

THE PRACTICAL EFFECTS OF CLERICAL CLOTHING ON EVANGELISM: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Clothing has been shown to have a quantifiable effect on the perceptions of research subjects in a variety of contexts. This study seeks to establish whether this general principle applies to Christian evangelism. While subtle, the study finds that the wearing of a clerical collar leads to measurable differences in the rate at which specific sorts of people approach an evangelist to discuss religion. Wearing a collar increases the rate of engagements with men and non-Christians, relative to wearing business casual clothing. Conversely, wearing a collar leads to fewer engagements with women and Christians. Possible explanations and applications of this disparity are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Christian gospel is said to be eternal and unchanging, and it transcends culture. However, the ways in which one shares that gospel are not so. Communication is a decidedly acculturated affair, and as culture is variegated and constantly changing, the particulars of effective communication are deeply contextual, variegated, and changing, too.

Against the backdrop of the intersection between culture and Christian evangelism, the notion of “incarnational ministry” has become rather popular among missiologists and other thinkers in related fields. In order to

present the gospel effectively, so the thinking goes, one must understand and occupy the cultural space of those one hopes to reach. The idea is that by adopting the cultural norms of a given society, one can lower the barriers that might separate the would-be evangelist from potential hearers, putting the audience at greater ease. Such a self-presentation allows for the communication of the gospel without the sense of unnecessary foreignness that might frustrate the process. So, as Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers counsel in their seminal work on the subject, “We must love the people to whom we minister so much that we are willing to enter their culture as children, to learn how to speak as they speak, play as they play, eat what they eat, sleep where they sleep, study what they study, and thus earn their respect and admiration.”¹

The same noble intent that lies at the back of the incarnational approach to cross-cultural missions also informs many Christians’ attempts to minister within their own culture and other closely related “near-neighbor” societies. In such familiar contexts, the incarnational orientation often takes the form of presenting one’s self as “one of the guys,” of adopting the dress and style of the normal layperson a Christian minister is likely to meet in the course of his ministry. By being more familiar and more relatable, the would-be evangelist again hopes to lower unnecessary barriers that might hinder the communication of the gospel.² That is, the proverbial man on the street may be more inclined to genuinely hear the gospel if it is presented by someone with whom he can more obviously identify.

However, is such a *hyper*-targeted incarnational approach truly helpful? Does a willingness to present one’s self, not just as part of a target culture, but as part of *a part* of a target culture—the lay part specifically—really translate into greater evangelistic effectiveness? To be sure, such a strategy likely increases an evangelist’s relatability, but does it not also consequently undermine his visibility (what Paul Avis calls the church’s “findability”) and credibility?³ Doctors, police officers, firefighters, even plumbers and waiters typically wear uniforms of sorts to advertise their presence and competency to serve in their appropriate capacities. Historically, clergymen have done the same, too. Even the quintessential historical heroes of the incarnational model—men like Hudson Taylor and Robert de Nobili—intentionally and

¹ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 24–25.

² Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex, “The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective,” *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (January 1972), 727.

³ Paul Avis, *A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 191. Cp. Jeffery J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003), 348–353.

visibly associated themselves with the vocationally religious segment of their target cultures: Taylor affected the long fingernails of a classical Chinese religious scholar and de Nobili embraced the trappings of an Indian guru.⁴ Might it be that missionaries and evangelists, if they were to dress in a way that advertises their presence and intentions, a way that signals their own ministerial vocations and competency, would be able to share the gospel more effectively as a result? Perhaps in the church's rush for intercultural self-assimilation, we have lost some of the benefits of *intra*-cultural differentiation.

