

Why I Wear A Minister's Uniform

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I have begun to wear the recognized uniform of my calling—the white tab-collared shirt—with more frequency these days. Some of you may have never seen me wear the pastor's collar. You are more likely to now that I have become convinced that I need to wear a ministerial uniform around town during the week. Many of the same arguments I used seven years ago to defend the use of the pastoral robe in worship apply here as well. I will not, however, be wearing my collar for the Sunday services. The robe is sufficient for the worship service. You all know that I am a pastor. The collar is for my weekday ministry. It will serve to identify me as a minister in the community. For me there is one overriding reason for wearing a collar: it can open doors for evangelism and ministry in the community that I would otherwise miss. I am convinced this is true. Whenever I have worn my collar in the past, I have always been surprised at the results. I want the congregation to be comfortable with this practice. That is why I'm writing this little essay.[†] Once you think over the reasons and hear about the results, I think you will understand and accept the uniform as a helpful way for us to have more visibility in our community.

"Hold your horses," someone may say. "If you need a collar to do ministry then you've got a problem. You should be identified as a Christian minister simply by your life and words." I've actually had someone (not a member of this congregation) say this to me. I do think that there's more than a little truth in such a statement. Surely a collar alone does not make one a minister. But I don't think it's really that simple. The real question is not whether I *need* one, but will wearing a uniform help me *better* perform my ministry in the community. I certainly don't *need* a collar to do ministry. I will never claim that it is *necessary*. Rather, I think it is *beneficial*. The same holds true for other professions. A waiter or EMT specialist doesn't need a uniform, but it sure helps. And if it is helpful for waiters, policeman, doctors, even UPS drivers to be readily identifiable by their uniform, shouldn't the same hold true for pastors?

Furthermore, I don't deny that a collar *alone* is worthless. There must be godly living and speaking if there is to be any real ministerial service to others. To be sure, some ministers may wear a collar out of haughtiness and self-promotion. Some may even misinterpret my decision to wear the pastoral collar as arrogance—a kind of spiritual one-up-manship. I'm a minister and you're not. Look at me! But I know my own motivations. I fully expect that a few will call me pompous and elitist. But that is not the effect that wearing the uniform of a pastor has on me. It affects me in just the opposite way. The actor Laurence Olivier once said that he could not become a character until he had decided upon the right nose. Clothes do the same thing for us. A moment's reflection will show that the kind of clothes you wear affects the way you behave. There's a powerful short story by Ray Bradbury called "The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit" in which six down-and-out men

experience a miraculous transformation in their attitude and behavior when they wear a brand-new white suit around town for an evening.

When I wear a collar I am continually reminded of my accountability as a minister of the Gospel. In a word, I speak and behave differently. I have a constant reminder that I am a slave of Jesus Christ. With all due respect to those ministers who don't wear a collar, I find dressing like a West County banker or lawyer to be a much greater temptation. Why should I pretend I'm someone I'm not? Why should I wear clothes that affect me in ways that do not contribute to my ministry? I think the offense of the collar is often determined in large part by the man wearing it. If he's a smart aleck with a haughty attitude, he'll probably come off as a high-church upstart. This is a real temptation. Nevertheless, I think wearing the collar will actually serve to curb this temptation for me. It will constantly remind me of my calling, of how I should speak and act before the world as a representative of Jesus Christ and his Church.

Moreover, if I wear a uniform, I can no longer travel around town incognito. What I say and do will be evaluated differently by everyone who sees and hears me. Wearing the collar will be an act of self-denial, a helpful means of rectifying my own sinful tendency to hide my calling. That white tab over my voice box will remind me of the need for sanctified, life-giving speech. While I'm out in the community, I must take Paul's charge to Pastor Timothy with the utmost seriousness: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:6).

Think about the office of the pastor and what kind of work he should be doing. The pastor is *not* a businessman. He is *not* the CEO of the ecclesiastical corporation with its headquarters at the intersection of Sappington and Eddie & Park. I always feel a little uncomfortable in a starched shirt, suit and tie. It tends to contribute toward a very real problem in our PCA churches. We tend to attract upper-middle class people. People in these economic strata are comfortable around a pastor whose uniform is a suit and tie. Poorer people, however, often find it hard to relate to a pastor who dresses like and acts like a banker or businessman. I often sense that what I wear erects unfortunate barriers in certain situations. Talking to a poorer man or woman wearing a Polo shirt doesn't make sense.

