

Modest Apparel

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CAN WE KNOW WHAT GOD MEANS BY MODEST APPAREL?

Timothy Kidwell

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:1-2 NKJV).

Christians are to live in a way that sets them noticeably apart from the world. This lifestyle is based on the condition of our heart (mind). If our mind is not renewed we will find ourselves compromising (conforming) with the ways of the world. Christians are to be transformed (different).

How does this teaching apply in the realm of modesty? Even though the Bible commands we clothe ourselves in “modest apparel” (1 Tim. 2:9), some still view the issue as subjective. To them, modesty is determined by society, culture and conscience. To them, there is no clear standard. This sentiment makes God’s command a matter of judgment. But what if one’s judgment is wrong? Can we disobey God’s command without jeopardizing our soul? Would God give a command and then basically say, “I hope you can figure out what I mean, your soul depends on it?” How absurd!

God makes clear what he expects concerning any given command. As with any topic, the child of God must study the subject in its entirety. In interpreting God’s word we can never do less than what any one verse says, but there may be more to understand because of instruction we find in other verses. Is this not true concerning the plan of salvation? No one verse identifies completely what God requires of a person to become a Christian. We must study the subject in its entirety to have a complete understanding.

In examining the Bible we learn that God, through time, has changed requirements concerning certain commands. For example, acts of worship under the old law (animal sacrifices, burning incense, etc.) are not required under the law of Christ. In fact, they are forbidden by absence of example or command. But in the realm of moral law, God’s will has never changed. Just as it was wrong to kill, steal, lie, commit adultery, etc. in the Old Testament, these moral laws are still binding today. From the beginning of time until the destruction of this earth these laws have, and will, apply. Modesty falls into the realm of moral law. Therefore, what God deemed modest from the beginning has not, and will not change.

Let us begin by looking at some definitions. Paul writes, “In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation; not with braided hair, or gold or pearls, or costly clothing. But which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works” (1 Tim. 2:9-10).

The word *adorn* means “to arrange.” The word *modest* is from the Greek “kosmios” meaning: “orderly, well arranged, decent, modest, harmonious arrangement, adornment” (Strong’s Dictionary, Power Bible CD). Webster defines modest as “observing the proprieties of sex, chaste, decent.” Chasteness implies moral excellence manifested by forbearance from acts or thoughts that do not accord with virginity or strict marital fidelity. *Modest* and *decent* are both applied to propriety in behavior, dress, bearing or speech as exhibiting morality or purity.

From these definitions we can logically conclude that God expects his children to dress in a way that is decent and free from the hint of that which is lewd (sexually unchaste), salacious (arousing or appealing to sexual desire or imagination), or wanton (unduly lavish or extravagant). Gaudiness is definitely condemned, but for many, the problem lies in the area of that which is provocative. For most people, an honest consideration of what is appealing to the opposite sex makes the matter quite simple. But for many others, proof is demanded that they might live as close to the “line” as possible. God provides such proof. Since those “things that were written before were written for our learning” (Rom. 15:4), let us start at the beginning.

In Genesis 3:6-10 we read that Adam and Eve, after discovering they were naked, clothed themselves with a fig leaf apron. These aprons, from the Hebrew “chagora” (Strong’s Hebrew Dictionary) were loincloths or hip clothing that would cover what the modern swimsuit would cover, (maybe more), on the lower body.

Even though he was partially covered, Adam still referred to himself as naked. God shared this sentiment by asking Adam, “Who told you that you were naked?” (Gen. 3:11). God then clothed Adam and Eve in what we know would meet his definition of modest apparel. In Genesis 3:21 God gave them coats of skin to wear. This coat, according to the Hebrew word, “kethoneth,” was a long, shirt-like garment, generally with sleeves, that covered Adam and Eve from their shoulders to their knees (Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies). God clothed the first man and woman in modest clothing at a time when there was no one else to look at them. Why? Does God do things without reason? Is it possible God was establishing a standard for all future societies? Honest reflection demands an affirmative answer. Remember. Moral laws do not change with time!

