

A HISTORY, CURRENT USE, AND FUTURE VISION
FOR VESTMENTS IN THE CHURCH

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Summary:

The place of special clothing for worship has a long history. This paper surveys this history and gives some contemporary analysis as well as suggestions for future use of official clothing for worship leaders – vestments.

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It is part of human culture to use special costume and clothing for ceremonial occasions. Weddings are adorned with the white bridal dress, bridesmaids' dresses, and tuxedos. Graduations and academic type processions are garbed in ceremonial gowns. For proms, homecomings, and other formal rites of passage, people dress in outfits appropriate for the special occasion. And in church, many historic denominations use clothing and robes to mark the occasion of an encounter with God. Even the Fall was marked with the use of clothing to cover Adam and Eve's shame at their sin. Clothing has become monumental at defining who we are, with what we're affiliated, and who we are trying to be. As time passes on, the importance of dress in human society "to distinguish the various callings of men" is becoming increasingly stronger.¹ We are in a world that is obsessed with clothes. Who we decide to be each day is communicated through what we wear and how we wear it. Is it possible to retain or regain the meaning of certain symbolism found in the use of clothing in the church?

Clothing has been used throughout history as a symbolic means to ascribe meaning to the wearer. In the church, whether in the form of clothing (vestments) or decoration (vesture), material has been in use for thousands of years dating back to the time of the Israelites. In some instances, God gave specific instructions as to what the material was to look like and its coloring. Other times, humans have given clothing meaning out of cultural influence. The symbolic meaning ascribed to clothing has evolved throughout history. Before the print influence of the modern era, culture was communicated by means of the oral tradition and symbols, including the vestments of priests in the church.

The first instance of clothing is recorded in Genesis 3 at the Fall of mankind. At the moment Adam ate the fruit, "their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their

¹Geo. S. Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy* (London, England: William Andrews and Co., 1897), 1.

nakedness. So they strung fig leaves together around their hips to cover themselves.”² Later, after encountering God’s wrath for eating the forbidden fruit, God made clothing for Adam and Eve from animal skins.³ From this time on, clothing was used for the covering of nakedness. This earliest use of clothing, though symbolizing Adam and Eve’s shame, was a purely practical means to cover the body.

As the history of the world progressed, clothing moved from the purely practical coverings of Adam and Eve to be filled with messages about money, prestige, state of being and position. Genesis 27:15 recounts Rebekah dressing Jacob in his brother’s best clothes to fool his father into giving Esau’s birthright (an honor reserved for the first-born son) to Jacob. Esau’s clothing marked him as a hunter, and when placed on his brother, the smell and feel tricked his father. In Genesis 37:3, Joseph’s robe marks his father’s partiality toward him. His robe distinguished him above his brothers, causing them to hate him and eventually leading to his being sold into slavery and rising up to power in adulthood. In Deborah’s Song found in Judges 5, Deborah makes a reference to those “who ride on fine donkeys and sit on fancy saddle blankets”.⁴ Her song marks the use of cloth in saddle blankets as a way of identifying prestige.

Much like the color black at a funeral, clothing in the Old Testament was used to symbolize a state of being. Joshua 7:6, Esther 4:1, Isaiah 37:1 and many others describe instances of putting on sackcloth as a sign of mourning. The Isaiah passage includes the tearing of clothes as part of the mourning ritual, saying, “When King Hezekiah heard their report, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the Temple of the Lord to pray.”⁵ Clothing was also used to appease royalty. In Esther 5:1 we have an account of Esther putting on her

²Genesis 3:7 (New Living Translation - NLT)

³Genesis 3:21 (NLT)

⁴Judges 5:10 (NLT)

⁵Isaiah 37:1 (NLT)

royal robes before entering the inner court of the palace to see the king. In Daniel chapter five, is the story of Daniel, who after reading the writing on the wall, was rewarded with purple clothing, a gold chain to wear as a necklace, and authority as the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

Ownership of clothing also expressed wealth. Many instances of the Israelites attacking other towns included the taking of donkeys, camels, and clothes. In 1 Samuel 27:9, we learned that whenever David attacked an area, he didn't allow anyone to live, and always took their animals and clothes. Clothing, as a gift, was given as frequently as gold.