I think it's important for us to reflect on how our pastors are dressed. Just because a congregation doesn't have their pastor wear a robe on Sunday or a collar on the weekdays doesn't mean that they escape the idea of a uniform. In the modern Evangelical subculture pastors are expected to dress conservatively. This usually means a blue or dark suit, a white starched shirt, a conservative necktie, etc. As I have already pointed out, the problem is that this attire is the typical weekday *uniform* of a lawyer or middle to upper management businessman. Unfortunately, it has become *de facto* the American Evangelical clerical garb. I think this "uniform" often communicates precisely the wrong message in our churches and the communities in which we minister. Our pastors too often seek to conform to the patterns and symbols of authority prevalent in American middle class culture. It is simply not possible to escape the symbolism of clothing. When

[†] This brief paper is not an in-depth theological explanation and defense. If anyone wants to read about this further, I will be happy to recommend some references. Unfortunately, the historical information on pastoral dress must be gleaned from a variety of sources. There is no one book or article that adequately deals with this subject.

a minister wears a collar, however, it helps him and the people he comes in contact with remember that his authority comes from Christ and his Church. In the Bible clothing and calling are often connected; a person's calling or office—together with whatever authority is connected with the office—is often visually symbolized by the clothing the man wears (Gen. 9:20-27; 37: 3-11, 23; 39:1-13; 41:1-44; all of the references in Exodus and Leviticus to the clothing of the priests; 1 Sam. 2:19; 15:27; 18:4; 24:4, 5, 11, 14; Ezra 9:3-5; Esther 8:15; Isa. 22:21; Jonah 3:6; Matt. 22:11ff.; 27:31; Mark 16:5; Luke 15:22; Rev. 1:13; 4:4; 6:11; 19:13, 16). The purpose of the pastoral collar is to cover the man and accent his God-ordained office or calling.

We need to remember that people need to be able to place some kind of secondary confidence in the office of the pastor and elder. Our *primary* confidence, of course, is in God and his Word! But God mediates his presence and authority through his officers in the church. They have a secondary, delegated authority. An outward sign of that authority and office helps people. This is not hard to prove. You may have heard of the J.D. Power & Associates study on the importance of uniforms in the workplace. They found that customers prefer to deal with sales associates, service people, etc. who are in uniform. Think about doctors, nurses, judges, and policemen. People want them to wear something distinctive that reminds them of their expertise or calling. We are helped when our doctor wears a white uniform. The uniform assists us in remembering that we can place some confidence in him. This is his calling. The uniform reminds us of his training and commitment. The same ought to be true with our pastors. Biblical teaching as a whole links clothing and calling. You are what you wear or you wear what you are. Just as judges, physicians, policemen, and auto mechanics wear clothing that befits their calling, so should the pastor, especially when he is available to minister to people in the community.

When a pastor wears distinctive garments around town it testifies to his *office* as a special servant of Christ. The white collar has been associated with the iron collar of a slave. The minister is the bondsman of Jesus Christ. The symbolic clothing serves to hide the personality, social class, or economic status of the man and highlight his special *calling*. The pastor represents and ministers Christ to the world. The pastor does not act for himself, but for Jesus Christ. A judge or a policeman wears a uniform because he does not act for himself. He is *under orders*. He represents the law and government of the county, city, or state in which he serves. In the same way, a minister represents the law and government of another kingdom—the clothing he wears testifies to this. He also is under orders, as Paul reminds young pastor Timothy:

You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops. Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things (2 Timothy 2:3-7, NKJV).

The pastor's authority, therefore, does not derive from his economic or social status (expensive suits and starched shirts). It does not derive from his natural charisma (impressive hair or flashing dark eyes). It most certainly does not derive from the fact that he looks and acts like other leaders in the world

(business suits), even though this is what happens too often in America. Just as the church building with its steeple and cross symbolize the presence of a congregation of believers in the community, so also the visible presence of the pastor in his "uniform" at the grocery store, post office, cleaners, mall, bookstore, etc. makes the ministry visible and more readily available to those outside of the church. It creates opportunities to speak to and serve people in the community.

