

Biblical Modesty

By Britt Williams

Unfortunately, I have noticed that the modern church responds to the Biblical doctrine of modesty with confusion, apprehension, or worse, disdain. Sadly, fully dressed Christians are often viewed as victims of legalism. Several years ago, a preacher visiting our church was visibly troubled after seeing all the modestly dressed women. He preached for us on a Sunday morning and supposing to enlighten us, made this comment from the pulpit, "holiness is not a dress dragging the ground." After service, I lovingly asked him how many articles of clothing he thought our wives/daughters should discard before he would consider them "liberated." As one might expect, he was speechless.



It is true, modesty alone does not make a Christian. Externals mean nothing if there is no divine love in the heart. Nevertheless, God commands "modesty" in His Word. And yet, it is lamentable how few professing Christians have a proper, Biblical perspective regarding their personal dress. In this post, I would like to address the N.T. doctrine of modesty as presented throughout the Scriptures...

"In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works."
-1 Timothy 2:9-10

True Christianity is to willingly come under the Lordship of Christ. The Spirit of God, dwelling within and gently leading, is the divine method whereby the Lordship of Christ is realized in the believer's life. If Jesus is truly to be our Lord it will be required that we honestly allow the Spirit of God to scrutinize every area of our life. One of the fruits of the new birth is that the new convert hears and obeys the voice of God. Moreover, the Spirit of God will always lead the believer in the way that he must walk, that is, in the way of holiness. Of course, the new believer cannot possibly know that way, having never walked therein before. Therefore, he must be led into purity and taught how to walk in holiness. Naturally, this comes from direct revelations of the Holy Ghost to the heart of the new believer in Christ - aided by the means of preaching/Bible study/prayer. Because of this, many stagger over the vast changes that occur when they are initially born-again. We know that the Lord teaches each of us very specific things concerning the practical aspects of our daily life on this earth. He'll not leave our spiritual development to chance any more than an earthly father would leave his son's moral development to chance. Certainly, this will include how we dress.

I. MODESTY IS A BIBLE DOCTRINE.

Mark 8:38 Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and

sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Unfortunately, in this hour, it is almost considered a shame to be fully dressed. We live in an adulterous and sinful generation. In our day, sinfulness is exalted and purity is ridiculed. Case in point: 50 years ago virginity was considered virtuous while today it is commonly belittled or ignored. Whereas, a generation ago, a promiscuous teenage girl would feel pressured to lie about her promiscuity and claim to be a virgin. Today, a virgin would feel pressured to lie about her virginity and claim to be promiscuous. Likewise, to hold to a standard of modesty in this hour generally earns you the immediate label of legalist. To our shame, this is the case even in, and especially in, the professing church. Legalism, though not a Biblical term, is the practice of seeking to be justified by works rather than faith. In other words, doing things to be saved, rather than doing things because I am saved. John Wesley made this observation...

"I find no such sin as legality in the Bible. The very use of the term speaks of Antinomianism. I defy all liberty, but liberty to love and serve God; and fear no bondage, but bondage to sin."
-John Wesley

Contrary to popular opinion, we are not legalists simply because we obey the Bible (in fact, this is an irrefutable mark of Christians). The life that is submitted to Christ must be submitted to His Word. Show me an individual who sincerely desires to be like Christ and I will show you someone whose life is constantly being shaped to N.T. doctrine. And such individuals will never belittle or ridicule the N.T. doctrine of modesty.

1 Cor. 12:3 Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus [the Word] accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.

People often assume "modesty" is a tradition of men, a man-made doctrine, or something of little consequence. Few realize "modesty" is directly mentioned in the N.T. as much as the instructions given to husbands and wives regarding the marriage covenant. It is also a command, meaning all Christians are obligated to dress modestly. But, the question arises, how are we to define modesty? Like many Biblical principles, modesty has been redefined in our day. Each new generation has accepted, as God's standard of modesty, the sinful deviations of the preceding generation from pure modesty. So by degrees, the definition of modesty has been corrupted to the point that the average woman today would not meet the approval of even the harlots of old.

II. IS GOD CONCERNED WITH OUR MODE OF DRESS?

Rev. 3:18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear...

A careful study of the Bible indicates that God is indeed concerned with how we dress. First, let's consider the events that immediately followed the fall of man in the garden of Eden. In the fall Adam and Eve lost their innocence and were given the knowledge of good and evil. The moment Adam and Eve sinned they became aware of their nakedness. Immediately, we see that they felt a necessity to cover themselves, as is evident in Genesis 3...

Genesis 3:7 And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

Consider that this was the first time that man reformed in order to avoid God's displeasure. Afterward, when the LORD God came walking in the garden, we're told...

Genesis 3:9-10 ...the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

Finally, we see that God, was not satisfied with Adam and Eve's attempt at modesty...

