against clerical garb for ministers in the new epoch than it provides an argument against a distinct and authoritative ministry in the new epoch. This same argument is sometimes couched in terms of the unbiblical nature of the clergy-laity distinction. But that is a distinction often observed, in both the OT and the NT, and there is no argument against that distinction that can be raised from biblical materials. The fact that the distinction between ministers and people can be and has been abused in Christian history is not argument against its validity. In fact you find the distinction between priests and ministers on the one hand, and people, on the other, everywhere you look in the Bible.

2. *Second, the priestly clothing described in such detail in Exodus 28 belongs to the very ceremonial regulations that have been done away with in the New Testament.*

The argument is that just as we no longer offer blood sacrifice, just as we no longer observe the Day of Atonement, just as we no longer have a high priest, so we no longer dress up our ministers in such elaborate clothing. There is, without a doubt, some force to this argument, but only some.

First, as we have already argued at several points in considering these chapters containing liturgical regulations, the sum and substance of this regulation binds us as well as it bound Israel in the wilderness and later. Outward forms have no doubt changed, but the inward substance is the same. These regulations, rightly understood, express timeless realities. We made a point a few weeks ago about covenant renewal being the nature of Christian worship (e.g. we still eat a sacrificial meal today, though we call it the Lord's Supper), we made a point tonight about the bells on Aaron's robes, as we made a point about the way in which the holiness of God and the care with which sinners must approach the Living God was expressed in the architecture of the tabernacle. Our worship today ought to be in substance the worship of the tabernacle.

Second, some things in these regulations are timeless principles as obvious and as important in our day as in Israel's. For example, you will have noticed how beautiful everything was in the tabernacle and in the clothing of the High Priest. The colors and the quality of the material used, the precious stones, the importance of the work of skilled craftsmen are an emphasis in this material. We took care, in our own way, to ensure that the building we built and the sanctuary we remodeled were likewise beautiful in their own way. We do that in a way consonant with our time and culture, but we do it and virtually all Christians do it no matter their theory of worship or lack of same.

What makes that so important here is that the rationale provided for these garments, *and the only rationale* – given twice in v. 2 and v. 39 – is that the priests should have “dignity and honor” as they superintend the worship of God's house. Many seem to think that OT priests wore special clothing because they were offering sacrifices. This is, to be sure, the idea of vestments in, say, the Roman Catholic church. But the Bible never says this. The only reason the Bible provides for the special clothing of the priest is that given here: that they might have the dignity and honor appropriate to their office as God's representative to the people and the people's to God. Surely no one thinks that the Christian ministry should be *without dignity and honor* but, if so, why not employ the trans-cultural and trans-temporal means of adding honor and dignity to an office, namely a special uniform. We do this today still. Judges wore robes, policemen and firemen uniforms, so do doctors and nurses, professors when they march in academic processions. There is *no rationale* provided for clerical garb in this chapter that does not make the same sense in our time as it did in the days of Moses.

3. *Third, it is argued that Jesus, our Great High Priest, came wearing the clothing of a common Galilean man, not the robes of a clergyman. He has established a new pattern for us today.*

There is a superficial plausibility to this argument, but only superficial. Fact is, Jesus was the counterpoint of Aaron in the sense that he fulfilled the prophecy that was embodied in Aaron. He was the anti-type to Aaron's type. He was the true and eternal high priest. In the same way that Christ is the fulfillment of the sacrifice, but that sacrifice in our worship continues in the Lord's Supper, so Christ is the fulfillment of Aaron but Aaron's ministry continues in the new epoch. The successor of Aaron as a serving priest is not the Lord Jesus but the Christian minister. Jesus did not serve as a priest or serving minister in his own day. His disciples baptized, but he did not. He did not lead a congregation in worship. He participated in the worship of the temple under the oversight of Jewish priests as it was in his day. He did not himself administer the sacrament until he created the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room the night of his betrayal. He very clearly created a ministry to serve the church upon his ascension to heaven and left instructions for the performance of that ministry. The fact is, there is a continuing priestly ministry in the New Testament, performing the same functions as the priesthood in the Old Testament and there is nothing in either Testament to suggest that the nature of that ministry had changed in any fundamental way.

4. *A fourth argument against priestly uniforms* for Christian ministers is not drawn directly from Scripture, but is widely made nevertheless. It is claimed that the desire to wear ministerial garb is little more than a reaching for status. Protestant ministers who wear robes are Catholic wannabees and crave the kind of status that a Roman Catholic “father” has. Robes or other ministerial uniforms are contrary to the humility that ought to mark the Christian ministry.