Many of our Christians forefathers would not have understood the need for such an essay as this. Before the democratization of American culture, ministers commonly wore uniforms that set them apart from other callings.[†] This was the accepted practice. In many parts of the world, this is still true. There is no need to explain why a minister should wear his uniform around town. Since the time of the Reformation there were, of course, questions about exactly what kind of clothing Protestant ministers should wear, but there was not a great deal of controversy about the fact that they should wear something visibly different. Puritan ministers objected to Episcopal vestments in the sanctuary, for example. But even they themselves wore some sort of robe to lead in the assembly on Sunday and clerical clothing during the week around town to identify them as pastors. It may have been something as simple as the "Geneva bands." If you've seen portraits of 17th and 18th century ministers (like George Whitefield or Jonathan Edwards), then you've seen the two strips of white cloth that hang from the front of the collar. It seems like every other *Banner of Truth* magazine displays on its cover a portrait of a 17th, 18th, or 19th century minister wearing pastoral tabs. It is clear from paintings of Presbyterian clergy of an earlier era (e.g., John Witherspoon in the late 1700's or Archibald Alexander Hodge in the mid-1800's) that clerical garb was considered normal. At one point in Dr. Calhoun's American Presbyterian Sunday School class earlier this year, after he had been displaying various pictures of 18th century Presbyterian ministers on the overhead projector, someone in the congregation raised their hand. "I can't help but notice that all of these Presbyterian ministers wore some sort of distinctive clothing. Did Presbyterian pastors wear ministerial clothing and collars back then? If so, when did this practice change?" Dr. Calhoun answered the question in the affirmative and briefly explained that the practice of wearing pastoral uniforms became problematic in the 19th century with the increasing democratization of the church. Of course, Protestant ministers did, over time, choose clothing that distinguished them from Roman Catholic priests. In our context, I think this would mean avoiding the black and white-collared shirt. I will be wearing either a white, blue, or gray colored shirt with a small white tab over the front of my throat.

The objection cited at the beginning of this essay implied that it was unnatural for a minister to be identified in any other way than by his life and speech. Is this helpful? How a minister is identified is a little more complex than how Christians with other callings are known to be believers. Around my neighborhood, people know that I'm the pastor of

[†] I am using "democratization" in a negative sense. Egalitarian socio-political movements at the opening of the 19th century radically affected American culture. Traditional notions of authority and leadership in society and church were attacked as "undemocratic." One of the most fascinating and instructive accounts of this period is Nathan O. Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1989).

the Presbyterian church up on Sappington and Eddie & Park. I have had a few opportunities to talk with people based on that general knowledge. They came to me with questions or favors. They did so because they knew I was a minister. A similar kind of thing ought to happen to all Christians in their neighborhoods. People should know that you are a believer. But you will have to tell them. They will not be able to discern that you are a genuine believer in the Lord Jesus Christ by observing your activities around your home. Even if you offer your help and service to various neighbors, you are nothing more than a nice guy (or maybe even a Mormon!) unless you make it known somehow that you are a Christian. With those we have contact with on a regular basis this works just fine. We will have opportunities to share Christ with our relatives, our neighbors, and our workmates if they know we are Christians and see that we live according to the example of Jesus Christ.

All of this is great and true for me as well. But I have added responsibilities. There are people at the Post Office, the restaurant, the bank, the video store, Barnes & Noble, etc. that will never be able to guess that I am a Christian or a minister by the way I act or talk. Not unless I'm obnoxiously going around announcing the fact to everyone I meet. But if I wear a collar, then everyone who sees me knows that I am a pastor. They may not discern what kind of minister I am, whether liberal or conservative, Lutheran or Reformed, but they can recognize the distinctively Christian clothing of a pastor. (As I mentioned earlier, they should know that I'm not a Roman Catholic priest, since I will not normally wear a black shirt with the collar.) But what, you may ask, will that accomplish? Well, with some people it may mean nothing. For others it will evoke hatred and spite. But there are those who may be curious and want to ask me who I am. There are others who are in need and will ask me for help. Some may have questions about difficult situations they are facing. I anticipate one day walking into Schnucks or Barnes & Noble and having people actually recognize me. "That's the pastor of the church on the corner of Sappington and Eddie & Park." That kind of visibility and familiarity cannot hurt the church, can it? I suspect that it will greatly increase my (and our) ability to evangelize people in this area.