Genesis 3:21 Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.

Coats: {Hebrew} keth-o'-neth, A robe.

This was the first time that God rejected man's feeble attempt at reformation. Obviously, God did so because it fell short of His standard. Adam and Eve thought themselves to be clothed, but God didn't. God Himself had to teach Adam and Eve His standard for modest apparel. Incidentally, this was the first time that God revealed to man how to act so as to please Him. Hence, we see that the first sin revealed to our fallen parents after their repentance was not rebellion, nor idolatry, but the sin of nakedness. This being true, it stands to reason that God will effectively deal with the sin of immodesty in the lives of every new convert. Take note of the demon-possessed man Jesus delivered in Mark 5...

Mark 5:15 And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid.

Furthermore, every angel that appeared to man, if his appearance is described, is always described as fully clothed (head to foot).

Mark 16:5 And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man (angel) sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted.

We do not have one scene presented to us where heavenly beings are not clothed. Also, every description of the appearance of the O.T. priests and high priests indicates that they were fully clothed. As a matter of fact, we are told that the high priest had to wear linen breeches under his long robe to insure that his nakedness would be covered whenever he would ascend the altar before the people.

Exodus 28:42 And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs they shall reach...

Nearly every reference to nakedness in Bible refers to either slaves, unconverted sinners, backslidden believers, conquered peoples, false prophets, or prophets trying to show the people that they were sinful and needed to repent. Thus, nakedness is almost always associated actually or symbolically with sin.

Consider the Lord Jesus Himself. With the exception of His crucifixion, every description of His appearance shows Him to be fully clothed (head to foot).

Rev. 1:13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

If we are going to take the Bible seriously, we must accept the fact that God indeed cares how we dress. True, a clear standard of dress is difficult to establish, yet the principles of modesty and purity cannot be ignored. Let men and women truly walk with God and I believe that outward standard will be met.

III. MODESTY MUST FLOW FROM THE HEART.

Matthew 23:25-26 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

The emphasis must be on the inward, rather than the outward.

Modest: {Webster's} Moderate; not excessive or extravagant, loose, nor lewd.

If you and I are to set Biblical boundaries in our lives then we must have our hearts right with God. Do we wonder why so many lack conviction? Perhaps it is because they have not kept their heart? Perhaps they have no intimate relationship with Jesus as Lord? Why? Because when men truly walk humbly before God they need no external law to restrain them. Instead, the law of God is written upon their hearts, in true love, they yearn to fulfill God's Word and please Him.

"...the early church did not try to legislate the type of clothing Christians should wear. While the church emphasized the principles of simple, modest dress, the specific application of those principles was left up to the individual Christian...Instead, they relied on sound teaching and righteous example. Religious groups that depend on extensive rules to produce personal holiness usually end up producing Pharisees instead. For this reason, the church emphasized the need for new believers to change from the inside out. Externals were considered worthless unless they reflected what was happening inside a person."

-David Bercot

Biblical modesty should be nothing more than a manifestation of an inward work of the heart.

Matthew 12:35 A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.

A change of heart always produces a change of life. If Jesus is to be Lord then we must submit even how we dress to His sovereign rulership. In fact, I would suggest that most who oppose modesty have never truly sought God for His mind regarding their dress. For someone to assume God is unconcerned with our attire reveals a lack of familiarity with God and His Word.

Matthew 25:36 Naked, and ye clothed me...

IV. MODESTY WILL MANIFEST IN OUR APPEARANCE.

Modesty demands that I glorify God in my dress.

1 Cor. 10:31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

To seek God's glory is to be unconcerned with my own. Thus, we should dress to please God, not ourselves or others.

Modesty demands that I be adequately covered.

Leviticus 18:6 None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the Lord.

Nakedness: {Hebrew} er-vaw', Nudity.

God hates unlawful nakedness. Practically speaking, this is why God gave us clothes: to cover our nakedness. Hence, God was the first tailor, clothes were His idea.

Modesty is especially important for women. Men and women are different. They think differently and are tempted differently in regards to the opposite sex. Generally speaking, men are more enticed by what they see, whereas, women are more moved by how they are treated.

2 Samuel 11:2 And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

Matthew 5:28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

This is why Job said...

Job 31:1 I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?