Jesus, remember, said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk about in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces.... Such men will be punished most severely.” I’ve heard this argument myself and I’m not the only one. It is important to remember that clerical garb is virtually as much the historical tradition of the Protestant Church as it is the Catholic.

The Calvinist reformers discarded most of the vestments of the medieval church but retained the normal outdoor dress of the clergy, which was worn in church as well. It consisted of cassock, plain black gown, bands, and black velvet cap... Calvin, who with the other ministers of the city, was accustomed to wear this dress, said that he had “never met with but one rebuff in all his life, and that from a silly woman who declaimed against long garments.” She pretended to prove this from the Gospel saying what I just quoted from Mark 12:38, “is it not written, they shall come to you in long garments?” Calvin says he left her, in despair of overcoming such ignorance. [Ep. to Farel, cited in W.D. Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, 150] The Lord’s statement is, of course, not an argument against clerical robes but against pride.

I won’t deny that such a motive may lie in the hearts of some ministers. Knowing human nature, who could deny that? But, in my experience, most Presbyterian ministers of my generation began to wear robes not because they wanted to, but because they felt they ought to and to begin to do so was a matter of some embarrassment to them, *precisely because they feared people would suspect their motives*. They feared that people would think they were showing off. But it is worth remembering that it is the office that is being noted by such clothing, not the man. In fact, as C.S. Lewis wisely remarked:

“The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the offender’s inability to forget himself in the rite, and his readiness to spoil for everyone else the proper pleasure of ritual.”

The purpose of the robe or collar is to hide the man and accent the office. So it is with a judge’s robe. The individual is hidden behind the office. When the judge speaks it is not to deliver his private opinions but to deliver the judgment of the law. When the police officer stops you on the side of the highway and walks up to you in his uniform you do not expect him to say, “You know, you don’t drive in the manner that I prefer.” You expect him to say that the legal limit is 60 and you were going 73. The uniform subtly but powerfully reminds us and him that he speaks as a representative of something far greater and more powerful than himself. Well, so it is with the minister’s robes.

If the motives of minister's wearing robes can be questioned, it is just as true that a man who paces back and forth in either an \$800 suit or a Hawaiian shirt can be thought to be calling attention to himself.

5. *Fifth and last, the modern argument against clerical dress, especially in the United States, is that it stands in the way of unbelievers being comfortable in church.*

It is for this reason that a number of my friends in the PCA ministry dress casually in church. Not only do they not wear a business suit, they don't dress formally at all. They wear dress you might well expect to find at a picnic. And they will tell you straight away why they do so: they want unbelievers, visitors, outsiders to feel comfortable. They think that an informal setting is more welcoming and familiar to people in our informal culture.

First, I will say that I doubt that is true, frankly. I think people who come to church expect it to look like and feel like a church and not like a picnic. They've seen enough churches on television to know that they aren't like parks or playgrounds or beaches. *Second*, such a theory is a distinct departure from the practice of 2000 years of Christian worship *and evangelism*. *Third*, it matters not what we think about the most effective way to reach people if, in fact, the Bible has spoken to these issues. And, *fourth*, the matter of God's holiness, its heartfelt embrace by God's people, which lies behind the instructions for Aaron's clerical garb, is crucial to the welfare of the church of God. God seemed to think that the nature of that holiness and the nature of our approach to God's presence needed to be expressed and confirmed in outward ways. It is not progress and it is no kindness shown to the unbelieving to allow the church's active sense of the divine majesty begin to wane because of inattention to its expression in public worship.

You know the hymn of Timothy Dwight, "I Love Thy Kingdom Lord," and its line "I prize her heavenly ways..." In our day people have decided that the church doesn't need her own ways. The world's way will work well enough for her. Indeed, many seem to think that for the church to have her own ways is bad form. It is impolite, perhaps even proud. The commercial culture's ways produce an enthusiasm like that of someone who wants to buy something. The technical culture's ways prize efficiency. Of one thing you can be sure: none of our culture's "ways" are concerned with the holiness of God or the reverence of his people. [Based on Ken Myers at FPC, 7-20-99]

