

## CLOTHING TIPS FOR MINISTERS

BY DONALD S. WHITNEY

Every minister has to dress up sometime. Some do so virtually every day and always on Sunday. I remember from my boyhood a pastor who wore a tie even when he mowed his lawn. But those days are gone, and now in our ever-more-casual culture it is common to attend a church service or watch one on television where everyone on the platform is wearing jeans.

This article, however, is not about when and where ministers should dress up; it speaks only to those occasions when they do.

For even those who serve in the most casually dressed churches and who never wear a coat and tie in the office or pulpit, will perform and attend weddings and funerals and will participate in other events where they will wear a suit, if not a sport coat and tie.<sup>1</sup>

When the cultural norms were more formal (ever notice photographs or film footage of fans at baseball games in the 1930s and how both sexes wore hats and men wore ties?), it was easier to learn how to dress well by observing others. Moreover, the knowledge of when to wear a necktie and how to tie one was something that fathers usually taught their sons, and something sons eventually wanted to learn because this was both part of being a man and fitting into the culture. Today, ministers have fewer examples in the culture and the home to instruct them about dressing up. Complicating matters is that the average minister typically has little money to furnish a fine wardrobe.

So I'm writing these clothing tips specifically to help the minister (and anyone else) who sometimes must dress up, but who feels some need for guidance on the matter and cannot afford to spend a great deal on clothes. I am no expert on haberdashery, nor do I want this piece to give me a reputation as one. These are simply things I was taught while growing up, as well as a few other pointers I've picked up in the decades since. Having observed many young ministers who seem not to have received much guidance in this area, it occurred to me that I might be able to help by condensing what I've learned over the decades into something practical they can read in ten minutes.

And lest anyone misunderstand, I also want to make this abundantly plain to any minister who may be reading: to know how to dress tastefully in more formal ministerial settings is nowhere near as important as it is to "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Tim. 4:16, NIV). Without strong piety and theology, a well-dressed minister is—to borrow King Solomon's phrase—"like a gold ring in a pig's snout" (Prov. 11:22, NIV).

But no minister wants his appearance, especially on more formal occasions, to hinder his ministry in any way or be an embarrassment to those he represents. So to help ministers dress at these events in ways that will not be a distraction or a stumbling block, and yet be as affordable as possible, I offer these suggestions.

## **BUYING DRESS CLOTHES AFFORDABLY**

Most people probably think of buying their clothes only at clothing stores or department stores. Watching for sales or asking the personnel about the best time to buy is often a wise choice. But do you know you can also buy new clothing at great savings on eBay? While it may not be advisable for items that are best tried on first, eBay can be a terrific way to buy dress shirts and some pants, especially if you already know that, say, a certain size of Dockers slacks always fits you.

Perhaps the most surprising—and to some, unappealing—recommendation is to look for dress clothes (especially suits and sportcoats) at thrift shops. Some are put off by putting on clothes previously worn by others. However, some of the clothes at thrift shops are brand new. On several occasions I've bought suits and sportcoats with all the tags still attached. Most of the time, of course, the clothes have been worn at least once. But everyone wears used clothes, right? How often do you wear something that's never been worn before? Chances are every item you are wearing at this moment has been worn many times previously. All that really matters is that the clothes are clean. Thrift shops do not sell dirty clothes. Besides, you can (and should) remove all doubt by cleaning the items yourself. I'll grant that you may have to look through several racks to find anything worthwhile, but as long as top-quality, name-brand suits and sport coats in new or excellent condition are available there for five to fifteen dollars, I'll continue to recommend thrift shops.

For the same reasons, consider buying your dress clothes at consignment shops and garage sales. Consignment shop prices tend to be a little higher than thrift shops, but the overall quality is much more consistent. At an occasional garage sale you may find a bonanza where every suit and sportcoat there is your size.

## **SUITS**

Your first and best suit should always be navy blue or black and relatively—if not completely—solid, that is, without pinstripes, checks, etc. Ministers used to refer to this as their "Marryin' and buryin'" suit, as it was the most appropriate one for the most formal of occasions in which they most frequently found themselves. Such a suit is versatile, too, as it is fitting not only for weddings and funerals, but for any other suit-wearing occasion. The same is not true for a lighter-colored suit which, while appropriate in many other situations, would be out of place in a funeral, because tradition dictates dark colors.

As you are able to acquire additional suits, darker colors should continue to dominate your choices. A dark blue one with subtle pinstripes still provides you with great versatility and yet remains distinguished somewhat from the solid blue suit. Moreover, dark suits are acceptable year round while most suits in very light colors are designed for warm weather wear only. Similarly, your suit-buying dollars will stretch farther if you choose suits made of fabrics designed to be worn three or even four seasons instead of those intended only for cool or warm weather.

Two-button, three-button, and double-breasted suits are always in style. Lapel width on the two and three-button suits may change with the fickle winds of fashion, but lapels that are approximately 3.5 inches wide are almost always acceptable.

Except when seated, keep your coat buttoned as much as possible, especially when preaching, teaching, etc. As with sportcoats, the bottom button on two and three-buttoned suits should normally remain unbuttoned.

### **SPORTCOATS**

Sportcoats are sometimes called sports coats, sports jackets, or jackets. In the same category is a jacket known as a blazer, which is basically a sportcoat in a solid color. The two marks typically distinguishing most sportcoats from suit coats are (1) metallic (usually gold-colored or brass) buttons and/or (2) a pattern that would look too "busy" for an entire suit.