To validate this standard, consider the apparel of the priest in Exodus 28:42, “And you shall make for them linen trousers (breeches KJV) to cover their nakedness; they shall reach from the waist to the thighs.” Should we not be concerned about covering that which God describes as a person’s “nakedness?” According to Strong’s concordance, “breeches” were drawers worn under the robe to conceal the private parts. And what did these breeches cover? This article of clothing covered from “the waist to a little above the knee” (Easton’s 1897 Bible Dictionary). The robe already covered the upper body. Why was this additional layer of clothing necessary for the lower body since the robe covered them? God had earlier instructed that the altar was to have a ramp going up to it, not steps! Why? “That your nakedness may not be exposed on it” (Ex. 20:26).

Again I ask, “What does God consider nakedness?” The man already had a robe on that covered his shoulders down to at least his knees. What would possibly be exposed by going up steps or an elevated platform? The “private parts,” or, the part of the body that included from the thigh to the waist!

This same standard was applied to women in Isaiah 47:2-3. Here Isaiah proclaimed that the Babylonians would flee the land and cross the rivers in exile. The prophet said, “uncover thy locks, make bare the leg, uncover the thigh, pass over the rivers. Thy nakedness shall be uncovered, yea thy shame shall be seen (KJV).” Isaiah speaks of the leg being bare and the thigh uncovered. Since, in common dress, the foot and lower part of the leg were exposed, the woman’s nakedness would be shown in the exposing of her thigh. By picking up her clothing to “pass over the rivers” her thigh would be exposed, and therefore, her nakedness would be displayed. Let us not forget that her upper body was adequately covered at this time by her robe.

Is this consistent with God’s instruction to the New Testament Christian? Again let us look at First Timothy 2:9, “In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel.” The word apparel is from the Greek meaning “to send down,” – not up (Thayer’s Concordance). In his commentary concerning this passage Adam Clark states, “some of the Greek women wore their robes open on each side, from the bottom up above the knee, so as to discover a part of the thigh. These were termed ‘discoverers’ of the thigh; but it was, in general, only the young girls or immodest women who wore them thus” (Adam Clark’s Commentary Power Bible CD). According to Young’s Analytical Concordance, “apparel” in First Timothy 2:9 means “long robe.” This information is harmonious with the information we have from the Old Testament.

Why does God require that our bodies be adequately and appropriately covered? First, can clothing identify one’s heart? We read in Proverbs 7:10 that “the attire of a harlot” can allure man into sin. Does lust stop when a Christian woman wears the same attire? We know it does not. Should a Christian woman wear clothing that would resemble the world? If she does, where is her heart? Should there be any doubt that the attire is that of someone professing godliness and good works (1 Tim. 2:10)?

Second, honest reasoning persuades a person to conclude that dress, or undress, can stimulate sexual feelings. Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt. 5:27-28). It is a fact that men are more easily stimulated by sight than women. I am convinced that this fact is why God stresses this teaching to the women. Why is the swimsuit edition of Sports Illustrated the most sought after issue of that publication each year? Because of the thought provoking articles? Why do “playboy” type materials profit billions annually?

While God condemns those who are “lusting after,” He also condemns those who are the cause of lust. Jesus taught his disciples, “It is impossible that no offences should come, but woe to him, through whom they do come” (Lk. 17:1). God holds the man or woman who is dressed immodestly accountable for stimulating the lust of others. I know what you may be thinking. And yes, it is possible some will lust no matter how a person clothes himself or herself. If we cover our “nakedness” with appropriate attire, we have not sinned. We are only guilty if we have violated God’s command of modest apparel.

What valid reason is there to defend involvement in what the world quickly admits is sexual? The world is full of sexual temptation. Sex is used to advertise, entertain and define normality. Why are so many people divorcing and remarrying? Sexual temptation. Why are there so many abortions? Sexual temptation. Why are so many people living together? Sexual temptation. Why are there so many unwed mothers? Sexual temptation. Why are women and children being raped every hour of the day? Sexual temptation. Why does the pornography industry profit billions of dollars per year? Sexual temptation.