PAST EXPERIENCE

Over the course of the last decade, I have sought to share the gospel on university campuses in a sustained capacity. I set up a small table along a busy walkway, put out some candy, business cards, and New Testaments, and I posted signs inviting passersby to sit down for a conversation about Jesus. In the course of this ministry, I have sometimes worn what could be called business-casual clothing; at other times, I have worn more overtly ministerial attire, including a clerical collar. People see the signs, hear my friendly invitations, and sometimes they stop in for a chat. Often those who stop are Christians looking for advice, or prayer, or merely hoping to encourage me with a friendly word. At other times, I receive non-Christians—atheists, agnostics, and adherents of other religions like Islam. In these instances, I share the good news of Jesus, offer my interlocutors a copy of the New Testament, and seek to engage with their questions and concerns as best I can. It has been a thoroughly worthwhile ministry, and one that I hope to continue for years to come.

For some time, though, I have wondered what effect the different kinds of clothing I have worn in the midst of this outreach have had on my ability to speak with students and others about the gospel. Casual clothing makes me more approachable, one would think. However, the clerical collar makes me more identifiable and seemingly professional. Do the benefits of one style of dress outweigh the benefits associated with the other?

I recently resolved to investigate the matter quantitatively, but it seemed that there simply was no quantitative data available on the topic. To be sure, researchers have studied similar issues in connection with other fields: past studies have found that subjects perceive interviewers, therapists, and college professors as more competent and reliable when they wear formal,

⁴ Jedd Medefind and Erik Lokkesmoe, *Upended: How Following Jesus Remakes Your Words and World* (Lake Mary, Florida: Passio, 2012), 79. Ed Mathews, "History of Mission Methods: A Brief Survey," *Journal of Applied Missiology* 1, no. 1 (April 1990), accessed January 5, 2015. <http://web.ovu.edu/missions/jam/histmeth.htm>.

professional clothing.⁵ In addition, other research has found that, when it comes to retail sales at least, this perception of expertise translates into greater effectiveness—a greater effectiveness that outstrips the benefits of any “incarnational” considerations even: seemingly “expert” salesmen are more successful than salesmen that resemble their customers in various ways.⁶ However, when looking for data on the quantifiable effects of clothing in connection with evangelism in particular, little is apparently available.

Internet and library searches did turn up a good deal of thoughtful commentary by ministers and evangelists discussing the pros and cons of clerical dress, but it was all anecdotal and thematic in nature. Some people, like Samuel Wells of St. Martin in the Fields in London, England, strongly endorse the clerical collar in the context of outreach as a way of implicitly communicating that “this conversation we’re about to have, this conversation we’re having, could be the most important one of your life.”⁷ Others sound a more cautious note, like Roger Pittelko (formerly of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana), warning that many fear the collar “hampers evangelism” because it serves as “a mark of high status,” which some may find off-putting.⁸

Desiring to move beyond such general notions and to get at some hard numbers, I decided to conduct an experiment of my own. I would continue to evangelize at a local university as I always had—sometimes wearing casual clothing, sometimes wearing clerical dress—and I would track the number and kind of people who approached my humble booth, comparing the results of one strategic self-presentation against the results of the other.

STUDY DESIGN

Park University in Parkville, Missouri, had given me permission to evangelize on campus, so that was to be the setting for the study. Parkville is proximate

⁵ Barbara K. Kerr and Don M. Dell, “Perceived Interviewer Expertness and Attractiveness: Effects of Interviewer Behavior and Attire and Interview Setting,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 23, no. 6 (November 1976). Jennifer M. Dacy and Stanley L. Brodsky, “Effects of Therapist Attire and Gender,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 29, no. 3 (Fall 1992). Karen Lightstone, Rob Francis, and Lucie Kocum, “University Faculty Style of Dress and Students’ Perception of Instructor Credibility,” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 2, no. 15 (August 2011).

⁶ Arch G. Woodside and J. William Davenport Jr., “The Effect of Salesman Similarity and Expertise on Consumer Purchasing Behavior,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 11, no. 2 (May 1974).

⁷ Samuel Wells, “Dressed for the Moment,” *Christian Century* (November 19, 2014), 33.

