


Reverend Who?

Are costumes & titles for church leaders biblical?

Introduction:

Is this subject something really worth concerning ourselves with? Absolutely yes. All biblical truth is important and by ignoring a seemingly trivial spiritual issue we may be opening the door of our lives to some very serious spiritual problems. 

Religious clothing:

Why do so many church leaders dress differently from the rest of the congregation? Some leaders wear expensive suits, some wear robes, some wear shirts with distinctive looking collars. Where did this practice come from and is it the biblical pattern for God's New Testament church?

Jesus made a very unflattering comment about the clothing of the religious leaders of his day:

"Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts" [Luke 20:46]

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." [Matthew 23:27]

Unsaved man is always interested in looking holy - not by an inward change of the heart, which only God can orchestrate - but by something as simple and easy as putting on a religious costume. Can you imagine if the Pope of Rome went out into public in just his underwear instead of his long robes and impressive head gear? How many people would honor and respect him if that is how he presented himself to the world? Or what if he just wore ordinary clothes like the average man on the street? To those in the world, "clothes indeed make the man". Christ, the head of His Church was not dressed to impress. In his own words, he lived a very humble and unpretentious life:

"The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." [Matthew 8:20]

He and his disciples distinguished themselves from the world, not by how they dressed but by the godly lives they lived.

“Man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart” [1 Samuel 16:7]

The Bible instructs Christians to be concerned about our inward spiritual condition:

“Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and **be clothed with humility**: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.” [1 Peter 5:5]

Is a church leader **clothed with humility** when he dresses in a way that is a stark contrast between himself and the congregation?

Religious titles:

So, does the Bible approve of the use of titles like “reverend” or “pastor” for church leaders? Matthew chapter 23 seems to answer this question pretty clearly:

Matthew 23:1 - “Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, 2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. 4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. 5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, 6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. 8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. 9 And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. 10 Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. 11 But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”

The above passage indicates that titles are for the kingdom of this world (those who do works to be seen of men) and not for the kingdom of God. The phrase “be not ye called **Rabbi**” does NOT mean that it is OK to be called “Pastor” or “Reverend” because Jesus only mentioned the title “Rabbi”. Jesus was referring to any kind of special titles as we see by His use of the phrase “all ye are brethren”. Otherwise, Jesus would have said “some are brethren and some are to be given titles so that they have a higher status in the church than the rest of you”. Also, Jesus said “call no man your **father**” and “neither be ye called **masters**”. What more could He have said to make this point any clearer?

Who does the Bible refer to as “reverend”?

According to the Bible, no mortal man has the title or deserves to be referred to as reverend. Only God alone is referred to in this way:

Psalms 111:9 - "He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name."

The reason we have such titles in the Church is because men like to feel important, they like recognition, they like to exalt themselves and they like to steal glory from God AND they don't even know what the Bible says about such things, yet they allow people to address them as if they were of a higher status than the rest of the body of Christ. The Bible clearly teaches against this practice in several ways in various Bible passages. For example, Paul said:

2 Corinthians 10:17 - "But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."

A true believer in Christ would not want to do anything to take glory away from God or to exalt himself over any other believer as John the Baptist pointed out very well when he said, of Christ:

John 3:30 - "He must increase, but I must decrease."

And why did John make the above statement? Because John's disciples were focusing too much on John when they should have been concerned about following Christ:

John 3:25 - "Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. 26 And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him."

Being a proper example:

To follow the example of John the Baptist, church leaders must fervently AVOID attempts by others to put them on a pedestal. What kind of example does a church leader set by having a special name or title for himself? Such things stir up envy in some people and cause others to think of their overseers as more trustworthy than they deserve to be thought of. The Bereans had the proper perspective of leadership when they did NOT trust what Paul said and instead went to the scriptures to see if what Paul said was true:

Acts 17:10 - "And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received

the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

There is a natural, prideful tendency in us to follow people we admire, but we often admire those who are not really much better than ourselves and in fact who are just as weak and sinful as ourselves. Which is perhaps the reason why we admire certain individuals - because they are like us, or perhaps because they don't confront us about certain sins that we don't want to deal with in our lives...

1 Corinthians 3:3 - "For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? 4 For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? 5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?".

The danger of the church "caste" system (clergy versus laity):

When we start to make a distinction between "clergy" and "laity" we are asking for trouble. We end up elevating teachers and leaders into a class of individuals who are unapproachable and uncorrectable. What church can you go into today and ask the preacher to repeat something he said while he is preaching... something you did not hear clearly. And what church can you go into and challenge or correct the preacher? Error goes on unchecked. Denominations preach heresy generation after generation because you are not supposed to interrupt "Reverend" So-And-So when he is preaching.

