

“Getting to Know COTR: Why do the ministers wear robes and collars?”

(September 19, 2018)

Clothing is not merely utilitarian. It is not primarily for protection from the elements or for covering nakedness but primarily clothing is symbolic – it symbolizes blessing or cursing, joy or sorrow, authority or submission, honor or dishonor, or office or position.

This reality lies behind the fact that specific callings have historically required special clothing. Part of man’s restored glory is his calling and work. Thus, clothing represents calling. We often identify a man’s calling (what he’s authorized to do) by his clothing (policemen, firemen, judges, MacDonald’s workers, doctors, etc. by the special “clothing” he wears.

We are still very sensitive to the symbolism of dress. People don’t trust a “plain clothes” policeman (or doctors who don’t wear the white coat and carry stethoscopes). We are instinctively attuned to the symbolism of clothing whether we realize it or not.

What is true for other callings is also true of ministers. Special clothing for ministers was never considered unusual by the Church and of course this was so because God Himself ordained that His ministers wear distinctive clothing.

Ministerial Robes: In the Scriptures the Lord is said to be “robed” as a sign of His majesty and authority (Isa. 6:1). God “clothes Himself” with a garment of light (Psa. 104:1-2) and is described as wearing a white robe (Dan. 7:9). When Jesus revealed His glory to the apostles, His clothes became white like light (Matt. 17:2). This is so common, Satan imitates it (2 Cor. 11:14).

Man, as God’s image bearer, is also to be robed. When Adam and Eve sinned, God restored them to His favor and gave them “robes” to signify their restored condition (Gen. 3:21, the word “tunic” is used later to refer to a robe of authority – Joseph’s robe, Gen. 37:3). We are given new clothes when we are restored to communion with God (Isa. 61:10). Robing is symbolic of covenant privileges and blessings (Zech. 3:3-4).

Robes signify positions of rule and authority. Kings wore their robes when they exercised the functions of their office (1 Kings 22:10). Ezra, the elder and teacher, wore a robe – and tore it as a sign of the seriousness of the sin of Israel (Ezra 9:3). Joseph’s authority over the household business was signified by a robe (Gen. 37:3). Pharaoh honors Joseph in the same way (Gen. 41:42). King Ahasurus honors Mordicai in the same manner (Esther 6:8-9) and Belshazzar does the same for Daniel (Dan. 5:29). When Jonathan learns that David has been chosen by God to replace his father as King, he gives his robe to David (1 Sam. 18:4).

And thus, to lose the robe was symbolic of losing the office of authority (Isaiah 22:19-22). It is from the symbolic significance of the robe that we speak of a minister being “defrocked” – to be removed from office is equivalent to having his robe of authority taken away.

This also helps us understand the prohibition of men from wearing women’s clothing. For a man to wear a woman’s garment (or vice versa) is an abomination (Deut. 22:5) because the clothing signifies position and authority. For a man to wear women’s garments is to reject his calling and position as a man.

In Revelation the angels are clothed in white (they are ministering spirits and thus, wear the clothing of the office). And the elders of the Church as the representatives of Christ are clothed in white robes (Rev. 4:4) like Jesus Himself.

The priests of Israel were to wear distinctive garments:

1. Because every Israelite was a priest, all were required to wear distinctive clothing (Num. 15:37-41).
2. The house of Aaron were chosen as the special priests to Israel and therefore were also to be dressed in distinctive garb (Exo. 28:4,40-41). Notice, this not only distinguished them from the rest of Israel but set them apart as the special representatives of God to the people (and so their garments were to be glorious and beautiful).
3. Finally the High Priest (who was priest to all of Israel including the house of Aaron) had distinctive garments to signify his peculiar position and calling (Exodus 28).

The ministers of the church hold an analogous position to the Levitical priests in Israel. The priests in Israel were representatives of the people before God and the representatives of God to the people. The ministers in the church do precisely the same thing and so priestly functions are attributed to them in the N.T: 1. Elders are to anoint those who are sick (James 5:14-16). 2. Elders ordain men to office (i.e. impart the robe) by the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 4:14). 3. Elders are to teach and this too was the job of the Levites as well.

The Church has biblical warrant to have their ministers wear special clothing. The robes or special clothing was for the purpose of signifying the office of the minister and not the man in the office. The robe “hides” the man and sets the office in the forefront. To be robed is to remind the people symbolically that you are not speaking for yourself but for Jesus and you are not speaking in your own authority but by His authority. The robe does not draw attention to the man but to the office.

Conversely, to wear your own clothes while leading worship is to call attention to yourself and to push the office into the background. The robe reminds men that the minister has no authority apart from Jesus and the office to which Jesus has called him. He is *not* inherently *better* than other men. He, like the Levite, is distinguished only by his office.

Ministerial collars: The rationale for wearing clerical collars during the week is very much akin to the rationale for wearing robes and stoles in worship on Sunday. The robe reminds all of us that elders and ministers are the representatives of Christ and servants of the people of God. The stole (worn over the robe) represents the yoke of Jesus that every minister takes upon himself (Matt. 11:29-30). So, when the minister wears the stole, he is preaching a visual sermon, reminding people that he is serving as representative of the Savior.