The first instructions regarding symbolic clothing of the laity are found in Numbers 15:37-41. God instructs Moses to tell the people to attach tassels to the hems of their clothing. The tassels are to remind them to follow the commands of the Lord rather than their own desires. Verse 40 states, "The tassels will help you remember that you must obey all my commands and be holy to your God."⁶ The tassels become symbolic of God's commands to the Israelites. Not only was clothing endowed with symbolic tassels, but clean clothing became important as a means of being worthy before God in ceremony. God instructed the laity on how to retain ceremonial cleanliness. The Old Testament is full of references to cleanliness of clothing in relation to being ceremonially clean. In Leviticus alone there are over 20 references to the washing of clothes as a means of becoming 'clean'. Unclean clothing was separated from the people after being brought before the priests, and burned if deemed unrecoverable.⁷

God's instructions for the clothing of Aaron and his sons is the first example we receive of clothing specifically made for use by God's servants in a formal worship setting. In Exodus 28 and 39, God gives specific instructions for the clothing of those who are to serve in his temple. Aaron and his sons are set apart from the common people as priests that will minister to God.

⁶Numbers 15:40 (NLT)

⁷Ezekial 42:14 (NLT)

Exodus 28:2 says, “Make special clothing for Aaron to show his separation to God —beautiful garments that will lend dignity to his work.”⁸ The garments were to be worn, “whenever Aaron and his sons enter the Tabernacle or approach the altar in the Holy Place to perform their duties. Thus they will not incur guilt and die. This law is permanent for Aaron and his descendants.”⁹ God’s instructions regarding the clothing of his priests were very specific —to disobey God’s ruling on priestly clothing meant certain death. For Aaron and his sons, the clothing worn while serving their duty in the temple was more than a symbolic gesture. It protected them before God. Tyack writes, “Any office performed by high priest, or priest, without all the vestments of his order was deemed to be invalid.”¹⁰ The vestments of Aaron and his sons were deemed as holy — “when the vestments were soiled, they were not washed, but used for making wicks for the lamps of the sanctuary.”¹¹ The clothing of the priests was especially set aside for use in the Lord’s house only. When the priests left the Holy Place, they could not exit into the outer courtyard without first taking off their holy vestments. Before entering any parts of the building open to the public, they were required to wear other clothes.¹²

As time progresses, more emphasis is placed on the prestige which clothing communicates. Man’s preoccupation with what to wear and what his clothing says has evolved greatly from Adam and Eve’s practical fig-leaf coverings. In the New Testament, more so than the Old, clothing is important as a sign of prestige. Jesus directly addresses man’s preoccupation with having and obtaining fine clothing, often asking, “Why do you worry about clothes?”¹³ The New Testament brings with it many of the same Old Testament symbolic use of clothing, but includes a new emphasis on *white*. While there are three instances of white clothing in the Old

⁸Exodus 28:2 (NLT)

⁹Exodus 28:43 (NLT)

¹⁰Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 4.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ezekiel 42:14 (NLT)

¹³Matthew 6:25; 6:28; Luke 12:22; Luke 12:27-28; (NLT)

Testament, the New Testament has seventeen.

Throughout the New Testament are references to white clothing as a sign of royalty, Godliness and cleanliness. At Christ's transfiguration, his face and robe became as "white as the light,"¹⁴ "dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them,"¹⁵ as "bright as a flash of lightning."¹⁶ The Angel of the Lord that rolled the stone away from the tomb appeared to the guards with a face like "lightning" and clothes that "were as white as snow."¹⁷ When the two women went to Jesus' tomb with spices, they were greeted by two beings in "clothes that gleamed like lightning".¹⁸ From these, we find God's presence and heavenly beings symbolized numerous times in a white clothing and white light unlike anything found on earth.