⁸ Roger D. Pittelko, “Clerical Collar—To Wear or Not To Wear?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (April 2001), 155.

to Kansas City, with a history that extends back to before the Civil War. Park University itself is a liberal arts school founded in 1875. Originally Presbyterian, the school was purchased by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the 1970s, only to be sold again in more recent history, thus acquiring its current non-sectarian character. The university's student body is remarkably diverse, with more than a third of the residential students being internationals from a plethora of Latin American, European, African, and Asian nations.

The study took place over the course of sixteen Monday sessions, falling between September 29, 2014, and March 30, 2015. On half of these sessions, I would wear business-casual attire; on the other half, I would wear a clerical collar—alternating every two sessions. To ensure that I was collecting genuinely comparable data in the course of the study, I planned to evangelize at the same place on campus, on the same day of the week, at roughly the same time of day, for about two hours each day, with the same setup. Therefore, for about two hours each Monday, sometime between 10 AM and 2:30 PM, I would appeal to students, faculty, and other passersby from my evangelism table situated in a wide hallway leading to the university's library.

The table would contain some business cards, some New Testaments, a bowl of candy, and it would bear several small signs displaying the words, "LET'S TALK ABOUT JESUS" in bold font, as shown in figure 1. A pair of chairs would be provided for potential conversation partners.

I would greet the people who came within comfortable earshot of my table with a pleasant greeting, some variation or other of, "How are you doing today? Do you have time for a chat?" Should a person sit down for a

FIGURE 1.

The table *in situ*



conversation, after a brief personal introduction, I would ask them a specific question: “Do you consider yourself a follower of Jesus Christ, or are you still weighing your spiritual options?” The conversation would then develop from there in an organic fashion, touching on those points of the Christian gospel that seemed most relevant to the situation at hand. After we had finished our conversation and the visitor had departed, I would record the individual’s visit, noting his or her gender, nationality, and religious identity.

HYPOTHESES

Prior to carrying out the study, I made a number of hypotheses concerning the expected results against which I could compare my actual findings.

Hypothesis 1

In keeping with past research concerning other vocations, I predicted that wearing a clerical collar would attract more individuals to my table for religiously-themed conversations, relative to dressing in business-casual shirts. If more formal, professional attire increased the perceived expertise of professors and therapists, and the perception of expertise in salesmen led to better sales, presumably similar dynamics would apply in the context of evangelism. By advertising, as it were, my identity as a vocational Christian minister, more people would think that the proffered spiritual conversations would probably be worthwhile—that I would have the training and information needed to answer questions meaningfully and to thoughtfully engage with objections. If the potential conversation partners had this perception of the relatively greater value of the possible conversations, they would seek out those conversations at a greater rate relative to the control sessions.

Hypothesis 2

On the basis of my past experiences, I hypothesized that, relative to dressing in business-casual clothing, wearing a clerical collar would attract a greater number of specifically non-Christian individuals to my table. Inquisitive and assertive skeptics had always seemed drawn to the collar. Sometimes they have had questions, sometimes they have had complaints, and sometimes they have provided me with my most substantive conversations I have enjoyed as a part of this outreach. For whatever reason, though, the presence of the collar serves as a kind of lightning rod with this community.

In addition, given the very large number of Muslim students enrolled at Park University, it seemed plausible that such students would be attracted by the presence of the collar. Many of these Muslim students hail from nations with very little Christian presence—let alone overt and unabashedly proselytizing Christian presence. Perhaps these individuals would be attracted to a conversation with a Christian evangelist for the sheer novelty of the experience. If their mental image of a Christian clergyman were mediated

to them primarily through television and movie depictions (depictions in which clerical collars are nearly ubiquitous), then reflecting such depictions would key into their mental images and effectively advertise my presence and purpose.⁹ As Alvin Reid has noted, even the “radically unchurched” recognize and understand the meaning of a clerical collar.¹⁰

Hypothesis 3

Finally, as a corollary to the second hypothesis, and being mindful of the overlap between international students and Muslim students, I predicted that, relative to dressing in business-casual shirts, wearing a clerical collar would attract a greater number of international students generally.

