

# I. Modest Appearance, Decent Dress

## A. Introduction

"What shall I wear?" is a question most people ask themselves nearly every morning as they prepare to go out into the world. Beyond style or fashion, the faithful Christian considers other more important issues:

1. Is it modest?
2. Is it decent?
3. Is it proper for those professing godliness?

Our challenge is to determine what constitutes modesty in a constantly changing society. For example, at one time, it was immodest for a woman to expose her ankles. Today, even the most modest dress would have been considered scandalous.

So the questions follow:

1. Should a Christian woman wear shorts, mini-skirts, low-cut blouses, tight skirts, or tight pants?
2. What about men? Should they be concerned about modesty? Should they go about without their shirts?
3. What effect might decency have on certain activities, such as mixed swimming and other athletic sports?

As we ponder these questions, we will not propose some technical answer measurable with a ruler such as "skirts no higher than an inch above the knee". The Bible does not address the issue that way, so neither will we. Instead, we encourage prayerful consideration of what the Bible has to say, which provides basic principles and concepts that can help us discern between good and evil. God's word will be our standard on this. The world has an entirely different notion about what is right and proper for our attire.

At the outset, we need to establish that God does not have a double standard for men and women. What is decent and fitting for a man is also decent and fitting for a woman. However, we will find that most of the scriptures on this subject refer to decency for a woman. There is probably good reason for this. Men, by nature, are typically more visually stimulated than women. This is one reason pornography is usually more ensnaring to men than to women. The inspired writers may well be concentrating on the instructions for women to help counteract this tendency.

Let's begin by simply noting what the Bible says about nakedness.

## B. It Is Shameful To Expose One's Nakedness

### 1. Consider the example of Adam and Eve

After they sinned, they made "coverings" for themselves:

*Genesis 3:7-10*

In the original Hebrew, the word "coverings" is from CHAGORAH, meaning a garment which covers the mid-section. This describes what most men typically wear at a public swimming pool. Note that, despite such coverings, they still felt naked!

The Lord made "tunics" for them:

*Genesis 3:21*

In the original Hebrew, the word "tunics" is from KETHONETH, a robe or coat-like garment commonly reaching from about the neck to the knees. Evidently, God was not satisfied with the brevity of the coverings they had made. Note how this word is used in the book of Exodus and its context:

*Exodus 28:40-42*

### 2. Consider general references to nakedness

*Genesis 9:22, 23*

*Leviticus 18:6-19, 20:17-21*

*Nahum 3:5*

*Revelation 3:18*

Though the Bible speaks of nakedness occasionally to denote defenselessness or destitution, the context is almost always associated with shame. The larger references to nakedness in Old Testament scripture speak of bodily indecency and improper behavior. Nakedness is cast in a favorable light only in respect to that exposure in private between husband and wife (Genesis 2:25).

### **3. Partial Nudity**

It is shameful to expose or draw attention to private parts of the body. Exposure of such parts was often a form of judgment intended to shame the wicked.

*Isaiah 3:16-17; 47:1-3*

Paul alludes to the fact that some parts are "unpresentable" and thus should be covered.

*1 Corinthians 12:23-24*

At some point, then, there needs to be a line where it is a shame to cross, there are parts of the body that should remain private.

## **C. We Must Not Provide Opportunities For Fleshly Lusts**

### **1. Provoking lust is clearly condemned in the scriptures.**

*Romans 13:13-14*

Can the way we dress excite fleshly lusts? Consider the following:

- "An astonishingly great number of men are of the opinion that women are more attractive partly dressed than nude. They prefer to see women partially disrobed to the sight of complete nakedness." - Theodor Reik (Of Love And Lust)
- "Mini-clothes are symbolic of those girls who want to seduce a man..." - Mary Quant, London fashion designer and inventor of the miniskirt.
- When asked where it (miniskirts, etc.) was all leading, Mary Quant replied with one word: "Sex."
- During the hijacking of the Santa Maria in 1967, the women on board were concerned the rebels might have designs on them, so they left off wearing "enticing clothing"; i.e., they stopped appearing in shorts and halter-tops, and quit swimming in the ship's pool.

If the "women of the world" know what is capable of stimulating the lust of the flesh, why not the "daughters of God"?

