

How Should We Dress for Worship?

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Reading Time: 6 minutes

This may not be an issue at your church. If it isn't, there is no need for you to spend time reading this article. But in some places, the "how should we dress for worship?" question is rather controversial. Some feel strongly about this, and whenever people feel strongly about an issue the Bible does not much address, we are apt to find imbalance.

On one end of the spectrum is the "we should give God our best" group of people. While I've never heard **any** Christian say we shouldn't give God our best (cf. Col. 3:23), this group argues that giving God our best specifically means, in part, men wearing a "suit and tie" or women wearing a dress to worship. Some in this group would even claim that we honor God by our formal attire—it is actually a display of **irreverence** (or at least betrays an unrefined or easygoing attitude to worship) to dress down in some way. "It was discouraging to see so few men wearing ties," I've heard said more than once.

On the other end of the spectrum is the "we need to be real" group of people. While I've never heard any Christian say we shouldn't be genuine (cf. 1 John 3:18), this group argues

that dressing up too much is actually a form of immodesty (i.e. ostentatiousness). “If we worship God from the heart, the externals will take care of themselves,” this group argues. They see no direct Biblical or cultural correlation today between **reverence** and **formal attire**. Some grew up in churches that were in fact shallow in their teaching while putting an inordinate emphasis on external appearances (perhaps you have at least visited churches like this), and now—for better or for worse—formal worship attire for these same people is reminiscent of dysfunctional Christianity. They are apt to find an unspoken “suit and tie” dress code to be stuffy, artificial, and pretentious. As societal norms change, outsiders may increasingly feel uncomfortable among churches that expect formal attire. “People were so dressed up at this church, I found it distracting,” I’ve heard said more than once.

How do we find the truth on this matter? To answer the question, we need to first be impressed with the absence of “book, chapter, verse” commands in the Bible about how to specifically dress for worship. Compared to the Old Testament, it is striking how **indifferent** the New Testament is about such things as worship buildings, worship attire, weekly worship times, worship rituals, worship length, or ceremonial objects. The reason being is the Old Testament worship was a shadow of the mystery that has now been revealed. In the New Testament, the focus is on the reality and preeminence of Christ, not the shadow and copy of religious objects and forms (see Heb. 7:26–8:7). The Old Testament pattern is not our standard, and thus we must not bind today where God has not bound. We should never introduce conditions to worship that God has not instituted (cf. Matt. 15:1-3).

With that being said, there are two (2) governing principles in the New Testament that **do** dictate how we should dress in a worship setting.

1. Christians must dress modestly

“...Women should **adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty** and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire” (1 Timothy 2:9). Interestingly, this is the only passage in the New Testament that specifically addresses our clothing in a worship context (though it is relevant outside of worship, too).

Christians here are commanded to wear clothes that are *aidōs*, or discrete/restrained. The KJV perhaps more accurately translates the word today rendered “modesty” as “shamefacedness.” There are parts of the body that are shameful to reveal or expose (cf. 1 Cor. 12:23).

Clothing is immodest, and therefore inappropriate, in one of two ways: (1) If it is sexually

revealing, or (2) if it invites an inordinate amount of attention to oneself. It is immodest to wear clothing that is too short, too tight, or too revealing. Furthermore, it is immodest to dress so extravagantly that everyone can't help but notice **you**. Do we assemble so we can glory in ourselves, or so we can glory in the Father? Our attire should be both **muted** and **chaste**.

One area of personal frustration is the inconsistency among a few churches with shepherds who enforce a "suit and tie" policy (perhaps for worship leaders), yet who seemingly do nothing to ensure members—specifically women—are taught to dress in a sexually modest fashion. In the first case, the Bible more or less silent, but in the other case, the Bible is very clear.

2. Christians must dress so as not to offend

The only other passage that references how to dress in the context of church life is 1 Peter 5:5: "***Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another***, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). While this verse is using clothing metaphorically, the principle is applicable to our actual clothing—we must dress in a way that is in step with the Christians around us. Are my clothes primarily about **my** tastes, or am I living for a higher calling?

This is why it is difficult to give a cookie-cutter answer to the question, "How should we dress for worship?" Not every congregation shares the same cultural nuances. I know in some churches, it is expected that members dress in a more formal manner. Here, attire does communicate reverence. In which case, many would find it objectionable to intentionally wear jeans and a t-shirt. Wearing such would be offensive and distracting. In other churches, you generally see members dressing in a more casual or business-casual manner. In which case, wearing a suit and tie can be objectionable and distracting (and also, in this setting a "suit and tie" could actually be immodest). Christians are to adapt to their cultural surroundings (1 Cor. 9:19-27; cf. 1 Cor. 11:2-16). Perhaps a good question for a Christian to ask himself in whatever culture he finds himself is this: "What statement am I making with my attire?" **Different cultures speak different languages, not only words and local dialects, but in their norms of dress.**

When we assemble, we are to serve one another. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Matt. 20:26). **If I am knowingly "pushing the envelope" with my attire by dressing in a way that draws undue attention to myself, I have**

developed—perhaps unintentionally—a divisive attitude. Christian fellowship is about submitting to one another (Eph. 5:21). That means worship is not about me nor is it about my preferences. Paul said he would not do something as simple as eating meat among Christians if he knew there was a brother present who had a conscience issue with it (1 Cor. 8:13). If men wear suits, then wear a suit. If people don't, then don't.

“Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28). Does this apply to how we are to dress for worship? It certainly does. But culture plays an important role in dictating how norms of dress communicate reverence. (And, increasingly in American society, a “suit and tie” doesn't always best communicate reverence.)

Let's Make Worship More Meaningful

There is a stunning de-emphasis in the New Testament on clothing in the worship assembly. “If a man wearing [...] fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a man [...] in shabby clothing also comes in,” you are not to make “distinctions” between the two. To do so would be “evil” (James 2:2-4). Doesn't this mean clothing should be a non-issue for us today? If our metric for acceptable worship is, “How many are wearing suits and ties?” then we are practicing a very shallow Christianity. “Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear” (1 Pet. 3:3). Here's a suggestion: Let's try to be less fault-finding of one another and of congregations in matters where God has allowed human judgment.

There are *real* concerns that should be present at every congregation. Are there substantive, meaty, convicting lessons being taught from the pulpit? Are the elders ensuring sound doctrine is being practiced? Are members being held accountable and being challenged to grow? Is there an emphasis on living holy lives? Is there an atmosphere of love and patience? These are battles worth fighting. Let's restore New Testament Christianity. Our battles need to be kept from a more biblical perspective. Let us press on to maturity (Hebrews 6:1-2).

But one hill not worth dying on is maintaining today how people dressed “in the good ole' days.” That is irrelevant in our task of going back to the Bible. We are not interested in restoring religion how it may have been practiced in American yesteryear. Maintaining traditions of dress for the sake of traditions, without being mindful of the cultural landscape, is inherently sectarian. What should we wear to worship? Dress modestly and humbly in a way that is expected at your congregation—in a way that does not detract from our reverence of God. That way, we can more easily keep our eyes on Jesus.

