

Why the Pastor Wears a Robe

Michael Brown

“What’s up with the robe?” This may be a question that you have quietly asked yourself as you witnessed the pastor wearing a black Genevan gown in the pulpit. You may have wondered what purpose the robe serves and whether or not it is really necessary. Perhaps you grew up in a church where the pastor never wore such apparel. He may have only wore business attire or, like the pastors many of us grew up with, Hawaiian shirts. If this is the case, then the pulpit gown might seem a little weird to you. It might seem slightly Rome-ish or too “high church” for your taste. On the other hand, you may have grown up in a Reformed or Lutheran church in which the minister regularly wore a pulpit gown, and thus the practice comes as no surprise or shock to you. But whatever your personal experience and preference may be, we must approach the matter of the minister’s gown like any other practice in worship and ask: What is the purpose of this? Our mere familiarity or unfamiliarity with a particular practice does not make a practice right or wrong. We must determine whether or not the practice is biblical and if it facilitates, rather than impedes, the acceptable worship of God with reverence and awe.

For this reason, let me point out four arguments in favor of the pulpit gown.

1. THE PULPIT GOWN EMPHASIZES THE OFFICE, NOT THE MAN

The minister of the Word has been appointed to a particular office (Eph 4.8-14; 1 Tim 5.17; 2 Tim 4.1-5; Heb 13.17; etc.). His chief responsibility is to bring God’s Word and administer the sacraments to the flock of Christ. He is, therefore, a Christ-appointed emissary and ambassador for the gospel. When God’s people gather together in the covenant assembly of worship, the minister is acting in his most official capacity. When he steps into the pulpit, he is functioning in the prophetic role of bringing the means of grace to the people of God. This is how God has chosen to act and perform his work of sanctifying his people, through his preached gospel and his administered sacraments.

The pulpit gown reminds us of this. It draws our attention away from the man, his personality and his personal taste in clothing, and reminds us of the office that Christ—not man—has appointed. It reminds us that God is acting in the worship service and performing his work through his ordained office. Just as a judge in a courtroom wears a gown as a reminder to the people of his or her office, and that he or she is an appointed spokesperson for justice, so too the

*minister wears a gown as a reminder that in the worship service he is acting as a spokesperson for God. He opens the canon of Scripture and breaks the bread of life for the Lord's people. Rev. Jeff Myers, pastor of Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church (PCA) in St. Louis, Missouri, makes the point very clear in his article, *Why Does the Pastor Wear a Robe? A Defense of the Use of the Ministerial Robe in Public Worship*:*

When [the minister] leads the congregation in prayer before God, he represents Christ leading the church in prayer before the Father. When he reads and preaches the Word, he symbolizes Christ, the Husband, speaking to his holy bride. The robe is not meant to set him above the congregation, but to set him apart because of his unique office as pastor during the Lord's Day worship service.

*Likewise, Rev. Daniel Hyde, pastor of Oceanside United Reformed Church, says in his forthcoming book, *What to Expect When You Worship With Us*:*

[The robe] may seem strange, especially if you are used to "getting to know the man" in the pulpit. There is a time and a place for the minister to get to know his people casually, socially, and intimately, but the time for this is not in the pulpit. In the pulpit, the minister is your minister, who serves the Lord by feeding your soul with spiritual food.

2. THE PULPIT GOWN IS A DISTINCTLY PROTESTANT PRACTICE, NOT ROMAN CATHOLIC

Contrary to what many people might assume, pulpit gowns did not originate with the Roman Catholic church; rather, they were originally worn by ministers in the ancient church, and again by Protestant pastors from the time of the Reformation and for hundreds of years thereafter. These robes were different, however, from those of Roman Catholic priests. It was not until Rome adopted and began to teach an unbiblical view of the priesthood that certain abuses came into being with the robe and priestly garments were fashioned. Instead of a plain gown worn in the pulpit, Roman Catholic priests began wearing very elaborate and ornate robes with complex symbols known as vestments. This came from, as well as promoted, the notion of the priest being above the congregation, rather than merely set apart as an officer of Word and sacrament.

During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the Reformers sought to correct this unbiblical view of the priesthood. They argued from Scripture in their preaching, teaching and writing that the pastor is a divinely appointed servant of the church, not an exalted individual with a greater spiritual status than the laity. His authority in the church is ministerial

authority, not magisterial authority. To that end, the Reformers sought to do away with vestments and simply wore plain black preaching robes, later known as ‘Genevan gowns.’ Writing in 1524 on behalf of Protestant ministers in Strassbourg, the great Reformer Martin Bucer explained the change in this way:

[I]n our churches we have completely done away with and abolished everything which has no basis in the Scriptures and which has been added to the Lord’s Supper without any justification in the Scriptures and therefore has been an insult and a slander of Christ and of the divine mercies...the priest and servant of the congregation does not wear a special vestment, only what we call the choir gown, and none of the sacrificial vestments such as alb, stole, chasuble, etc.