There is not a normal man who does not understand the temptation to look and lust. That is why it is hard to believe a Christian husband and father would allow the bodies of his wife and daughters to be paraded in front of the eyes of the world (and sometimes brethren)! That same father will put his teenage son in the beach environment with this admonition, "Do not touch and do not think!" Does that father believe he is actually leading his family in the paths of righteousness? Would a godly man purposefully place his hormonal teenage son in a sexually provocative atmosphere? How hypocritical! These same parents later wonder why their children become sexually promiscuous.

The only reasons I can think of that a man would allow his family to dress immodestly and visit the sinful environment are: He enjoys the atmosphere himself and will sacrifice his wife and children to feed his lust, or he is not man enough to stand up to his wife and family and insist they dress godly. Neither makes sense for a normal thinking spiritual man.

At this point let me stress that I am not against going to the beach. I have taken my own family to see and enjoy the ocean and lakes. While there, we always search out a place to have privacy. This sometimes takes a lot of effort. We also wear modest clothing even though we are alone. There is a twofold reason for carefully dressing. First, I have older children and secondly, it saves us from embarrassment in case someone happens upon us.

One of the first arguments to rear its head in defense of "taking clothes off" is: "But at one time it was considered immodest for a woman to show her ankles or calves." Yes, and it was also considered, at one time, wrong for a woman to have her head uncovered in some first century churches (1 Cor. 11). This was dictated by the culture of that day. To have her head uncovered a woman would bring reproach upon the church. How can we save the lost if our "liberty" causes offense (1 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 14:21)? While wearing a head covering was more than God required for a woman to be modest, it was necessary to be effective in saving the lost. Thus, it was the right thing to do at that time. Similarly, if society dictates that one must wear more than God demands to be modestly clothed, (do not show ankles or calves), then a Christian will dress in a way which will allow them to be effective in reaching the lost. This can and should be done so long as it does not violate any teaching of God. Paul said, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some"(1 Cor. 9:22).

On the other hand, if society says a person is modest by wearing less than what God commands, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). During these times our Christian "light" must "shine" (Mt. 5:16). We must be "transformed" not "conformed" (Rom. 12:2). How may we win souls to Christ by violating the teachings of Christ? We cannot. Thus, in the realm of modesty we must always cover what God defines as our "nakedness."

Some argue that the modern “public beach” environment does not affect them. To a degree it is possible to become desensitized to sin. The prophet Jeremiah condemned the people for just such a condition when he said, “Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; At the time I punish them, they shall be cast down, says the Lord” (Jer. 6:15). Just because something does not bother you (cause you to blush), does not make it right in God’s sight. God will not judge us according to our comfort levels. We will all be judged by the same standard; His word (Jn. 12:48). The question should not be, “What can you handle?” but rather, “What does God command?”

Does God approve of the Christian recreating in an atmosphere of near nudity? Paul told Timothy, “Flee also youthful lusts: but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22). How does one pursue righteousness by purposefully placing themselves in the atmosphere of sin? At this point some will argue, “Then it is wrong to go to the grocery store because there will be some people who are dressed immodestly there.” Those who use this argument are only trying to justify that which is not consistent with godliness. Of course it is impossible to escape all the sexually immoral of this world. One would have to “go out of the world” to obtain the perfect atmosphere (1 Cor. 5:10). Since God says that we are to save the lost, and at the same time flee lust and abstain from every form of evil (1 Thes. 5:22), it should be obvious to the honest heart that there are some places a Christian should not go and some activities they should not participate in. Some environments promote sinful behavior and dress (bars, public pools, etc.). Often we are exposed to the same indecency at the grocery store or shopping center, but during these times we must remember who we are, children of God, and yield not to temptation. We must be strong like Job who said, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman” (Job 31:1). An atmosphere does not become sinful just because some choose to sin, but some places promote an environment of sin. Christians will not go to or remain in such a climate. While Jesus did eat with sinners, we do not read of him going into an atmosphere of sin to be with them. He attracted sinners to himself.