Revelation contains numerous accounts of heavenly beings dressed in white. "They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angel."¹⁹ This passage from Rev 3:4-5 paints a powerful picture of one dressed in a white robe before the Father, one who has been found worthy. Other visions in Revelation include the elders in 4:4 dressed in white garments, the martyrs in 6:9-10 given white garments, and the elect in 7:9-10, clothed in white robes. After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white... and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a mighty shout, "Salvation comes from our God on the throne and from the Lamb!"²⁰

¹⁴Matthew 17:2 (NLT)

¹⁵Mark 9:3 (New International Version - NIV)

¹⁶Luke 9:29 (NIV)

¹⁷Matthew 28:3 (NIV)

¹⁸Luke 24:4 (NIV)

¹⁹Revelation 3:4-5 (NIV)

²⁰Revelation 7:9-10 (NLT)

Though clothes started out as a practical means to cover nakedness, throughout the Bible symbolic meaning has been ascribed to them both by people and by God. Among the early Christians, it was the white robe that continued in prominence above all other garments in the Bible. It is argued among scholars whether the white robe was a reflection of early church theology or the regular practices of the time, because white has the customary color worn by all religions in service of a deity.²¹ For the early Christians to wear white would not have been out of the ordinary according to regular practice of the time. Also, other religions of the early world wore special garments to *protect* sacred space, much like Aaron and his sons. But because early Christians didn't have a sacred space, their white garments instead came to symbolize "the newness of life received in baptism,"²² a shift from the holy exterior space to a holiness within, the purity of the soul at baptism.²³ For the early Christians, the white robe became the "garb of all those who, through baptism, share in the priesthood of Christ."²⁴

They wore the same ceremonial dress used in all of Rome: a white tunic (later the alb) with a cord around the waist, an outer cloak (later the chalice), a neckpiece, and a scarf worn on the left wrist.²⁷ As the early church grew and leaders were established, special clothing was set aside for use by the presider when the church met, as influenced by Jewish practices.²⁸ Boudreau writes, "And it wouldn't have been unusual for that early assemble to chip in and buy some really nice threads to distinguish their guy."²⁹ Because of early persecution in the church, when a leader was killed, his clothing that the community had pooled resources to buy was passed on

²¹Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 8.

²²David Philippart, *Clothed in Glory: Vesting the Church* (Chicago, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997), 10.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 12.

²⁷Barbara Gent and Betty Sturges, *The Altar Guidebook* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1982), 47.

²⁸Chrysostomos, "Historical problematics in the study of the origin of liturgical vesture," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 26 (Spring/Summer 1981): 88.

²⁹Boudreau, "Why Do Priests Where Vestments at Mass?" 32.

to the next leader. The pattern of passing on the former leader's clothing continued as other clothing styles evolved in society.

The barbarian movement of the 6th and 7th centuries in Rome highly influenced cultural dress. Because of this, it became even more distinctive that the dress of the clergy be different from that of the street. "Partly due to the dislike of barbarian ideas, coupled with a certain conservatism against loss of dignity, new fashions superseded the church wear and were not considered suitable for the ministers at worship."³⁰ After the legalization of the church in 313 CE, the priestly clothing, now a symbolic tradition, became legislated,³¹ though the earliest written historical evidence of special clothing used in Christian liturgy dates back to the 3rd century. It is in the liturgy of St. Clement of Alexandria, which calls for the priest in his white vestment, that scholars find evidence of a special garment for priests even before Christianity was legalized.³² Regardless of the date or place, most scholars agree the style of the liturgical dress at some point ceased to develop alongside societal clothing styles and was set aside as a holy vesture.³³

After the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, the church no longer had to hide and could rise from years of underground hiding. Because priests no longer faced persecution, they could freely wear holy vesture in public. Like a modern day uniform, the clothing designated a priest's holy office and was considered proper attire. In the 4th century, St. Jerome is credited with writing, "We ought not to go into the sanctuary just as we please, and in our ordinary clothes, defiled with the visage of common life, but with clear conscience and clean garments handle the

³⁰Graham Jenkins, *The Making of Church Vestments* (London, England: Edgar G. Dunstan & Co., 1957), 7.