Galatians 3:28 - "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

In the spirit of the above verse we could say: "there is neither 'clergy' nor 'laity'..."

1 Corinthians 12:22 - "Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: 23 And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. 24 For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: 25 That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another."

Christians seem to want a schism, a division, in the body - an unbiblical clergy/laity division. Having such divisions can easily cause some members in

the body to be neglected:

James 2:2 - "For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; 3 And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: 4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

Can we honestly say that we have never had an attitude of favoritism towards "clergymen", where we were more concerned about what they think of us than what others (less prominent persons) in the congregation think of us OR where we were more concerned about the needs of the "clergy" than about the rest of the congregation?

Do we need any other "king" except Christ?

Just like the nation of Israel, many professing Christians of our day want a "king", one who does all the studying and discipling for them. One who does all the work. One who handles the problems, the disputes, etc. so the average churchgoer doesn't have to worry about anything except sitting in the pew and paying his tithe...

1 Samuel 8:5 - "And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. 6 But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD."

There is always someone who is willing to take the job of king, for his own reasons. But this position of king in the Church belongs to the Lord alone. There is no place in Christ's Church for an earthly king...

Mark 10:42 - "But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. 43 But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: 44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. 45 For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Doesn't the Bible mention people who rule over the church?

Yes it does as we see in several places in Hebrews:

Hebrews 13:7- “Remember **them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.**”

Hebrews 13:17 - “Obey **them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.**”

Hebrews 13:24 - “Salute all **them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you.**”

However, we must consider two things here:

1. Leaders have a role that others may not have in the local church but they are not “better” or of a greater status because of that. They are no more valuable or necessary to the health and operation of the church than anyone else, but we often think they are because of the unbiblical way that most churches are structured today, with the leadership doing everything and the rest of the congregation sitting silent in the pews, never interacting with anyone.

Husbands and fathers all have the **role** of leader in their homes whether or not they are leaders in the local church. That does not mean they are better than their wives and children or more special in some way. **They just have a different role.** “Father” and “husband” are roles they have, not titles we give them. Wives don’t usually call their spouses “Husband Bill” nor do children call their dad, “Father Joe”, etc. And even if they did use these terms, there is no one else in that environment who qualifies for that God ordained role or who will ever have that God given responsibility in that particular family. However, in a local congregation, there is expected to be a plurality of elders and it is expected that others in the congregation will mature into the role of elder over time.

2. What God means by having men “rule over” the church is far different than what man usually means by the term “rule over”. Considering Mark chapter 10 which we quoted above, we know that the verses in Hebrews cannot contradict what is said in Mark 10. So, God is talking about an **overseer** when referring to “them that have the rule over you” as we see in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5:

Acts 20:28 - “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which **the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.**”

1 Peter 5:2 - “Feed the flock of God which is among you, **taking the oversight** thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but

of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock."

Peter specifically said the overseers should not "lord over" the congregation. They are to lead by example, not by edict, ultimatum, or by force. And we must remember that God speaks of believers as sheep for good reason. In the physical realm which this term is taken from sheep are **led** around by a shepherd as compared to cattle and other animals which are **driven**. When the sheep trust the shepherd they go in the direction that he is going in - of their own volition:

John 10:27 - "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"

The congregation should follow the example and the teachings of its spiritual leaders *as long as* the leaders are following Christ (i.e. following the Bible):

1 Corinthians 11:1 - "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ."

What about Paul, the apostle? Wasn't his title "apostle"?

The term "apostle" is never used as a title for Paul. It is always used to describe his **role** in the church:

Romans 1:1 - "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God"

1 Corinthians 1:1 - "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother"

2 Corinthians 1:1 - "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia"

Galatians 1:1 - "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead;)"

Ephesians 1:1 - "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus"

Colossians 1:1 - "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother"

1 Timothy 1:1 - "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Saviour, and Lord Jesus Christ, which is our hope"

2 Timothy 1:1 - "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus"

Titus 1:1 - "Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness"

But doesn't the Bible talk about pastors, bishops, elders and deacons?

Yes it does. But these are "roles" that individuals have in the local church based on gifts God bestows and based on scriptural criteria (as in Titus chapter 1 and 1 Timothy chapter 3). These are not titles. Try to find a reference in the Bible to Pastor Paul, or Deacon Stephen, Elder Apollos or Bishop Peter. Such references do not exist. Everyone called each other by name or used terms of equal status such as brother, sister, brethren, and saints. — *RM Kane*

***"But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first."
[Matthew 19:30]***