Another argument is, “I am just dressing for the sport.” Sumo wrestlers also dress for their sport. At this point some will laugh and say I am being extreme. But Sumo wrestlers are just as serious and dedicated to their sport as any other. It does not matter whether the activity is in water, on a track, court, or football field. It does not matter whether you are a participant or a cheerleader. The question is not, “How much nakedness is being exposed?” but rather, “Is any nakedness being exposed?” If an activity calls for a person to violate God’s commands, then a Christian should not participate in it.

“But, preacher, I only wear a modest one piece bathing suit!” Modest by whose definition, the world or God’s? Can a woman bare her entire leg and be pleasing to God? Does the skin-tight fit of the one-piece bathing suit promote godly thinking? Is any nakedness exposed? Remember that we will not be judged by our feelings! God’s use of the word “nakedness” sometimes refers to one who is simply not properly clothed. This meaning is utilized in James 2:15, where a brother was “naked,” though not completely nude. In John 21:7 (KJV) we read of Peter girding his fisher’s coat, because he was “naked,” and casting himself into the Sea of Galilee.

Holger Neubauer in his tract *Nakedness and Modesty* writes, “*The word ‘naked’ translated from the Greek ‘gumnos’ can mean ‘clad in the undergarment only’ Peter had laid his outer garment off to fish, which left*

Peter with only his inner garment. This was fine in the presence of other men, but in coming to shore and meeting the Lord, Peter clothed himself. Peter was naked because certain parts of his body were exposed that were considered naked by the Jews and God himself”

Is there a faithful gospel preacher among us who would defend the modern day swimming attire and the beach environment? As a younger preacher in my early thirties, several men who defended this attire and atmosphere challenged me. They considered me still “green” and “wet behind the ears.” These “spiritually-minded” brethren believed we should teach modest attire; but we should not give examples of what is immodest or identify environments that promote immodest attire. They were convinced that if I were to consult older, more seasoned preachers concerning this subject, I would learn that I was only preaching my opinion. Without hesitation I agreed and wrote several well-known gospel preachers. I informed them of the situation and asked for their input considering my conclusions. Here are excerpts from their replies.

Garland Elkins from the Memphis School of Preaching wrote, *“You are on solid, and safe scriptural ground when you oppose immodesty. The Bible certainly teaches that immodesty is sinful. There are many defenders of immodesty, but there is no defense. Of course the activity of swimming is not wrong, but the scant bathing suits, and near nudity are indeed wrong. It is wrong to expose one’s nakedness whether in a bathing suit, shorts, or a dress, etc. It is proper to give examples of immodesty.”*

E. Claude Gardner, President Emeritus of Freed-Hardeman University wrote, *“Some may believe that they can participate in mixed swimming without consequences, but their participation may become a stumbling block to others.”*

Buster Dobbs, editor of The Firm Foundation wrote, *“Shamefacedness helps define the word modest. It means among other things, bashful. A person who is timid, shy, and easily embarrassed will not expose as much flesh as the average bathing suit bares. Someone asked the question, If today’s swimming attire is modest, how much more would a person have to take off to be immodest? Your position on this question is doubtless correct.”*

Leroy Brownlow, minister, writer and publisher wrote, *“We know that we are considering a command (1 Tim. 2:9). And we know that the purpose of a command is to apply it and control the conduct of an individual. Why have a command if you don’t apply it? Yet there are those who don’t object to preaching First Timothy 2:9, if you don’t apply it. But if a preacher does not help the people to apply a command what is his job?”*

Robert Taylor, minister and writer wrote, *“You are right in what you preached and they should hold high your hands. You were right to name mixed swimming as a specific example of immodest dress... The families there who participate in such should give it up promptly. Such is not becoming a Christian.”*

