

Question: When I was growing up, men always wore suits and ties when going to church, and women wore nice dresses. What would Jesus say about our way of dress in worship?

Somewhere there must be a picture that was kept of my brother and me in the 1950's wearing our suits, ties and hats with pink hatbands. We always dressed up in our finest when going to church. If a man or boy did not have a coat and tie on, he would not have been permitted to lead in the public worship assembly in any way. Unfortunately, this practice often made people feel embarrassed and ashamed to enter some church buildings for worship because they could not afford nice clothing.

In contrast to the above, many of the American pioneer churches of 150 to 200 years ago felt it was wrong to "dress up" in high fashion for the worship assembly. Their reasoning was based on the following scriptures: "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes" (1 Timothy 2:9); and "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight" (1 Peter 3:3-4).

While we do appreciate the desire to honor our Lord with our very best, the Bible teaches that God is more concerned with the heart than with any outward appearance of a person (1 Samuel 16:7; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:12). To impose on people any generation's cultural preference in dress styles would clearly disrespect the will of God as revealed in the Bible. In fact, we are warned not to judge people or to show favoritism that is based on the way a person may dress when he or she enters the assembly of God's people. James wrote: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:1-4).

Since Jesus said nothing personally about what kind of clothing to wear, I think it is safe to assume that he would place the emphasis on the inward person that God sees and not on the outward appearance that he public sees (Matthew 6:1-18; Luke 16:15).

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