³¹Boudreau, "Why Do Priests Wear Vestments at Mass?" 32.

³²Chrysostomos, "Historical problematics," 91.

³³Ibid.

sacraments of the Lord.”³⁴ In the middle ages, the white baptismal robe underwent significant change. As a result, a modified robe, worn mostly by monks was picked up by the clergy.³⁵ Clerical garments, then, are a merging of the plain monk attire with common clothes of the early Christians.³⁶ With less adults getting baptized in the middle ages, white robes began to lose their significance as a garment of all believers. Albs came to be symbolic for purity of the clergy alone.³⁷

Though clothing continued to evolve, the old vestment forms were retained, as they became “endowed with symbolic meaning.”³⁸ Once again practical and normal clothing in society turned into symbolic and almost sentimental keepsakes.³⁹ Over time, people began to assign meaning to the vestments. Vestments became a means of education in an oral culture. Ornamentation began to be added to clerical garments to instruct the new converts.⁴⁰ Each part of the priestly vestment was given meaning: the amice symbolized the helmet of salvation; the white alb, Christ’s robe of mockery put on just before His crucifixion; the stole, a sign of priesthood; and the chasuble, charity.⁴¹ “Time, however, conspired to place the cart before the horse. The need for symbols did not bring about the existence of the vestments: it was the other way around.”⁴² The meanings given to vestments were an afterthought, “drawn by the pious fancy of devout men in past times from robes adopted originally for quite different reasons.”⁴³ “In the middle ages, where knowledge of the historical origin of these garments had almost been

³⁴Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 7.

³⁵Philippart, *Clothed in Glory: Vesting the Church*, 10-12.

³⁶Gent, *The Altar Guidebook*, 47.

³⁷Philippart, *Clothed in Glory: Vesting the Church*, 11.

³⁸Philippart, *Clothed in Glory: Vesting the Church*, 9.

³⁹Frank E. Wilson, *An Outline of Christian Symbolism* (New York, NY: Morehouse-Gorham Co., 1955), 46.

⁴⁰Gent, *The Altar Guidebook*, 47.

⁴¹Wilson, *An Outline of Christian Symbolism*, 50-51.

⁴²Boudreau, “Why Do Priests Wear Vestments at Mass?” 32.

⁴³Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 12.

forgotten, allegorical and symbolic meanings became associated with most of them, often inconsistent, sometimes inaccurate, always imaginative.”⁴⁴

As the church became more standardized and hierarchical, so did vestments. Regulations were contrived regarding the material, make, and color of each vestment. The alb (the white robe, the base layer of all vestments) was to be made out of linen or hemp;⁴⁵ the stole and chasuble (vestments pieces that lay over the white robe), only out of material containing silk and only the colors white, red, green, black or violet;⁴⁶ “cotton, wool or any other material” was “strictly forbidden.”⁴⁷ The unchanging character of the vestments has become symbolic of a constant church throughout the ages “in spite of secular changes.”⁴⁸ The once simple and beautiful white alb worn as a testament of the newness of life in baptism was taken away from the laity, made the garment of the clergy, and given human-born meanings, regulations and was hidden under other decorative layers. A clothing that evolved from everyday wear was now an outdated garment given meaning by people.

Because of corrupt extravagance in use of vestments, attempts were made to reform the liturgical vesture to reflect that of the Levitical priests and to standardize the vestments during the 9th-12th centuries.⁴⁹ This came with much resistance, as “the church, from a reverential regard for antiquity, kept so far as possible to the older forms;” only with “great deliberation” did they come to modify the dress, “yielding slowly, as if under protest, to the influence of circumstances.”⁵⁰ In the 12th Century, Pope Innocent III declared only vestments of black, white,

⁴⁴Gent, *The Altar Guidebook*, 48.

⁴⁵Howard E. Collins, *The Church Edifice and its Appointments* (Philadelphia, PA: The Dolphin Press, 1940), 224.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 229-230.

