CHURCH AND MINISTRY

Covered

The Pastor, the Pulpit, and the Man Who Must Decrease

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Every Sunday, in thousands of churches, a man stands up in front of a congregation and opens his mouth. The people in the pews see him. They see his face, his clothes, his gestures, the way he holds the Book or doesn't. They hear his voice. They notice whether he is funny, whether he is warm, whether he seems to like them.

None of that is sinful. God made pastors with faces and voices. But it raises a question every congregation answers, whether it means to or not: when a man stands in the pulpit, who is supposed to be seen?

The usual way of asking it sets two pictures side by side. One is a robed pastor at a wooden pulpit with a crucifix behind him. The other is a young man on a dark stage with a headset mic and an expensive hoodie. The first is supposed to be about Christ and the second about the man. There is some truth in that contrast, but it is too easy. It lets one kind of church off the hook, and it turns the whole question into a matter of taste. The better way in is to ask what a pastor actually is, and then let that answer judge every church, including our own.

Not His Own Person

The Augsburg Confession does not begin its teaching on the ministry with the minister. It begins with faith. Article IV confesses that we are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith, and Article V immediately asks how such faith comes to be. God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments, through which as through means He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith where and when He pleases in those who hear the gospel (AC V.1–3).

Notice the order. The office exists because the gospel has to be delivered. It is not a platform for gifted men. It is a delivery route. That is why Article XIV insists that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call. The call is not the church's way of honoring a talented man. It is the church's way of saying that this man does not speak on his own account.

The Apology puts it more sharply. Answering the worry that the sacraments are spoiled when unworthy men administer them, it says that ministers do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church's call. When they offer the Word and the sacraments, they do it in Christ's place and stead (Ap VII/VIII.28). The Apology grounds this in the Lord's own words to the seventy:

> "Whoever listens to you listens to Me; whoever rejects you rejects Me; and whoever rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me." (Luke 10:16)

Paul said the same about himself and Apollos when the Corinthians were sorting themselves into fan clubs: "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1). A steward does not own the house. He hands out what belongs to the master. Nobody comes to the steward's table to admire the steward.

Why the Robe

This is where clothing enters the discussion, and it enters for a better reason than people usually think.

Vestments were not invented to make pastors look holy. The basic garments of the Western church grew out of ordinary Roman dress; the alb is simply a long white tunic. When fashions changed, the church kept the old clothes for the service, and over time they came to carry meaning. The white garment recalls Baptism, where the Christian is clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27). The stole came to be read as the yoke of the office. But the most useful thing a vestment does is plain: it hides the man.

When a pastor puts on an alb, his own taste disappears. You cannot tell what brands he likes, whether he is in shape, whether he keeps up with style. The man who preached here fifty years ago and the man who will preach here after this one retires look much the same. That is the point. The garment says, before he opens his mouth, "Don't look at me. I am here under orders."

This is not a law. The Lutheran Confessions treat vestments and ceremonies as adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden by God. A faithful pastor can preach in a black gown, a dark suit, or a sweater at the nursing home, and Christ is just as present in His Word. Some Lutheran church bodies with deep pietist roots have never been heavily vested, and nobody should pretend that a stole makes a sermon true. But the principle behind the robe is not optional. Whatever a pastor wears, the question is whether it covers him or displays him.

A Robe Is Not a Guarantee

Here the easy contrast falls apart. If the problem were only skinny jeans and stage lighting, the traditional church could relax. It can't.

A man can stand at a carved pulpit in full vestments and preach himself. He can preach moralism: try harder, love more, here are three ways to be a better father, with Jesus in the last paragraph as an example to follow. He can preach the law until the people are crushed, or so softly that nobody is crushed at all, and then send them home without a word of absolution. The robe stops none of that. It only makes it look reverent.

Nor is the cult of personality limited to the megachurch. The traditional and confessional world has its own celebrities: the pastor with the podcast, the scholar whose name settles arguments, the online figure whose following is built on how well he scolds the other

side. A congregation can attach itself so tightly to a beloved pastor that when he leaves, half the members leave with him. That is the Corinthian disease ("I follow Paul"), and it does not care what the man wears.

So the test is not how the platform looks. It is what is delivered from it.

The Room Is Preaching Too

None of this means outward forms don't matter. They matter a great deal, just not as a scorecard.

The Formula of Concord, written after the fights over the Leipzig Interim, confesses that ceremonies neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word are free, and that each church may change them as edifies its people. But it sets a hard limit. When ceremonies are pressed on the church in a way that obscures the truth, or when keeping or dropping them would confess a falsehood or offend the weak, they stop being indifferent (FC Ep X; SD X). At that point the form itself becomes a confession.

That limit cuts both ways. Ceremonies can be forced on a church to make a doctrinal point, and they can be stripped away to make one. And beyond the moment of crisis there is a quieter truth: every room teaches. A sanctuary arranged around an altar and a font tells people where God has promised to be found. A room arranged around a stage tells people to watch the performer. Lighting that darkens the congregation and floods the platform says the people are an audience. A service built to carry the crowd to an emotional peak says the decisive thing happens in the listener's feelings.

None of those messages is spoken from the pulpit. They don't need to be. People learn them anyway, week after week, before a single verse is read. That is why form can't be dismissed as taste. The question is never whether something is old or new. The question is what it confesses about where Christ is and whom He is for.

What the People Came For

So where is the line? Not between robes and hoodies, and not between organs and guitars. It runs between a service that delivers Christ's gifts and a service that delivers something else.

The Augsburg Confession defines the church as the assembly of saints in which the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly administered (AC VII.1). Those are its marks. They are also what people actually need. A sinner does not come to church needing a more engaging personality. He comes with a conscience that accuses him and a death he cannot avoid. What helps him is a man under orders saying, in Christ's stead, "I forgive you all your sins." It is water poured with the triune name. It is the bread and the cup given with the words "for you."

Paul knew this. He came to Corinth, a city that prized eloquence the way ours prizes charisma, and he refused to compete: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Later he summed up his whole ministry in one sentence: "For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

Even the Great Commission, so often quoted as a mandate for strategy and reach, describes this kind of ministry: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). Disciples are made by baptizing and teaching. Neither requires a compelling personality. Both require a man willing to hand over what is not his.

The Freedom of Decreasing

When John the Baptist's disciples worried that the crowds were drifting to Jesus, John did not defend his platform. He said, "He must increase; I must decrease" (John 3:30).

It is easy to hear that as a hard demand on pastors, and it is one. But it is also a gift. A pastor who believes his ministry rises or falls on his charisma carries a weight no man can carry. He has to be interesting every week. He has to grow the numbers. He has to be liked. When he fails, and he will, the failure is personal.

A pastor who knows he stands in Christ's stead is free of all that. His job is not to be impressive. His job is to be faithful, and faithfulness is something even a plain man with an ordinary voice can manage. The Word does the work. The water does the work. The body and blood do the work. He gets to stand out of the way and watch God keep His promises.

Congregations share that freedom. They don't have to shop for the most gifted speaker or the best experience. They can ask the one question that matters about any church, vested or not: when I walk out the door, will I have heard Christ, for me?

That is what the robe was always trying to say. Cover the man. Show the Christ.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), dedicated to the public domain. Identified translation and textual-variant comparisons retain the readings discussed.