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A collection of articles and quotes to aid your family in daily living.

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Worship Wear

The New Testament provides very few specifics regarding appropriate apparel in worship. This is in keeping with the spiritual nature of the New Covenant, which deals more with principles. Unlike the Jewish law, which set aside a select group of men as priests and went into great detail about the garments they were to wear in worship (see Exodus 39), the New Testament emphasizes that all Christians are priests, offering “*spiritual sacrifices*” (1 Peter 2:4-9), but it does not prescribe any particular garb. Because it is a tremendous responsibility and priceless privilege to come into God’s presence each Sunday, however, several principles relating to our worship wear are worth considering.

There are two passages in the New Testament that directly address our “Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes.” The first is 1 Timothy 2, in which the apostle Paul provides guidelines regarding the behavior of both men and women in worship. To the men he says, “*I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger and disputing*” (verse 8).

Paul’s point for men? **WORSHIP IS NOT ABOUT YOU!** Don’t cause a distraction by acting in an overbearing manner. Leave your ego, your competitiveness, your anger outside the assembly. When we gather in the presence of an Almighty God, it should be with humility and holiness.

To the women Paul writes: “*I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God*” (verses 9-10).

Paul’s point for women? **WORSHIP IS NOT ABOUT YOU!** Don’t cause a distraction by dressing in an ostentatious way that draws undue attention to you. Contemporary authors such as Juvenal and Philo shed light on this passage when they complain about the extravagantly expensive, flamboyantly showy outfits worn by wealthy women in the first century.

When we gather in the presence of an Almighty God, it should be with humility and holiness. Note especially Paul’s emphasis on the basis of a spiritual, inner beauty rather than a merely external physical attractiveness. This contrast is echoed in 1 Peter 3:3-6 and Proverbs 31:30.

The second passage is James 2, where God’s Word strongly condemns catering to a rich man who enters the congregational assembly “*wearing a gold ring and fine clothes*” while at the same time snubbing “*a poor man in shabby clothes*” who wanders into our worship service. If we fall all over ourselves to lavishly welcome the well-dressed visitor, while looking down our nose at the man whose clothing is out-of-style or threadbare, James sternly warns that we have “*discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts*”!

When James warns us not to make anyone feel unwelcome in our worship assemblies simply because they cannot afford the latest fashions, he reflects one of the major themes of the Bible: God’s special concern for the poor and powerless (Leviticus 14:21; Proverbs 31:9; Luke 4:18; Galatians 2:10; etc.). Moreover, it was God Himself who reminded Samuel, “*The Lord does not look at the things mans looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*” (1 Samuel 16:7).

It reminds me of my first regular preaching position: a small country congregation some eleven miles out in the West Tennessee countryside from Freed-Hardeman University. Several of the men came to worship each Sunday in

their best overalls, and while their attire might not have “fit in” at a more sophisticated city church, they were among the finest Christians I have ever known.

A generation ago it was common to hear the guideline: “When you come to worship, you should wear your very best.” While that maxim contains a grain of truth – we don’t want to show contempt for God by intentionally dressing in a slovenly way – it also runs an inherent risk of turning worship into an unequal fashion show, since a wealthy Christian’s “very best” may be far superior to a poor saint’s clothing. In another passage regarding worship behavior, Paul warned the rich Christians in the Corinthian congregation not to “*humiliate those who have nothing*” (1 Corinthians 11:22).

That is why no church serious about reaching the poor will enforce an arbitrarily formal dress code. I intentionally vary my own preaching wardrobe – sometimes wearing a tie, sometimes not – in order to make sure that no sincere seeker will ever feel uncomfortable simply because he doesn’t own a suit. I want to be part of a church where the man in a three-piece suit and his brother in a polo shirt can worship side-by-side, each fully comfortable in his own attire, neither critical of the other’s, and both focused only on our awesome God.

The basic principle for worship wear is that we do want to have a holy and reverent focus, and we don’t want to create a distraction for others. Our attire may be casual, but it should never be carnal. The following suggestions are purely personal,

but they represent an honest attempt on the part of this preacher to apply those principles to both men and women. For MEN, I would make the following suggestions:

1. First, any clothing that displays vulgar messages, uses questionable language, or features advertisements for beer should be avoided, so don’t just smell your tee-shirt before you put it on. Be sure to read your clothing first, to make sure you don’t become a walking billboard for worldliness.

2. Second, Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 11:7 that Christian men, unlike Jews, worshiped with their heads uncovered out of respect for God, so park your baseball cap, doo rag, or cowboy hat at the door.

3. Third, there’s a reason it is called “*underwear*” – so invest in a good belt.

4. Finally, if you’re going through a midlife crisis, take this friendly word of advice: no one really wants to see your hairy chest, even if it is adorned with gold chains, so button up your shirt.

Guidelines for WOMEN:

1. First, we have seen that Paul warned women in the First Century against causing a distraction by over-dressing. Given the skimpy styles of our Twenty-First Century culture, it is just as likely to involve *under-dressing* today. I said a moment ago that we don’t have an arbitrarily formal dress code. Given the current state of fashion in our society, however, I would like to propose a simple, two-word clothing guideline: “***Wear some!***”

2. Second, ask yourself, “What message is my outfit sending?” When Solomon warns naïve young men against the wiles of ut-

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terly immoral women who seek to seduce them into committing adultery, his description contains a vivid phrase: she was “*dressed like a prostitute*” (Proverbs 7:20). In other words, this temptress had deliberately chosen a provocative outfit which “advertised” her availability. God forbid that any Christian woman should wear the kind of clothing that communicates a message to carnal men that her morals are questionable.

3. Third, when Jesus warns men against the problem of “*looking at a woman lustfully*” (Matthew 5:28) he recognizes the fact that men are visually tempted. We are emphatically warned against causing a brother to stumble (Romans 14:20; 1 Corinthians 10:32), so ladies, out of consideration for your Christian brothers, please do not wear clothing to worship (or in any other setting!) that might lead them to commit this sin. Specifically, refrain from wearing low-cut, cleavage-baring blouses; up-to-there hemlines; short shorts; strapless, backless, shameless dresses; or any tight-fitting, form-revealing, “hey, look at me!” outfit.

I am not suggesting that women have to look *ugly* in order to be *holy*. I do believe, however, that in our morally-confused world we need to make a distinction between dressing attractively and dressing seductively, and especially in our worship assemblies. –Dan Williams, El Dorado, Arkansas www.cacoc.org