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What Should We Wear to Church?



Article by [Jon Bloom](#) 

Staff writer, desiringGod.org

When I was a little boy, probably 80% of men wore a coat and tie to our church, and 90% of women wore dresses. By the time I was in high school, 40% of men wore a coat and tie, and 50% of women wore dresses to church — the majority of both genders being middle-aged and elderly. Everyone else dressed “business casual.” Jeans were rare. Tee shirts even rarer. Shorts were never seen outside the nursery, even in mid-July.

Today, in the church I attend, no man wears a suit or sport coat unless it’s a special occasion. And ties are seen less than coats. I’d say less than 5% of women wear dresses on Sunday. Shorts, tee shirts, and sandals are commonly worn in warmer weather. My young son wonders why he has to “dress up” for church if I tell him to change into better jeans and a nicer tee shirt.

In the small Protestant denomination I belong to, no pastor I know of preaches in a coat or tie on a typical Sunday. Pastors, worship team members, and other platform participants dress pretty much like everyone else minus the shorts, tee shirts, and sandals.

These changes in what people wear to church reflect the wider cultural changes over the past fifty years regarding clothing. The whole of American culture has dressed down. This has produced largely generational debates over appropriate church attire. Those who favor more formal dress suspect casual clothes reflect a disrespectful, irreverent attitude toward God. Those who favor casual dress feel it reflects a more authentic approach to God. Does either have a biblical case?

Does God tell us what we should wear to church?

More Respectful?

The debate over formal versus casual church clothing is a shrinking one for at least two reasons: 1. the pro-formal party is shrinking, and 2. the pro-formal remnant is now so outnumbered it hardly seems worth the effort to argue.

Most folks who lament the casual trend came of age in an era where public dress in general was more formal. They, like most people in every era, simply assumed their own cultural norms. It just wasn't "right" to wear casual clothes in certain places, especially in church.

So, as the cultural clothing norms changed, and people — typically younger people — started wearing casual clothes to those places, including church, it felt "wrong." It felt like a form of disrespect, even rebellion, toward the older generations. In church, it felt like disrespect, even rebellion, toward God.

But is this true? Certainly, on the microlevel of sinful individuals, plenty of rebellion toward elders and God took place, just as it has in all generations. The pro-formal crowd had their own generational expressions of rebellion. But from a biblical standpoint, there is no compelling exegetical case to be made that more formal dress is *de facto* more respectful toward God than casual dress. Church clothing is a preference formed by culture and tradition.

More Authentic?

On the other hand, many of those who embrace the trend toward more casual have come of age during the dressing-down decades, and they are just as vulnerable to assuming the cultural norms that have shaped them. It feels "fine" to wear jeans and a tee shirt to church, perhaps the same ones worn on Saturday. But why does it feel okay?

As I mentioned before, "authenticity" is the most popular answer. We are coming to God as we are, putting on no airs or masks with him.

It sounds good, but I don't really buy it. Wearing casual clothes is no more *de facto* spiritually authentic than formal clothes are *de facto* spiritually respectful. We might not be at all authentic standing before God in our jeans. We may choose casual clothes primarily to fit in socially, or to attract attention to ourselves, or to nurture a "cool" image. In other words, we may wear casual clothes to church and worship God with our lips, while our hearts are far from him ([Isaiah 29:13](#)).

Perhaps casual clothes can help us approach God more authentically in ways formal clothes don't. Perhaps formal clothes can help us express respect and reverence toward God in ways casual clothes don't. I have significant doubts about both.

What God Wants Us to Wear

God does not explicitly endorse either formal or casual clothes in corporate worship. He doesn't even enter the debate. In fact, outside of ritual Levitical laws that no longer apply in the new covenant, God says virtually nothing regarding how we should dress when we come together to worship him.

It's not that clothing doesn't matter to God. Clothing matters a great deal to God — just not in the same ways or for the same reasons it typically matters to us. God refuses to decide the formal-casual debate, but he does explicitly tell us what he wants us to wear to church:

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](#))

What are we supposed to wear? Humility.

All clothing — formal, casual, work, sport, beachwear, sleepwear, underwear, headwear, every other kind of wear — can be a source of great pride. There isn't a clothing item or style that we can't turn into an expression of self-centered, self-exalting self-worship.

But if we clothe ourselves with humility, if we "count others more significant than [ourselves]," and "look not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others," then no matter how we dress, we will honor and reflect Christ ([Philippians 2:3–4](#)).

The Clothes Inside Us

God doesn't specify what external clothes honor him most, because he cares what our hearts wear. What's inside of us either honors him or dishonors him — either approaches him with authenticity or with inauthenticity. If our hearts are wearing humility, no matter what we wear, we will dress in loving ways. If our hearts are wearing pride, formal clothes will always be disrespectful and casual clothes will always be inauthentic.

If our hearts are wearing humility, what will matter to us is whether God is glorified and others are loved. But if our hearts are wearing pride, we will disregard God's glory and others' spiritual health in favor of our personal preferences and freedoms.

And, in the end, if our hearts are wearing humility, we will think of our clothes as little as possible when we draw near to God together in worship.