For example, the pornography industry is infinitely more successful selling its filth to men than to women. Many women fail to take this in account when they consider how they dress. They don't see it as a problem because they have no experience in the difficulties it can cause. This, I believe is why women were addressed specifically in the N.T. concerning dress. All of the apostolic admonitions concerning apparel are directed toward women. This is not because Paul was a chauvinist, as the liberated women would have us to believe. Nor is it because men are free from the obligation to dress modestly, because they most assuredly are not. It is rather because immodesty in attire is more ingrained in the female carnal nature than in that of men. Without a doubt the minds of women are more taken up with fashions of dress than any other pleasure. This is clearly manifested by the billions of dollars spent every year on fashions and

cosmetics. Dress designers make fabulous sums dreaming up new and exotic ways to reveal the female form in order to attract and stimulate the male passions. How else can one account for the absurd and even grotesque outfits that women gladly wear? The strongest carnal drive in the man is the desire for power. The spirit of physical and mental competition begins very early in boys. That is why they push and shove and fight from their very childhood. However, as a result of the curse, a woman's greatest carnal desire is to be desired by men. Thus, apart from grace, the moment that a girl enters puberty the opposite sex dominates her thoughts. From that point on almost everything she does is, in some way, directed to entice men. Although there are exceptions, this is the general rule. And women instinctively know that men are easily lured by sex. Thus, Paul seems to be saying that all Christian women should be possessed of a certain sense of shame with respect to their bodies and that this shame should, in turn, produce a bashful and modest attitude toward attire. The woman who truly possesses this "shamefacedness" will be conscious that normal men can easily be tempted and that her body, if exposed will possibly be the instrument of eternal perdition to them.

Proverbs 7:10 ...the attire of an harlot.

Remember, harlots dress in a specific manner for the sole purpose of drawing attention to their bodies. Ladies you should seek not just to be adequately covered but should also avoid clothing that extenuates the shape of your body.

"Luxurious clothing that cannot conceal the shape of the body is no covering at all. Such clothing, clinging close to the body, takes the body's shape and adheres to the flesh. It outlines the woman's figure, so that the whole shape of her body is visible to spectators, even though they cannot actually see the body itself...Such clothing is meant for looking, not for covering."
-Clement

"The word rendered "apparel" signifies a long robe, which reaches down to the feet; and the word translated "modest" signifies that which is clean, neat, and decent, yea, beautiful and ornamental; and the sense of the apostle is, that he would not have them to come to public worship in rags, and in dirty and filthy garments, but that their bodies should be covered with clean and decent raiment; so the Israelites washed their clothes that they might be ready to meet the Lord at Mount Sinai, in Ex 19:14. The Jews always appeared in their best clothes on the Sabbath day; this is one of their rules."
-Gill

Even the lost world knows this principle. At the prison I regularly visit for ministry, there is a warning posted for all visitors who are meeting with inmates. It forbids, among other things, sleeveless, low cut, and short dresses. Why? They know it will excite the wrong passions among the inmate population.

Modesty Demands That I Be Not Driven By Fashion.

Romans 12:2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Conformed: {Greek} soos-khay-mat-id'-zo, To fashion alike, conform to the same pattern, fashion self according to.

Fashion: {Webster's} The make or form of any thing; the state of any thing with regard to its external appearance. Form; model to be imitated; pattern. Custom; prevailing mode or practice. The form of a garment; the cut or shape of clothes; as the fashion of a coat or of a bonnet. Hence, the prevailing mode of dress or ornament.

Titus 2:14 Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

The Greek word rendered church throughout the N.T. literally means "the called out ones." Have we truly been delivered from the clothing standards of this wicked generation? Can the world see that we are unaffected by the current trends in fashion? Isn't it true, to be disinterested in fashion is to be free from it? We must not allow the world to dictate our decisions on how we dress. I believe we should be practical in choosing our dress: considering modesty, quality, and cost. But we should never be driven by the world's approval or disapproval.

Modesty demands that a distinction is maintained between the sexes.

Deut. 22:5 The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.

This, of course, is part of the ceremonial law, however there is an application for us under the new covenant. How are we to view this?

God has ordained a difference between male and female. God had a purpose in making us uniquely male and female. But ours is a generation that desperately wants to blur this divine line. Today role rejections are common. There are men who want to become women and women who want to become men. God wants a man to look and act like a man and a woman to look and act like a woman. The spirit of the age in which we live is characterized by perversion. We should not be ashamed of our distinct roles as men and women and this should be reflected in our outward appearance.

V. THE REASON FOR OUR MODESTY.

Mark 12:30-31 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. 31 And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

For the Christian, every action and every decision must be compelled by divine love.

Philip. 2:13-15 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world...

Our Christian duty is to love God supremely and love our neighbor as ourselves.

1 Cor. 8:13 Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.

Therefore, we live not to please ourselves, but to please God and edify others.

Mark 8:34 And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

In closing, we must remember, modesty does not necessarily constitute holiness. Modesty is only one facet of holiness. Nevertheless, it is commanded. Hence, I believe the man or woman who truly walks with God will eventually be led to consider his or her outward appearance. Though, we don't want to be preoccupied with our appearance, we must desire to abide under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our everyday lives, even our dress.

-B.W.

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