Let me tell you few true stories to illustrate what I have been saying. The first comes from Rev. Don Stone, pastor of Lehigh Valley Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Allentown, PA. You may remember that Pastor Stone spoke at our men's retreat a few years ago. He wore his collar. He has been wearing it for over a decade and has many stories about how it has opened doors for him. One of my favorite examples happened in a restaurant at one of our PCA General Assemblies. Unfortunately, most men in our denomination do not wear ministerial uniforms. Instead, as I noted earlier, we have adopted the attire of businessmen and bankers (blue suits, starched shirts, red ties, etc.). On this particular evening a group of PCA ministers went to dinner together. Don Stone was among them. He was the only one wearing his collar. They all sat together at a large table for dinner at Steak & Ale. When they looked around the restaurant they recognized a large number of fellow PCA ministers at other tables in the restaurant. Again, Don was the only one with a collar.

When the waiter had made his way around most of the table he stopped next to Don and asked him what kind of minister he was. After Don explained, then the young man said that he had just started attending a church and had some questions. They had a brief conversation and the waiter left

with the orders from their table. Later in the evening the waiter returned and asked to speak with Pastor Stone briefly. The young waiter told Don that he was having problems with his co-workers and manager at the restaurant. They wanted him to do things that he didn't feel were morally acceptable and were harassing him because of his Christian faith. Don gave him some encouragement and advice and told the man he would pray for him. After they had all finished their dinners and were ready to leave, the waiter returned yet again. This time he was visibly agitated and told Don that just now he was facing the kind of difficulties he described earlier. Discreetly he got down on his knees next to the table and Don prayed for the man. All the other ministers at the table were amazed at what had just happened. Don asked them if they had ever had something like that happen to them. They all said, "No." He then told them that this kind of thing happened regularly because he wore his collar and was readily identifiable as a minister of the Gospel. If Don hadn't been at the table wearing his uniform that night the young waiter may never have received any spiritual service from any of the other ministers at the table because he would never even have known that they were ministers. They were all dressed like business men.

Another similar story. This one from one of our former seminary students, Rev. Jeff Steel. Jeff is the pastor of John Knox Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Ruston, Louisiana. Here, in his own words, is an account of just one afternoon:

A woman who had had her electricity turned off came in to see me. She had a baby with asthma and needed to have it turned on that day so that she could operate her child's breathing machine. ¶The bill was \$479.00 to get it turned on. ¶I took her down along with a deacon (of course I had my collar on) and paid her bill and told her we would come and get her for worship this Sunday, feed her lunch, then come and visit her this next week. ¶I told her that we were willing to help get her back on her feet if she would be willing to receive help on our terms. ¶She sat on my office floor sobbing, confessing her sins and wanting me to pray for her because she had been wasting away her life and knew that she was living sinfully. ¶I hugged her and prayed for her and her baby (her boyfriend was wondering what in the world was going on) and we departed.

While I was downtown paying her bill, an African-American lady was sitting on the sidewalk with a box of clothes because her electric had been turned off. She owned a small thrift store in town and has been there for 23 years. ¶Her husband recently died and she was trying to make some money to pay for his funeral. ¶She was waiting for a silly inspection before she could get her electric turned back on. ¶She saw me walk out and asked me where I was a minister. After I told her, she said, "If you'll come get me, I'll go to your church. I don't have a ride, but I'll go with anyone who will come get me." ¶My deacon was standing and watching all of this in amazement. ¶The only reason we even talked was because I had on my collar and she recognized me as a minister. We exchanged numbers and then departed.

Then we stopped at the Mobile station to get a drink. After we paid, a young lady asked me, "Where are you a pastor?" Again, she saw the collar. I told her. ¶Well, she offered us a computer and printer for our church. ¶She said she received a new one and wanted to give her year-old computer to a church and wondered if we could use it. ¶

told her that we are beginning a mercy training program to help people in the community learn how to do resumes and teach them some simple computer skills so that they could become more employable. I will never go out around town without wearing my pastoral uniform. [This story alone is proof that ministers ought to be wearing them!]People look for the church and her ministers and can't find us!