Johnny Ramsey, minister and teacher for the Browntrail School of Preaching wrote, *“I agree with you 100%. What you said and the applications made are needed everywhere. We must apply what we preach on any subject and certainly on modesty in these wicked and worldly days.”*

Hardeman Nichols, minister wrote, *“Thus, with the two terms, “modest” and “shamefacedness,” this scripture commands modest apparel from a modest heart which is rooted in a character that considers the effect of a Christian’s dress upon others and would always restrain a good person from an unworthy act or appearance. In the light of the language, I believe a mature heart must reach the conclusion that the type of dress and the close proximity of both sexes in the general setting of mixed swimming is forbidden by Christians... . I would not be surprised if some good people do not know how to apply the principles of the Bible to many specific cases of immodesty. Since we live in such an immodest age, it would be easy for one’s sensibilities to be dull.... Does the scanty attire associated with swimming where both sexes are present war against my soul or the souls of others? I think the answer is obvious. Then God begs us to abstain from that attire. That goes for both male and female alike.”*

David Pharr, minister, writer, past director of the East Tennessee School of Preaching wrote, *“In summary, of course you are right in warning against swimming suits, or anything else, which provoke lust. There are times when such things need to be specifically named...”*

Perry B. Cotham, minister, writer, missionary, wrote, *“...I realize in our days of loose morals many do not have much modesty, and this is true of many members of the church... The scanty covering of the new ladies’ bathing suit would to me not be very modest... I do not know of any good, faithful gospel preacher who would condone or endorse such a practice.”*

V.P. Black minister and writer said, *“The Bible has much to say about modesty. We are living in an age when the world looks upon modesty as a joke. We as children of God should look upon modesty in the light of the word of God and not in the light of the world. There is not anything wrong with giving examples.”*

Winfred Clark, elder, minister, author, wrote, *“As to the matter of modesty, there can be no doubt that mixed swimming, males and females, would violate the teaching of First Timothy 2:9. If a swimsuit would not be immodest by Paul’s definition then it would be hard to find a garment that could be called immodest. I am sure you know that Thayer defines apparel as; ‘a lowering a letting down, a garment let down.’ It seems that the background would be that of ladies who went into the fields to work and would raise their dresses and fold them into something like a belt or girdle. Thus Paul would speak of the lowering the garment to cover the nakedness thus exposed. One would surely have a difficult time lowering the modern attire used for swimming.”*

Where is that “faithful” gospel preacher who would disagree with these faithful gospel preachers? Why would faithful gospel preachers stress the need for modest apparel and give examples, knowing that many brethren will object? Is it because they like to have people upset with them? Is it because they want to be a “killjoy”? Is it because they hate swimming and other sports? Do they enjoy jeopardizing their job security, selling their homes and uprooting their families to begin all over again somewhere else because brethren object? Or, could it possibly be that they are willing to preach the truth at the risk of gaining enemies because they love the souls of church members?

Paul tells us, *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy, meditate on these things” (Phil. 4:8).* Does wearing the

modern day swimming attire in mixed company meet these standards? Does the modern day beach scene help the Christian to “meditate on these things?” No! Does the near nudity atmosphere encourage spiritual growth? No! Is it possible that this climate will be a stumbling block to others? Yes? Is it an environment that promotes lust? Definitely! Is it possible that it could hinder our effectiveness in reaching the lost? Yes! Would the devil have any problem with the Christian visiting this atmosphere? Absolutely not! Why, then, would a Christian defend this activity in today’s world?

Brethren, our goal should be a united effort to reach heaven. Consistent godly decisions will prevail in the lives of those who obey God, because they love him. Godly people will not wear clothing that is even questionable. Those who love God will dress in a way that professes godliness. They will cover what God describes as nakedness. They will not wear clothing that is gaudy, too tight, revealing, or provocative. They will not let society or culture be the standard to determine godly living. They understand that modesty is a moral law, and that moral laws never change. They will be a light (different) in the world; transformed without shame. They know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God did not leave the topic of modesty in the subjective realm of human judgment. It is found in the unbiased, authoritative word of God, which “has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3).

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