With these hypotheses in place, I set about conducting the experiment, hoping both to see the predictions either confirmed or disconfirmed and also valuing the evangelism for the spiritual results it might produce in the lives of those I met.

OUTCOMES

As in the past, many people of various backgrounds stopped at the table, and we shared meaningful conversations. Some of the conversations were rather short—consisting of little more than personal introductions, a profession of Christian faith on the part of the visitor, and a brief prayer shared together. Other conversations lasted much longer—particularly those that involved passionate unbelievers who were eager for a thoughtful dialogue on multiple points of disagreement between us. I was able to share the gospel message many times, to distribute several copies of the New Testament, to pray with a number of people, and to give informational flyers relevant to various apologetics topics when appropriate.

Following the study protocol proved easy enough, as did ascertaining and recording the desired data. Each day of the study, I recorded the time I began evangelizing, the time I finished, and the data concerning the specific individuals who responded to my invitations and approached me. The data concerning the evangelistic program, presented in terms of absolute numbers, is summarized in Table 1.

When these absolute numbers are divided by the amount of time spent evangelizing, the disparity in overall time spent is accommodated for, and directly comparable rates of engagement emerge. This information is contained in Table 2.

⁹ Larry A. Witham, *Who Shall Lead Them?: The Future of Ministry in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 187.

¹⁰ Alvin Reid, *Evangelism Handbook: Biblical, Spiritual, Intentional, Missional* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 395.

TABLE 1.**Results in absolute numbers**

	Clothing worn by evangelist	
	Clerical	Business-casual
Total time evangelizing	8 hours	7.25 hours
Total people engaged	25	24
Men	19	11
Women	6	13
Christians	18	22
Non-Christians	7	2
Americans	19	15
Internationals	6	9

TABLE 2.**Results per hour**

Engaged	Clothing worn by evangelist	
	Clerical	Business-casual
Total people	3.125	3.310
Men	2.375	1.517
Women	0.750	1.793
Christians	2.250	3.034
Non-Christians	0.875	0.276
Americans	2.375	2.069
Internationals	0.750	1.241

These rates of engagement can be translated into percentages, with the rates associated with business-casual dress serving as a control or baseline against which to compare the rates associated with wearing the clerical collar. That information is presented in Figure 2.

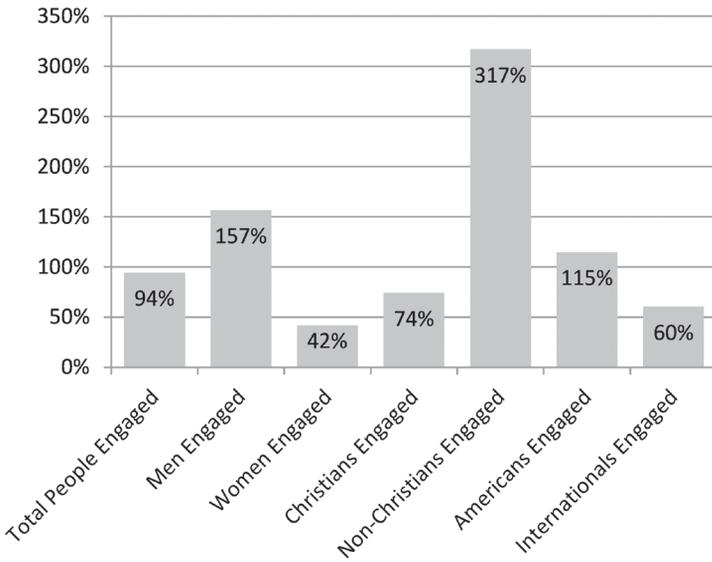
DISCUSSION

As can be seen in Figure 2, I encountered notably different outcomes while wearing a clerical collar when compared against wearing more familiar business-casual clothing. Looking back to the original hypotheses, some were borne out, and others were not.