Generally, sportcoats are for occasions that call for a tie, but do not require the formality of a suit. When to wear which is typically a judgment call based upon your knowledge of the situation and the people involved.

If there is a middle ground between the formality of a suit and the less formal sportcoat, it is the navy blue blazer. While blazers come in a variety of colors, the classic is navy blue. This should be your first sportcoat and the workhorse of your wardrobe. Other than a white dress shirt, it may be the single item of dress clothing you wear most often. With gray slacks it is almost as dressy as a suit (especially if the blazer is double-breasted), and yet it accommodates any situation where a sportcoat is appropriate. You can "dress down" a two-buttoned blazer somewhat with tan or khaki slacks. Don't try to match your blazer with a pair of blue slacks to make a suit. It will be almost impossible to find colors and fabrics that are identical to each other. Conversely, don't wear your blue suit coat as a blazer if you can avoid it. A suit coat and pants are each cut differently than a sport coat and slacks, and are designed to be worn together. Moreover, doing this will wear out your suit coat faster than the corresponding pants.

### **SHIRTS AND SLACKS**

There may be no more common reason given why men do not want to dress up than the discomfort of wearing a shirt buttoned at the neck. "It's choking me!" is the frequent complaint. Properly fitting shirts do not choke and are not difficult to button. Many men fail to realize that as the years go by, their neck size changes along with their waist size. A shirt that buttoned easily three years ago may still fit well everywhere except in the neck; nevertheless, it's time for a shirt with a larger neck size. You should be able to stick a couple of fingers comfortably between your neck and collar. But you do not want a gap to show between the two with your neck looking like a straw in a bottle.

While shirts in a wide variety of colors are available today, a white dress shirt is the most traditional, formal, acceptable, and versatile. There is no dress-up occasion when a white shirt would be inappropriate. Because a minister may frequently and/or unexpectedly need to dress up (such as for funerals), having multiple white shirts—so

that one is always ready—is a good idea. After white, then a light blue, a thin blue stripe, and *perhaps* a very pale yellow (or ecru) or other pastel (such as a pale green) would be your next investments. Wear pink at your own risk. Dark or very bright colors work well as dress shirts only occasionally.

Whether the collar on your dress shirt is straight or button-down usually does not matter, though some traditionalists argue always for a straight collar with a suit or sport coat and a button-down collar only for a sportcoat.

The best word of advice many men need about their dress shirt is this: iron your shirt! Buy no-iron shirts, but don't believe the claim. The appearance of a quality no-iron shirt is much easier to maintain, and it will travel better (that is, come out of your luggage with fewer wrinkles). Iron your no-iron shirt using spray starch, making certain that the collar—which is the most important consideration in evaluating the look of a shirt—is as crisp as possible.

If necessary, have your dress shirts professionally laundered and starched. Then if you wear one for only a short time, say, just on Sunday morning, and do not soil it, you may be able to touch it up with spray starch and wear it again. Multiple wearings can offset the minimal per-shirt cost of having them laundered, and they will probably look much better.

With slacks, a pair in gray, all-season wool comes first. Tan or khaki slacks would be next. Make sure to keep the creases sharp.

## **TIES**

Buy classic ties, not trendy ones. Classic patterns—such as British regimental stripes—will always be in style. Never wear humorous or themed (such as promote your favorite NFL team) ties with a suit. The great Welsh preacher of the twentieth century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, thoughtfully observed that a minister should avoid ties that might distract people while he preached.

At the outset of building your wardrobe, look for ties that accommodate the greatest number of clothing combinations. A maroon tie with a very simple pattern, for example, has the versatility to coordinate with almost any color suit and the simple pattern works with either a plain or busy sportcoat.

While it is a good idea for your wife to confirm that your tie harmonizes with your shirt and coat for that day, it may not be wise to let her buy your ties. Unless she knows traditional styles, the patterns and colors that attract her eye may be more feminine than masculine.

After wearing, remove your tie carefully. Yanking it from your shirt is the fastest way to wear out a tie.

## **SHOES**

As with ties, your dress shoes should reflect classic styles, not current trends. If you are uncertain what styles are the timeless standards, ask an experienced shoe salesman or a knowledgeable friend.

Color choice is simple with dress footwear, for virtually all traditional dress clothes go with black or cordovan shoes. You may never need brown dress shoes. And your belt should coordinate with your shoes. In other words, if you are wearing black leather shoes, you should wear a black leather belt.

Keep your shoes shined. Scuffed shoes can detract from your appearance as much as a badly wrinkled suit. Set a weekly routine, polishing your shoes, for example, every Friday night while you are watching the news.

### MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

- Take off your sportcoat or suit coat before riding in a car. Otherwise you will crumple the lower half of the coat like an accordion.
- Retire your coat when the elbows or bottoms of the sleeves get shiny. The same is true when the seat of the pants gets shiny.
- Invest in a clothes steamer. The travel size is adequate and inexpensive. Most do a great job removing wrinkles from hard-to-iron items, like suits.
- Shave your neck. Most men need to do this between haircuts. Unshaven necks are unsightly and soil the collar of your dress shirts more quickly.
- Ask well-dressed Christian men for advice, or search online for "clothing tips for men," etc., though the latter's perspective can be worldly.

Dressing well is not about "dressing for success," but dressing for the glory of God. Choosing clothes is a part of doing "*all* for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

P.S.—Don't anonymously give this to a minister without buying him a suit or tie!

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<sup>1</sup> As will become obvious, this piece is written from the cultural perspective of and most applicable to those who dress in traditional western masculine forms.

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