To symbolize the servant role of the minister even further, ministers have traditionally worn special clothing for their everyday work. The traditional symbol marking clerical clothing is the clerical collar. Rather than being a symbol of worldly honor, the collar is the symbol of the slave. The Church adopted this as the distinctive symbol for its ministers to emphasize the fact that they are the “slaves of Christ.” Certainly every believer is a slave of Christ, but the minister is even more so in his role as servant of the servants of God. Like the robe, the purpose of the ministerial collar is to cover the man and accent his God-ordained office and calling.

Remember, ministerial garb is inescapable. All denominations have a particular form of dress which is expected and informally “required” of their ministers. All clothing is symbolic and this form of ministerial dress conveys a strong symbolic message. The message conveyed today is that ministers are more like businessmen and salesmen, than servants of the Lord.

This has had unhappy consequences for the church over the past century. More and more pastors have taken on the role of the corporate CEO and the “business model” has been increasingly adopted by the Church. In the same way, Charismatics and Pentecostals often view themselves as entertainers and performers, and they dress to fit the role.

When a minister wears a collar, however, the symbolism is completely different. The collar is identified exclusively with the Church.

Prior to the 19th century and the strong influence of egalitarian thinking in this country, it was expected that ministers of all denominations wear some sort of distinctive clothing. There was debate among Protestants over what sort of clothing the minister should wear but the fact that he should be publicly identifiable by his dress was not questioned. Even the Puritans who had strong objections to clerical dress, wore white “Geneva bands” which hung from the collar. Distinctive clerical dress was the predominant practice of nearly all mainline Protestant denominations up through the mid-1800s. It was only in the 20th century that this began to change.

Ministerial garb makes the Church more public and visible. Symbolism is inescapable and very powerful. We see this in regard to the business world, education, and politics – and, interestingly, evangelicals usually have no objections to symbolism and ritual in those areas – yet they object strongly to symbolism and ritual in the Church.

Why are Evangelical Christians completely comfortable with political and corporate symbolism and uniforms but oppose ecclesiastical uniforms? Most evangelicals have embraced the lie of Satan that the Church is secondary to the well-being of society. It’s certainly NOT as important as the university or medical society or the business or political world – where *the real work* is done. This is a huge mistake.

The lack of formal ministerial attire has affected how we worship and our attitude toward worship. Since the Church is no longer viewed as important in our society, the worship of the Church is no longer viewed as an important occasion. You see this in how most Christians dress for worship. You dress up for important occasions – but many no longer dress up for church!

One of the benefits of the ministers wearing special clothing (robes and collars) is that they remind us of the reality going on in our worship – that we are *in fact* entering into heaven itself to join with the worship that continually goes on before the throne of God. The most important activity we could ever do!

Objections:

Shouldn’t ministers be identified by their lives and words? Of course. Clerical collars don’t make a man a faithful minister any more than a soldier’s uniform makes him a brave soldier. No uniform can substitute for godly character and faithfulness. Ungodly men dishonor their uniforms.

Uniforms do not impart magical powers but they do perform the very valuable service of publicly identifying various callings. They quickly identify you to the world and tells them what you are called to do and thus, what they can expect from you. The ministerial uniform publicly identifies the ministers of Christ (the representatives of the Church) to the world.

Isn't this merely the influence of Rome on us? No. The Reformers exchanged the ministerial robes of the Church of Rome for the academic gowns they wore as professors in the Universities. It was the desire of the Reformers to avoid (at least for a season) some of those signs and symbols that, though legitimate in themselves, had become attached to unbiblical superstitions and practices. But we are not living during the Reformation and it is not proper to allow Rome to set the standard of what is appropriate or inappropriate. Refusing to do something simply because Rome does it is just as wrong as doing something just because Rome does it.

But most people don't know that the modern clerical collar was the invention of Presbyterians *not* the Roman Catholics. The modern form of the clerical collar was the brainchild of Donald McLeod, a Scots Presbyterian minister. Ken Collins notes, "McLeod's collar is an adaptation of earlier Protestant neckwear, such as the Presbyterian preaching bands. It was McLeod's adaptation of the clerical collar that was later adopted by the Roman Catholic Church at the First Synod of Westminster in England (1852) and in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in the US (1884), for use among its clergy."

Why wear white robes? Because white is what we see the resurrected Jesus and His servants wearing. White is symbolic of cleansing and victory. The color does not *have* to be white or completely white. Historically, it has not been viewed as inappropriate for the church to follow the various colors associated with the ecclesiastical year. Remember, it is the rainbow that clothes the throne of God (Rev. 4:3). Thus, all colors would be acceptable. But most often in Scripture we see Jesus and His ministers and His people clothed in white.

Doesn't the robe set the ministers apart from the people? Yes and for good reason. The ministers, when they lead worship, are set by God over the people as His representatives. They are not inherently more holy, but they are *distinct* by virtue of their office, gifts, and calling.

So, in wearing robes and stoles and collars, ministers are not trying to be something they're not – i.e. uppity, self-important, high-Churchmen. They're simply seeking to be more obviously what they are – servants of the risen Jesus in this community.