First, the prediction that more people generally would approach the table when I wore a clerical collar was marginally confirmed. However, the

FIGURE 2.

Rates of engagement with a clerical collar compared to business-casual as a baseline



difference in the rate of engagement was small enough as to be statistically negligible. For all practical purposes, then, people in general approached the booth at roughly the same rate regardless of the style of clothing I wore.

Second, the suspicion that more non-Christians in specific would approach the evangelism table when I wore the clerical collar was dramatically confirmed. Indeed, the rate of such engagements with non-Christians (i.e. Muslims, atheists, agnostics, etc.) while wearing the collar was nearly twice that of the control sessions. Such a quantifiable finding is in keeping with my anecdotal impressions from previous outreach attempts.

Third, the prediction that more internationals would approach the table when I wore a collar was disconfirmed. Internationals approached the table under such conditions at only 81% of the rate that they approached the table when I wore business-casual dress.

Finally, a wholly unexpected outcome of the study presents itself in connection with gender. Relative to the control sessions, men approached the table 25% *more* often, and women 25% *less* often, when I wore the clerical collar. While predictions of gender-based differences in the rates of engagement were not among the initial hypotheses of this study, this outcome seems significant enough to warrant attention.

Perhaps this particular finding is related to the differing degrees to which men and women value expert testimony relative to the testimony of non-experts. Past research has found that men tend to find expert opinion

relatively more valuable than do women. As Sonia Livingstone discovered vis-à-vis television debate programs, “Men are more likely to consider experts more worth hearing than the laity while women especially emphasize the importance of giving a say to ordinary people.”¹¹ If more overtly professional dress communicates a sense of expertness, and men find such expertness particularly valuable while women do not, it would explain why the presence of distinctly clerical clothing attracted more men and fewer women to enter into religiously-themed conversations at the table. Such is only speculation, though, and further investigation is necessary to come to any settled understanding of the cause of this notable outcome.

LIMITATIONS

It needs to be said that the present study is more a beginning than an ending to the discussion of the effect and use of clerical clothing in connection with Christian evangelism. The body of literature that deals with the topic in an empirical and quantifiable fashion is quite small, as noted above—perhaps limited to this study alone. Are the outcomes of this study bound in time or space to the particular context in which the research took place? Might additional studies in other nations or other social settings produce similar results? Ministers have spoken of their impressions concerning the seemingly different effect of clerical dress in different cities in the American Midwest.¹² If researched systematically, would these impressions be borne out? These questions can only be answered with additional research conducted in a variety of settings.

CONCLUSIONS

While nuanced, this study provides empirical evidence in support of the notion that—sometimes at least—ministers seeking to play the part of an evangelist are wise not to blend in to their target culture *too* much. Visibly distinguishing oneself as a member of the clergy through the use of a culturally relevant symbol of one’s vocation, such as clerical dress, can lead to greater numbers of *certain sorts* of evangelistic engagements. When an evangelist wishes to reach non-Christians specifically (e.g. to share the gospel—the most obvious and direct work of an evangelist), wearing clerical clothing can help to facilitate this. Further, should one wish to engage with men specifically in evangelistic conversations, a clerical collar can, apparently, be an asset here, as well. Conversely, if an evangelist is seeking to attract Christians to himself (e.g. to announce the formation of a new church in an under-

¹¹ Sonia Livingstone, “Watching Talk: Gender and Engagement in the Viewing of Audience Discussion Programmes,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3 (July 1994), 434.

¹² Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 136.

served area perhaps), or if he is seeking evangelistic conversations with women specifically, then this study indicates that foregoing a clerical collar in favor of a more familiar and non-descript style of dress may be preferable.

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