⁴⁷Collins, *The Church Edifice and its Appointments*, 223.

⁴⁸Wilson, *An Outline of Christian Symbolism*, 47.

⁴⁹Chrysostomos, “Historical problematics,” 94.

⁵⁰Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 11.

green, red, or violet could be used, and gold for special occasions.⁵¹ Again in the 20th century was another call for a return to liturgy and a return to the style of vestments from the early church; Vatican II simplified the requirements, allowing for new designs.⁵²

The Protestant Reformation brought reforms to the historical vestments as well. The white alb, “despite its undoubted antiquity, came in for its share in the attack which the extreme men levelled [*sic*] at almost every custom which had formerly been in vogue. All vestments to such men were superstitious abominations, and albs among the rest.”⁵³ The Reformers cried out,

This popish apparel...hath been by Papists abominably abused; that it hath been a mark and a very sacrament of abomination; that remaining, it serveth a monument of idolatry, and not only edifieth not, but as a dangerous and scandalous ceremony doth exceeding much harm to them of whose good we are commanded to have regard; that it causeth men to perish and make shipwreck of conscience; ...that it hardeneth Papists, hindereth the weak from profiting in the knowledge of the Gospel, grieveth godly minds, and giveth them occasion to think hardly of their ministers; ...that by the Law it should have been burnt and consumed with fire as a thing infected with leprosy.⁵⁴

Following the Reformation, churches established under the Anabaptists, Calvin and Zwingli labeled vestments as “symbols of the tyranny of the Bishop of Rome and his detestable enormities”.⁵⁵ Some rejected vestments all together, and others (especially Calvinists) maintained the use of a plain black gown known as the ‘Genevan gown’. The Genevan gown was a modified version of the cape worn over the white robe, a type of overcoat, most often black in color, from the Medieval era. Originally worn by monks for similar overcoat purposes, the gown became the accepted dress of the clergy at the time of the Reformation.⁵⁶ In late 16th century England, ministers were required to wear “a long gown, a square cap, and a kind of

⁵¹George Twigg-Porter, “Color Me Catholic,” *U.S. Catholic* 62 (February 1997): 42.

⁵²Philippart, *Clothed in Glory*, 8.

⁵³Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 64.

⁵⁴Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, (1594); quoted in Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 70.

⁵⁵Carl Piepkorn, *The Survival of the Historic Vestments in the Lutheran Church After 1555* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Press, 1958), 8.

⁵⁶Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 35.

tippet over the neck, hanging from either shoulder, and falling down almost to their heels.”⁵⁷

The Genevan gown continued to be the accepted and ordinary dress of the preacher by the end of the 18th century and was adopted by academic institutions as the proper gown to wear when receiving a university degree.⁵⁸

For wearers of the Genevan style gown, there were few instructions regarding wear; use came down to personal choice both in formal and informal officiating events.⁵⁹ The one regulation that has lasted time is the presence of “bands” on the gown, symbolizing that the wearer “is the minister of a recognized congregation”; an ordained minister of another church that is visiting to conduct a service would not wear bands.⁶⁰ In the Reformed tradition, the use of the black Genevan gown continued into the mid-20th century. After the 1960's, Reformed preachers were less likely to wear the black robe in favor of a shirt and tie as worship styles began to incorporate other secular influences; after this, the dress of most preachers in the Reformed tradition evolved with culture. The same influence is found in liturgical traditions as well: “It is just as permissible today for a priest or bishop to preside at the Holy table in street dress as it was in the early years of the Church and in informal situations, they often do.”⁶¹

Though the use of vestments has been challenged throughout history, there is much to say in support of symbolic clothing in a worship service. Traditions that incorporate vestments do so with four strong reasons in mind. The first is dignity. The use of robes lends “dignity and order to the worship service...a highly visible part of the liturgy...in full view of the congregation,”⁶²

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸R.A.S. Macalister, *Ecclesiastical Vestments: Their Development and History* (London, England: Elliot and Spence, 1896), 208.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 210.

⁶¹Gent, *The Altar Guidebook*, 51.