Now, I need to say that obviously your ministers do not wear garments like these described in Exodus 28. There are good reasons why we take the general point but not the specific details of these regulations forward into our practice today. 1. *First*, fact is, no one really knows what this garb looked like exactly. We don't even know what an *ephod* was as I said. We don't know what the stones are, and so on. 2. *Second*, there were features of this clothing peculiar to Israel's situation. The two stones and the twelve for example. These would not be specific to our situation today in the age of the Gentiles. 3. *Third*, some of these instructions fell away even during the time of the ancient epoch as a feature of priestly garments. Provision is made for change in the garments to fit new conditions in the fact, for example, that after David there are no Urim and Thummim in Israel and they are not part of the high priestly garments. In Ezra and Nehemiah we hear expressions of longing for them, wishing they had them again, but they were

gone and were never coming back. 4. *Fourth*, the particular features of this clothing belong to the ANE. They would look familiar to people of that time and place and very unusual to us. They served their purpose in a way appropriate to that culture; they would not serve that purpose for us. The materials used, the method of construction, and so on; these are the *accidents* not the *substance* of this dress. What gives dignity and honor is what is to be sought and what we have in these instructions is a depiction of what would give dignity and honor in that time and place. We will need different styles and materials. It is not unlike the Lord's command that we wash one another's feet. In that time such a thing was a literal service rendered to people who walked dusty roads in sandals. In our day of socks and shoes, it is a metaphor for humble service of every kind. A minister's robe, even a clerical collar, works in the same way in our time to express what other clothing expressed in that long ago world.

The main point of all of this, after all is this: it is a *big deal* to come into God's presence. God himself clothes himself in glory, a glory so powerful, so radiant, so brilliant that no man has seen it or can see it and survive. It is a big deal to come into God's presence even when there was no sight of that glory and the worshipper had to grasp what is happening by faith. To aid that faith and that grasp, the tabernacle was built as it was, the altar as it was, and the priest was clothed as he was. We have the same needs as people did in those days; we have the same tendency to take God's otherness for granted, and to think it a small thing to come into his presence. We might say that such is the malady of American evangelical Christianity. To invest the office of minister, the one who speaks for God to you when you are in this house, and who, in some respects represents you to God – I say, to invest that office with dignity and honor is one way to preserve in our hearts more of a sense of God's holiness and majesty and the terrible seriousness of his presence. That has been an understanding – instinctive or reflective – of the Christian church through all its ages. To set aside this practice of dressing ministers in distinctive dress designed to invest the office with dignity and honor requires much better arguments than have so far been advanced.

Remember, what the minister wears says something. Culture always speaks. If a minister wears a business suit he may be saying I am a professional, or this is a formal occasion and I have dressed accordingly or, maybe alas, if you have enough faith you too can wear \$1000 suits and \$90 ties. If he wears informal clothing he may be saying, "Hey, I'm just one of the folks and I'm here to share some of my thoughts with you." If he is dressed in the uniform of his office, he ought to be saying, "I am the Lord's minister, and I am here to speak to you his Word and to declare to you his judgments."

As one liturgical scholar puts it:

"It must...be observed that the wearing of particular clothes to mark particular occasions or functions appears to be so nearly universal in the history of human society that it may be regarded as a natural cultural law, departure from which is not only psychologically unhealthy, but also in practice all but impossible: if, for example, the celebrant of the Eucharist today decides to wear 'ordinary clothes,' they immediately cease, psychologically, to be ordinary clothes, and become another form of symbolical ecclesiastical garb, their very ordinariness making an extraordinary theological or sociological point." [W.J. Grisbrooke, "Vestments," *The Study of Liturgy*, 543]

That is, a minister's dress will say something. The question is: what does it say? Does it invest the office with dignity and honor appropriate to the holiness of God whose servant he is, or does it do something else? No one thinks that this is the most important question we are facing in the church today. But the character of Christian worship, as the engine that drives the church and its ministry, its testimony and witness, and its internal holiness, is a matter of the greatest importance always and everywhere. The minister's dress is one of those factors, secondary in themselves, that contribute to the total effect of the worship and, therefore, is a matter of importance that must be considered. It is considered in the Bible and our answer to the question – what should the minister wear when presiding in the sanctuary – ought to be answered from the Bible. And we ought to do what the Bible tells us to do *for the Bible's own reasons*. Always the wisest, the safest way. This is one of the ways, among many in these instructions, by which the fact of God's holiness and majesty was brought home to the worshipping heart. We need that fact to be brought home to our hearts just as much as any previous generation of the saints ever did.