Rev. Burke Shade is another pastor who has been wearing his pastor's collar for about a year now. Burke is the pastor of Cornerstone Reformed Church (CRE) in Carbondale, Illinois. Here is his own testimony:

Since I began wearing my collar around town my witnessing opportunities have greatly increased. I take a lot of students out to lunch (they like free food!), and I regularly visit the same places (good, cheap food) that are student hangouts. I've been going to a Middle Eastern gyro place for about a year and a half now. A Muslim owns the restaurant. For the first year I witnessed to no one while eating there with students. But then, after I started wearing my collar, students would all of a sudden ask to join in on my discussions with whomever I was eating with! All sorts of students would join ask to sit down, friendly types, angry types, etc. We would have great discussions. I would almost always have an opportunity to tell them of the Gospel and call them back to the church of their baptism or youth. Even the owner and cook started treating me differently. Interestingly enough, just two weeks ago, as I was preparing to leave, the owner asked me if I was a pastor. I said that I was. Then he said, "I've never understood this Christian thing of how God can become man. God is not man!" For the next fifteen minutes, nobody came into the restaurant. So, in front of the visitor to our church that I was eating with, I got to witness to this Muslim about the Trinity, God's grace, Jesus, the need for repentance from sin, and call him to faith. This was all comfortably done in a relaxed atmosphere, because he asked! And I had never witnessed to a Muslim before!

Another pastor says, "Being a pastor who travels, I am always amazed when total strangers stop me to ask questions and discuss their lives. They see my clerical collar and approach me as I board the airplane, check into the hotel, or sit down to my meal; and they pour out their souls, confiding to me their hopes, fears, and even their sins. On my travels the pastoral collar has drawn its share of angry protests against Christianity, but it has also provided wonderful opportunities to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Still another pastor tells of an opportunity that would never have arisen without his being readily identifiable as a minister.

If I ever had any real doubts about dressing the way I do, they were dispelled forever one spring day in Charlotte, N.C. I was in town to perform a wedding for my best friend, and as I was leaving my room at the hotel the day before the wedding, I smiled and spoke to two maids who were in the hall as I passed by. When I returned to my room after lunch, I found the following note on the night stand (and I offer it exactly as it was written): "Good morning again. My name is ____ you're housekeeper. If I may take a minute of your time, I need

your advice and blessing. I'm having my first child and haven't been to church in a while cause of work. And I've sinned since this pregnancy by drinking. Just sometimes I slip. Is there some kind of blessing or scriptures you could share with me to clean my sins and have a healthy baby and life. If you come to an suggestion, I'm on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd floors all day. Thank you, _____." I searched until I found her, and sitting beside a vacuum cleaner on an unmade bed, we read Scriptures and prayed together. I don't know what ultimately happened to her and her baby, but I know that I was blessed just by being there for her. She would never have left the note if I had been wearing a suit and tie.

All of humanity relates to signs and symbols. On the Fourth of July, hats come off, hands are placed over hearts, and some even shed a tear as the flag of the United States of America passes by. Why? It's just a bit of cloth and dye, isn't it? Of course, we know that the answer is much more than that. The American Flag is Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, Pearl Harbor, the Tet offensive, and the Persian Gulf. It is Admiral Perry, Neil Armstrong and John Glenn. The flag is the symbol of our identity and freedom. Symbols and signs communicate. They do not exist in and of themselves but, rather, symbolize something greater. Throughout the Old Testament and the New, God communicated by signs and symbols. Words were not enough. Why should the church give up the realm of symbolism and ritual to the State or the business world. It often seems as though Evangelical Christians in America are more comfortable with political and corporate symbolism and uniforms than they are with ecclesiastical ones. Why do we fear a restoration of distinctive churchly and Christian symbolism? I would venture to guess that if every Protestant minister wore a pastoral uniform in public, scarcely a day would pass where most stores and public places in our communities would be without the visible presence of a minister of the Gospel. Think of that. Think of what such a visible presence might accomplish!

The pastoral uniform will set me apart from people in the community; but that is because it is helpful for everyone to know the office I hold, that they might benefit from it. The collar says, in effect, "Here is one who speaks God's Word. Here is the ambassador of Jesus Christ among you." I don't know of a more effective way to make this known. I suppose I could make an announcement to that effect every time I entered a building or ran into a group of people. But that would be obnoxious, to say the least. Choosing not to pick from various neckties and business suits, but rather deciding on a daily basis to wear the pastoral collar, I am choosing to wear the uniform of the office of pastor. I say, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" with my mouth as well as with my apparel. Uniforms are worn to identify the bearer as one who has been authorized to do a particular job. Thus a ticket collector at the movie theater wears a uniform to identify himself as a person having authority to demand tickets or collect money. The train or bus driver wears a uniform to show that he has the authorization and training to drive the train or bus. In a similar way, the pastoral collar will identify me as one authorized to declare the good news of Jesus Christ and to serve in his Name those who need spiritual assistance.

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