⁶²Jennifer Schuchmann, “Looking Good!” *Your Church* 48 (Nov/Dec 2002): 4.

adding to “the dignity of the worship offered to God.”⁶³ Secondly, vestments keep the worshipers from “having their attention distracted by too much concern with the passing changes in the fashions of street dress.”⁶⁴ Thirdly, vestments identify leadership within the church, and emphasize the leaders’ official character, as Wilson writes, “thereby minimizing the personal equation.”⁶⁵

And fourthly is the aspect of beauty. Vestments create an element of surprise, wonder, and mystery that is often otherwise missing. They capture the eye of the worshipers and serve as a window to the most high.⁶⁶ Beauty is found in the flowing of the material, the graceful movements of their wearers, and the natural design and materials used in their creation. Their message of refinement and dignity allow for both reverence and rejoicing.⁶⁷ Because nonverbal communication makes up 90 percent of the influence in a conversation, the beauty of the vestment communicates an importance to the worship service to those unfamiliar with the local customs. “Wearing particular clothes to mark particular occasions or functions is so common in the history of human society that it may be regarded as a natural cultural law.”⁶⁸ To the outsider, vestments communicate an important event. Though not an essential of the Christian religion, vestments give beauty to the house of the Lord; “deep lessons of pure religion and practical piety, are easily, rapidly and impressively communicated.”⁶⁹

The colors used in vestments open a door to understanding the church year. Twigg-

⁶³Wilson, *An Outline of Christian Symbolism*, 46.

⁶⁴Ibid., 47.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Philippart, *Clothed in Glory*, 45.

⁶⁷Herbert Norris, *Church Vestments: Their Origin and Development* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1950), 9.

⁶⁸Carol M. Noren, “Theology, Vestments, and Women’s Nonverbal Communication,” *Homiletic: A Review of Publications in Religious Communication* 15 (Summer 1990): 5.

⁶⁹John England, *Explanation of the Construction, Furniture and Ornaments of a Church, of the Vestments of the Clergy, and of the Nature and Ceremonies of the Mass* (Baltimore, MD: F. Lucas, Jr., 1834), 13.

Porter writes, “Colors symbolize the deep emotions of humanity.”⁷⁰ The colors used in liturgical vestments remind worshipers of the various festivals of the year, and their corresponding emotions. In Western culture, green communicates a hope and vitality of faith; purple, the need for penance and reformation; red, the supreme sacrifice and the need to have heroic faith; rose, an anticipation; and white, the rejoicing in newness of life.⁷¹ “The colours of the vestments...aim chiefly at teaching the people, by reminding them of the gladness or sadness...of the event of mystery that day commemorated.”⁷²

Vestments are still currently used in the liturgical traditions, as well as a few varied Reformed and Evangelical circles. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutheran traditions rely heavily upon the historical garb evolved from 1st century Roman wear. Other Reformed and Evangelical church’s vestments are descendants of this same garb, though altered during the Reformation and used without standardization among the churches. In current evangelical use, the gowns still have the potential to communicate the four main thrusts for their use in liturgical traditions: dignity, identification, dehumanization, and beauty. Though as time progresses and styles change, these four categories are slowly being broken and forgotten in all denominations. The practice of the laity ‘dressing up’ for worship, (a type of vesture in itself), is also waning as well. The tradition of a special clothing for church, whether clergy or laity, *is decreasing*, though culture is *increasingly identifying* special occasions and moments with a type of clothing and style of dress *in all other* aspects of life.

I grew up in a church in which the pastor wore the black Genevan-style gown every Sunday. His replacement within that same church wore only a suit and tie, with the elders and deacons marked by the same attire. Because the rest of the congregation came in dressy-casual

⁷⁰Twigg-Porter, “Color Me Catholic,” 42.

⁷¹Wilson, *An Outline of Christian Symbolism*, 43-44.

