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Theological Observer

Clerical Collar – To Wear or Not To Wear?

Fifty years ago the questions of wearing a clerical collar was much debated in the congregations of our Synod. In the late 1950s I was the pastor of a congregation in a near-west suburb of Chicago. Reading through the minutes of the Voters' Meetings, I discovered that, in the late 1940s, the pastor of the congregation had asked the Voters for permission to wear a clerical collar. A long and spirited debate followed, leading to no consensus. The final resolution of the Voters was "let the pastor decide." That was a very Lutheran answer since the wearing of clerical garb is neither forbidden nor commanded.

The clerical collar is not a vestment. It is ordinary clothing. The use of the collar illustrates something about clerical insignia and dress. From earliest times there were distinguishing marks about the apparel of the clergy. The use of a ring (the mark of a slave), the wearing of the *stola*, and the shaving of the head or tonsure all marked the members of the clergy. What we call liturgical vestments were, in fact, originally ordinary clothing worn by all. The alb, cincture, and chasuble were regular dress in the Roman world. But styles changed. When the barbarians invaded the Roman empire, they brought a new form of dress, trousers and a shirt. As the new styles were adopted, the clergy retained the old clothing. The old clothing was now understood to be liturgical vesture for use in the services of the church. The old clothing, now considered vestments, was given new symbolic meaning. This process of the clergy keeping the old style has gone on ever since. The cassock, a common walking coat used by all gentlemen in the Middle Ages, was retained by the clergy when it was shortened to form a suit coat. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Protestant ministers wore a frock coat and a turn down collar as clerical attire. The frock coat and turn down collar, formerly the common dress of the gentleman, was abandoned in favor of the modern suit coat. But the Protestant clergy retained the older style as a clerical uniform. With our culture adopting more and more casual clothing, it is possible that the new clerical uniform will be a shirt and tie.

From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, gentlemen wore elaborate collars. Often they were of lace or something that took the appearance of a primitive ascot tie. To keep the collar from being soiled, a band of linen was worn around the neck. In time, styles changed. The collars disappeared, but the clergy retained the band of linen around the neck. That band of linen used to keep the collar from being soiled is the clerical collar of today.

In reality, the clerical collar has become a uniform. Uniforms are worn by those who serve. Members of the armed forces wear uniforms, but the commander-in-chief does not. Waiters and waitresses wear uniforms, but the owner of the restaurant does not. Police wear uniforms, but the mayor of the town does not. Physicians, nurses, and technicians wear uniforms, but the chief executive of the hospital does not. A uniform designates status, the status of one who serves. The pastor who wears a clerical collar as a uniform is indicating not superior status, but rather the status of a servant.

Those who argue against the use of clerical attire suggest that it hampers evangelism. They view the collar as a mark of high status. As one pastor put it, "Sitting next to a sick bed with color (not a collar) is more intimate, personal, and cheerful than clinical, dull black and white." The clerical collar is believed to draw constant attention to the wearer.

Are there advantages to wearing a clerical collar? Certainly the wearer is constantly reminded that as a pastor, he is the Lord's servant to minister to the people. The pastor has greater access to restricted areas such as hospitals. During his visits with hospitalized parishioners, he does not need to constantly explain his presence to the staff. The pastor wearing clerical garb in his rounds of visitation in the community is never confused with a door-to-door salesman. Perhaps the Voters' Meeting of so long ago had it right: "Let the pastor decide."

Roger D. Pittelko
Pastor Emeritus

Carl F. H. Henry: An Evangelical Tribute to a Theologian

The turbulent years of the Missouri Synod from the 1950s through the 1970s still require historical analysis from all sides of the debate. Whether these will spring forth from Missouri's soul is another matter. Should they be written, the name of Carl F. H. Henry, the one outstanding theologian of the Evangelical movement must be included. On December 7, 2003, Henry passed away in Watertown, Wisconsin, at the age of 90. Perhaps more than anyone else he turned the discredited Fundamentalism of the early twentieth century into an academically acceptable force in American Protestantism. Today the pages of *Christianity Today*, of which he was the founding editor, advertise a multitude of seminaries, which testifies to the strength of the Evangelical message that he helped define. During the 1970s *Christianity Today* was the second most widely read periodical by Missouri Synod pastors. Henry expressed his personal distress that today its articles tend to center around a personal Christianity and have become less theological. Nearly forty years ago I was allowed to present an article on baptism ("Conflict Over Baptism," *Christianity Today*, April 14, 1967, 8-10.); such an opportunity cannot be expected now.

Details of his life can be found in the March 2004 issue of *Christianity Today*, but a word should be said of where his path crossed with those in Missouri. Conservative Lutheranism shared with Evangelicals a commitment to biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and historicity. Henry, however, addressed higher critical issues long before and more thoroughly than anyone in the Missouri Synod did. In the early 1960s he set off for Europe and sat down with such luminaries as Rudolph Bultmann and Karl Barth. He also met with theologians who had already addressed Neo-Orthodoxy, whose views had already found their way into the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. There were about sixteen interviews in

all, which he then published in *Jesus of Nazareth: Savior and Lord*. For some of us this provided a map through uncharted waters.

In 1965 I traveled from my Rockville, Connecticut, congregation through wintry weather to hear him speak at Park Street Church on Boston Common, a congregation of the American Baptist Convention. Throughout his life Henry remained a member of that classical liberal denomination and was proud of it. Evangelicals have this kind of freedom. Church and confession do not have match. As I remember, he hinted that I join the editorial staff of *Christianity Today*, but I had been never comfortable with Evangelicalism's lack of sacramentality and its deficient Christology. Some years later as a guest in our home, Henry urged that conservative-minded Protestants should forget their differences to fight against the common enemy. This challenge was tempting, but it comes with a price. Henry was baptized as a Lutheran, but he pointed to his later conversion to Christ as the crowning moment in his life. No surprise. He was after all an Evangelical and a committed Baptist.

Henry's massive 3,000 page *God, Revelation and Authority* (1976-1983) belongs to the Reformed theological tradition and, as such, has no integral place in Lutheran theology. It shows, however, how fervently he worked to keep Evangelicalism theological. Whether his legacy will be preserved among Evangelicals is uncertain but there is a lesson in this for Lutherans who cannot hold a candle to the theological works he produced. Henry was a good friend of the late Robert D. Preus, whom he admired for his work on biblical inerrancy. Ironically he became associated with Richard John Neuhaus in working to prevent the further erosion of core Christianity. At this point ecumenical associations become confessional in insisting that the center of faith must be preserved. If the church is catholic, some invitations to ecumenical participation cannot easily be turned down. Neuhaus notes that "toward the end of his life, he expressed a very doleful view of the state of evangelicalism, fearing that it had fallen captive to market dynamics of American religiosity." Neuhaus urged Henry to join *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, theologians who recognize a common theological core among themselves and identify their differences. He would have been a natural in this group, but he could not find it in himself to join.

A tribute to Carl F. H. Henry by Neuhaus says it all. "The story is told of a lunch held by mainly liberal religious leaders to honor the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. About two hundred people were present and Carl rose to ask a question, introduction himself as the editor of *Christianity Today*. To the great mirth of the crowd, Barth responded, 'Do you mean Christianity today or Christianity yesterday?' Without missing a beat, Carl answered with a smile, "Yesterday, today, and forever.'" Neuhaus concludes: "Henry was a rare thing, a Christian gentleman, whose graciousness of manner was on easy terms with the clarity and confidence of faith. May choirs of angels welcome on the far side of Jordan" (*First Things* 110 [February 2004]: 67).