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## “WHY DO THEY DRESS THAT WAY IN CHURCH?”

- 1 The question in my title this month arises from my days in Campus Ministry. Adult visitors to our Sunday worship on campus – often the parents of students – would sometimes ask that question of me. Or more often repress asking that question outright, but nevertheless harbour that judgement inwardly, and perhaps verbalize it only later, in a setting or context when it felt safer to do so.
- 2 “Why do they dress that way in church?” Why, that is, can you find students at worship in a campus congregation on a Sunday morning dressed in blue jeans or even shorts and tee shirt, even barefoot in sandals?
- 3 The question receives concentration and focus when you place it alongside a question often asked – or internalized – by student worshippers, when they see adults – their own fathers, perhaps – in suit and tie, and their mothers, perhaps, in dress and even hat and gloves.
- 4 Let me suggest a mediating response to both questions. An attempt at bridge-building between two pieties.
- 5 There’s a type of piety abroad among Christians – I myself was brought up in it, nurtured in it – that maintains it’s impolite to dress in anything but your best when you go to church. Going to church is like meeting the Queen. You’d want to look properly put together. You want to “dress up” to show respect.
- 6 Women would never go to church, in my childhood, dressed in slacks. Always a dress. Maybe even a hat and gloves. Men always in suit and tie. Never even an open necked sport shirt. A sport coat and slacks, on a man, was pretty close to crossing a line.

7 That piety still persists, in many places. The American South, for example. My daughter's Presbyterian Church in Kentucky is a case in point. Men almost invariably wear jacket and tie. Preferably a suit, with matching trousers and jacket. Sport coat and slacks? Maybe. You almost expect ushers and greeters to be wearing white gloves and flowered boutonniere.

8 And women? Never slacks, always a dress. Among older women even, always a hat. "It's in the Bible: Women should not be uncovered in church". *1 Corinthians 11:5*.

9 I can understand that piety, and honour it. It's a piety that wants to show respect. But there's an alternative piety that I also understand and honour, and that's observable among contemporary students.

10 That student piety says this: I'm not going to pretend before God. I wear blue jeans and tee shirt and sandals all week. That's who I am. I do not want to dissemble before God on Sundays. Put on airs. Pretend before God that I am someone I am not. My shorts and sandals are the authentic "me". Don't ask me to change, just because it's Sunday.

11 Now, can one piety come to respect the other? Can the adult refrain from accusing the student of dishonour, when that student appears in church in shorts and sandals? And: Can the student refrain from assuming that the adult is a phony, when the adult appears on Sunday in suit and tie?

12 Respect?. Or authenticity? I'd be willing to endorse both pieties on Sunday morning. I'd be willing to celebrate both responses. Even when they appear to conflict.

13 It would be a wise and compassionate congregation that points out the admirable qualities in both pieties to its worshippers, with some regularity. And steadfastly refuse to impose a Sunday dress code!

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