⁷²Tyack, *The Historic Dress of the Liturgy*, 124.

clothing, the elders and deacons would stand out on any given Sunday. Though not the vestments of the Catholic church, within my tradition, the suit and tie served as a way of loosely communicating (with the exception of beauty) most of the same messages as the historic church vestments. In my current ministry context in Saskatchewan, vestments are not a common practice. The preacher does not wear any type of formal vestment (no robe, no suit, and no tie) to identify him as leadership within the church; he and other leaders wear the same casual clothing as the rest of the congregation. There are the sporadic few among the laity that still practice wearing dressy clothing for church, but they are in the minority. To an outsider, this might send one of two messages: 1-That worship is a laid-back, come-as-you-are place where everyone is welcome, or 2-there is nothing happening here that makes it more special than everyday life. On the other hand, the use of vestments, besides communicating the four reasons for their use outlined above, can also become a distraction. Noren writes, “When the preacher’s clothing is altogether foreign to the congregation, the ‘noise’ created by anxiety over its significance drowns out whatever words she speaks.”⁷³

I am in favor of some sort of clothing, like all else of culture, to mark the special occasion of a worship service. The possibilities of the beauty and message they could communicate are endless and could redirect the way we approach God in worship. As earthly worship is a preview of the worship in Heaven, the white robe could be a yet another mirror of the worship found in Revelation 7:9-10 quoted earlier. Perhaps it is the basic white alb that we could implement. I have a awe-some vision of a room full of worshipers, gathered for the regular church service in matching white albs. The white alb, a basic style of dress dating back to the early Christians, would communicate a message of historic roots and connection with the many faithful that have gone before. The color white, teeming off of visions of heaven from

⁷³Noren, “Theology, Vestments, and Women’s Nonverbal Communication,” 7.

Revelation and the heavenly beings who appear in white throughout the New Testament, would communicate a message of pureness and newness of life in baptism. Philippart writes, “The wearing of the white garment by adults at their baptism, the wearing of albs by ministers at the altar, and the wearing of the alb by ordained ministers...speaks of the rootedness of liturgical ministry in baptism.”⁷⁴ A room of people in matching white robes would send a powerful message of a Body in unity. The loss of secular clothing and identity replaced with a holy vesture and identity in Christ could communicate a Body of equal persons and equal statuses.

Theologically, the use of the white alb would symbolically speak of our understanding of the Body through God’s Word. As secular forces and postmodern thought begin to emphasize even more the “me, me, me” in society, the use of a unifying robe sends a powerful message of “us, in Christ”. Ecclesiologically, the white robe connects us with our past, with the time period in which Christ lived, the early church fathers, and the other historic traditions which have held on to its use. Doxologically, the use of the robes would effect how we worship God. Would we come into worship with our individualities and maintain them? Most likely we would enter worship with a renewed mind-set of being a part of something bigger than ourselves. Aesthetically, the robes speak of a beauty and a purity received in a new life in Christ. I find the vision of a room of people garbed in white almost overwhelming in beauty.

When planning the use of the white robe among an entire congregation, many questions need to be asked. Who gets to wear the robe? How and when would they be distributed? How often would they be worn? If the white robe is a sign of baptism, would an adult baptism tradition withhold the robe from the younger members? Does each person own their own robe? What does the robe symbolize in our tradition? Who will pay for the robes? Who would make the robes? Each of these questions would be answered differently by each church, according to

⁷⁴Philippart, *Clothed in Glory*, 12.

their beliefs, traditions, and resources within the church.

The possibilities are endless for the use of vestments in worship. Their potential is unfairly overlooked because of past abuses and prejudices held against the historic church. It is true that the worship and sacraments of the Church “could be effectively administered with no vestments at all. Insofar as they contribute to the beauty, dignity, and reverence of public worship, they have a rightful place by force of custom and tradition.”⁷⁵ They ought at least be understood and considered in light of the history and the many faithful that have gone before. And in a culture that has learned to dress up for any occasion of the slightest significance, it only makes sense that the church would follow a similar trend with appropriate clothing to celebrate an event of the highest and most importance significance of all.

⁷⁵Wilson, *An Outline of Christian Symbolism*, 55.

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