### **2. Jesus warned about "committing adultery in the heart".**

*Matthew 5:27-30*

There is a two-fold responsibility here.

- a. The man is responsible to guard his mind and eyes from impurity.

*Philippians 4:8*

*Job 31:1*

- b. The woman is responsible to help prevent the lewd stare.

*Proverbs 7:6-27*

*2 Samuel 11:2*

Though lust is inexcusable on the man's part, if the woman by her apparel or conduct has encouraged it, she shares in the guilt! If the clothing we wear encourages the arousal of fleshly lusts in others, then we have clearly crossed the line. Of course, this requires honesty and objectivity on our part; we must be willing to be true to ourselves and to God.

## D. Appearance Consistent With Godliness

Thus far we have examined what the Bible says about nakedness and lust. The proper attire of a Christian goes beyond merely the exposure of skin. Consider this reading from the American Standard Version:

*1 Timothy 2:*

*(9) In like manner, that women adorn themselves in **modest** apparel, with **shamefastness** and **sobriety**;*

*(10) not with braided hair, and gold or pearls or costly raiment; but (which becometh women professing godliness) through good works.*

### 1. Apparel

In verse 9, let's examine more carefully the three words shown above in bold:

#### "Modest" [KOSMIO]

From whence the English word "cosmetic" is derived, this word is defined as follows:

- "Orderly, well arranged, decent, modest" (akin to kosmos, in its primary sense as "harmonious arrangement adornment"; cf. kosmos, of the world, which is related to kosmos in its secondary sense as the world) - Vine's Expository Dictionary.
- "The well-ordering is not of dress and demeanor only, but of the inner life, uttering in deed and expressing itself in the outward conversation" – Trench.
- "Well-arranged, seemly, modest; of a man living with decorum" – J. H. Thayer.

This word applies not so much to scanty clothing, but to gaudy clothing. This touches on clothing that is not fitting for the occasion as society or culture would expect; such clothing would attract undue attention. The modest Christian does not go to a funeral or worship services dressed like they are going to a picnic. Likewise, they do not dress at a picnic like they're going to a banquet.

#### "Shamefastness" [AIDOS]

Translated "shamefacedness" in the KJV, this word is defined as follows:

- "A sense of shame, modesty, is used regarding the demeanor of women in the church" – W. E. Vine's Expository Dictionary.
- "A sense of shame or honour, modesty, bashfulness, reverence, regard for others, respect" – J. H. Thayer.
- "AIDOS would always restrain a good man from an unworthy act" – Trench.

It suggests the ability to blush. This word applies more to the issue of scanty clothing; those who display their bodies so as to excite lust in others have not the quality of "shamefacedness." The faithful Christian takes into consideration the affect their apparel has others.

It is a well-known fact that men like to look at women's legs; it's the subject of many popular songs. Young ladies, if you are wearing in public the typical women's swimsuit, there is no portion of your legs that you are not exposing to their view. As men look and lust (and they will!) you have enticed them to do so and are equally guilty of sin.

#### "Sobriety" [SOPHROSUNE]

Translated " discreetly" in the NAS, this word is defined as follows:

- "Denotes soundness of mind" – Vine.
- "It is that habitual inner self-government, with its constant rein on all the passions and desires, which would hinder the temptation to these from arising..." – Trench.

The NKJ translates this "moderation," which suggests that one does not go to extremes in any regards. Though this is not the best term for SOPHROSUNE, someone of a sound mind will certainly recognize the limits of good taste.

## 2. Adornment

Go back to 1 Timothy 2 and look at verse 10. He is building on a point concerning the appearance that draws undue attention to one's self. An attitude that is full of self will dress in such a way that says "Hey, look at me!" This includes:

- Girls with too much make-up. Make-up worn discreetly is not the first thing you notice when you see a face.
- Girls who work for hours on making their hair look right. How much comparative time is used in Bible study?
- Guys with muscle shirts or no shirt at all to show off their physique.