But the Protestant Reformers did not throw the baby out with the bathwater. They would never have considered it acceptable for a minister to wear his street clothes or fashionable business attire while conducting the worship service. The importance of the pulpit gown was universally understood. Consequently, Reformed and Presbyterian ministers since the sixteenth century regularly wore the Genevan gown whenever leading worship. The evidence—both written and artistic—reveals that men like John Owen, Herman Witsius and Thomas Goodwin from the seventeenth century, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Boston from the eighteenth century as well as countless others, all wore pulpit gowns whenever they led worship. It was simply the norm in Protestant congregations on the European continent, the British Isles and the Americas. Even in the twentieth century, men like Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the most gifted preachers of the twentieth century, exhorted students at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia to wear a gown when they entered the pulpit as a sign of their call to the office.

Clearly, the claim that the pulpit gown is a Rome-ish device is an illegitimate charge. The pulpit gown is distinctly Protestant attire and consistent with our theology. But if that is true, then what happened to the regularity of the gown in so many pulpits? Why have ministers in evangelical churches typically opted for business suits and beachwear instead of a robe during worship?

3. THE PULPIT GOWN WAS REMOVED BY REVIVALISM

Two movements come to mind: the first is the egalitarian and populist movement of the nineteenth century. Men like Charles Finney and Alexander Campbell sought to make Christianity appealing to the democratic spirit of the

American masses. They propagated an anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional religion that privatized Christianity and exalted the experience and autonomy of the individual over the collective will of any congregation or ecclesiastical assembly. They called for a revolution within the church that would place clergy and laity on equal footing in every way, thus doing away with (not to mention misunderstanding the purpose of) institutional forms of church government (including membership) as well as important ecclesiastical practices such as Geneva gowns and raised pulpits. The idea was to make the minister look and feel like “any other man” as much as possible, and whose preaching in the pulpit was no more significant than the private individual’s personal reading of the Scriptures. The result was a tremendous upsurge in untrained pastors and anti-creedal, anti-confessional congregations with very little organization and very poor theology. But because their methods were so appealing to the democratic mindset of the American general public, these men were largely successful in their revolution. Consequently, we have what we have today in modern evangelicalism: radical informality in worship, not to mention radical ignorance in doctrine and radical need for another reformation!

The other movement that comes to mind which has severely affected our approach to worship and has bearing on the regularity of the pulpit gown is that wonderful era known as the 60s. As evangelicalism sought to reach the masses, many so-called “non-denominational” churches began to pop up around the United States. In Southern California in particular, some of these churches essentially baptized the hippie subculture, creating what was known as the “Jesus People” movement and, subsequently, the contemporary Christian music phenomenon. Pulpit gowns, therefore, just didn’t fit into an atmosphere of praise bands and afterglows. It smacked of the authority and formality which much of that generation was rebelling against. Thus, it should come as no surprise when today we see numerous “successful” pastors of the baby-boomer generation regularly wearing Hawaiian shirts in the pulpit.

But while we might agree that such breezy, laid-back attire is inappropriate for a pastor while he is leading God’s people in holy worship, we must ask: what is appropriate attire for the pastor during the service? From whom should we take our cue? As Protestants, we certainly do not take it from Rome, but neither should we take it from revivalists like Charles Finney, nor the culture in which we live. While suits, starched shirts and conservative ties might be the norm for the business world, we must remember that the minister is not a CEO of a corporation. He is an ordained servant of the gospel and called to lead God’s

people in worship on the Lord's Day. While the pulpit gown is certainly not commanded in Scripture (clothing is circumstantial to but not an element of worship), we would be wise in this matter to listen to and learn from our Reformed forefathers who have gone before us.

4. THE PULPIT GOWN ADDS TO THE REVERENCE OF OUR SERVICE

In Hebrews 12.28b-29, we are commanded: "let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." The pulpit gown compliments a reverent atmosphere. It helps set the tone of the service, which should be awe in our hearts as we have gathered to worship a holy God. Again, think of a judge in a courtroom; what would be your reaction if he entered the courtroom dressed like one of the jurors or attorneys? His personal clothing would detract not only from his position as a man who is supposed to be impartial for the sake of justice, but it would also detract from the respect we are to have for law and order in society. It would inevitably change the tone in the courtroom.

The same is true with the worship service. Our clothing communicates a message. And the clothing of the minister does this in particular. Why is it that we expect judges to wear gowns when they are in the courtroom, but we want our ministers to wear business attire when they lead worship? Is it for sound theological reasons or merely because that is what we are accustomed to? C. S. Lewis has said, "The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the worshiper's inability to forget himself in the rite, and his readiness to spoil for everyone else the proper place of ritual."

Thus, before we scoff at and rashly dismiss the idea of the pulpit gown in worship, let us consider many of the sound reasons why ministers have, historically, worn such attire. As worshipers at Christ URC, may we do all we can to have our focus upon the gospel of Jesus Christ brought to us each week. May we always have our attention drawn to the work of Christ and his apostles, outside of whom the minister has no authority. And may we seek to offer God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, knowing that it is he who speaks to us each Lord's Day as his Word is opened for us by the office he ordained.