The apostle is not altogether condemning the wearing of jewelry or fixing the hair. Excess, rather than actual adornment, is what is being condemned here. Compare these passages:

*Isaiah 3:16-26*

*Ezekiel 16:10-14*

1 Timothy 2:10 is an example of elliptical speech found frequently in the Bible. It condemns one thing to the exclusion of another; it is "Not only this but also that" terminology. Note these examples:

*John 6:27 not labor (ONLY) for the food which perishes, but (ALSO) for the food which endures.*

*1 Corinthians 1:17 did not send me to baptize (ONLY), but to preach the gospel (ALSO).*

*1 Timothy 2:10 not (ONLY) with braided hair, and gold or pearls or costly raiment; but... (ALSO) through good works.*

Outward adornment is not wrong absolutely, but in comparison to the adorning of the inner person by good works, it is to be of lower priority and lesser importance

That which is "proper for women professing godliness" is that which is fitting, seemly, suitable, and becoming. A woman professing to be godly would never knowingly adorn herself in a way that excites lust in another person.

*Ephesians 5:3*

*Titus 2:2-7*

*1 Peter 3:1-6*

Regardless how unfair we may think it is, our appearance will affect our influence. If we appear in a well-arranged demeanor, others will be more likely to respect us when we try to teach them the gospel. If we appear disorderly, we will be prejudged by others as unworthy and disregarded. The apostle Paul would have never done anything to thus mislead others.

*1 Corinthians 8:13*

*Romans 14:21*

When a person disregards the effect their appearance may have on others, it cannot be said they are adorned with a gentle and quiet spirit.

## E. Modesty And Decency In Application

God's word is clear about indecent clothing, but the Bible instruction is based on principle and concept. God leaves it up to us to make the proper application before we dress and go out of our house into public every day. The world has a different standard of decency, but many young Christians, instead of steering clear of worldliness, will try to get as close as possible to looking like people in the world.

*1 Peter 2:11, 12*

If Christians do not look different in dress from most anyone else in the world with no regard for godliness, they are obviously not behaving in a godly manner themselves.

## 1. Excuses

Let's examine some excuses young Christians sometimes give for dressing indecently.

**"In old times, a woman even showing ankles was considered lewd, so it's really all just relative."**

We are not living in old times. God's law requires us to dress in two ways: (1) appropriately, as our current culture dictates and (2) decently, as to not induce lust. If our current culture suggests that ankle exposure is lewd, then the faithful Christian will not do it, regardless of whether it is really lewd or not. On the other hand, appearance that causes lust is the same regardless of culture.

**"Some cultures, for example in Europe, are more open about their bodies, so there, nudity is okay."**

They're not as open as they think, or they would not make such a big deal of their nude beaches and parks when Westerners come to visit. It is not that they are less "up-tight" but that they have lower moral standards.

**"It depends on the situation. If everyone else around is dressed scantily, it's okay."**

Here is situation ethics again. The fact is, young ladies, you should hear how men talk to each other about what they see at the beach and swimming pools.

**"It depends on the activity. If it's some athletic completion or hard work, you can't expect full clothing."**

There's an interesting statement found in John 21:3-8. Here, men were at work in a fishing boat. They were out at sea some distance from the shore. Being in a private setting, Peter was naked (KJV), that is, stripped for work (NAS). The original word here [GUNMOS] according to Thayer includes "ill clad, clad in undergarments only (the outer garments or cloak being laid aside)." That sounds like what most people wear at the public pools. However, notice that before Peter jumps into the water to swim to Jesus, he **puts on** his regular clothes so he will be decently covered when he reaches the shore.

**"I'll be cooler and more comfortable."**

Does God have as much concern for your comfort as He does your sin? Besides, you can be cool enough in decent apparel.

**"Everybody is dressing in this style now."**

We have long ago established that what others do is not our standard. Besides, if dressing decently requires custom-made clothes, then that is what we will do.

## 2. Guidelines

Before you dress, consider these guidelines based on biblical principles:

- Prayerfully consider whether your adornment in any circumstance reflects your profession of godliness and the principles found in God's word.
- Seek counsel from those who are mature in the faith, whose senses have been exercised to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:14)
- Girls, if a part of your body is exposed for view that would make you uncomfortable for guys to touch, perhaps you should not be showing it to them.
- If it doesn't cover enough, if it is too sheer, or if it is skin-tight to show your form in detail, it is indecent.