

## Christian Modesty in Dress – What does the Bible Teach?

*(The following is the substance of an address given by Rev David Silversides at a fellowship meeting at Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church, Northern Ireland on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2009. The form of a spoken address has been retained.)*

*"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)*

Our theme is Christian Modesty in Dress – What does the Bible teach? Christ is King and Christians have begun to acknowledge him as such. This means the whole of life is to be subject to his Word. If the Bible says something about dress, and it does, then it behoves us to listen and to follow.

### **The Scope of the Subject**

**Firstly**, we shall not be dealing with matters of taste. These are in the realm of Christian liberty. Some people are more conscious of neatness and colour co-ordination etc. than others. It is not the business of a minister of God's Word to pronounce on such matters and it would be exceedingly foolish to do so.

**Secondly**, we shall not deal, on this occasion, with gender issues - issues relating to the distinctiveness of male and female dress. This is not because there is nothing to say, but because we have quite enough on our plate for one session.

**Thirdly**, we shall confine ourselves to sexual modesty in dress. This is a matter of moral principle. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:27 & 28). If such sexual lust is a breach of the seventh commandment, then to knowingly dress in a manner that provokes or encourages such sin, must also be sinful. For this reason the Westminster Larger Catechism teaches that the seventh commandment requires "modesty in apparel" (Answer 138) and forbids "immodest apparel" (Answer 139).

**Fourthly**, we are specifically looking at the question of female sexual modesty. There is reason for this. It is not that the question of sexual modesty of dress is completely irrelevant to men. There are male fashions that are designed to enhance aspects of the male form that Christians should certainly avoid. Nevertheless, the problem is much greater in terms of female dress. And why is this? It is because men, on the whole, are much more affected by what they see than is the case with women as a rule. Women, generally speaking, are affected more by a combination of things than is the case with men. Sexual desire is immediately stirred in men by looking. "I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I look upon a maid?" (Job 31:1). Other

Scriptures also bear out this emphasis that men easily sin by looking upon a woman. The Larger Catechism gives as a proof text, in the answers to which we have already referred, the verse with which we began, "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety" (1 Tim.2:9). This specifically refers to female attire. The role of the men in leadership is emphasised in the preceding verses and then the apostle turns to the women and says they must dress modestly. He then goes on to other matters of church order and decorum and government and the offices in the church in chapter three. Another text referred to by the Larger Catechism is Proverbs 7:10, which refers to the "attire of an harlot". And in Isaiah 3:16 it is particularly women who are reprov'd for their dress as well as for their manner of behaviour, "Moreover the Lord saith, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet."

**Fifthly**, this is not an attack upon women; it is not misogyny. Nor does it reflect any disrespect for women; quite the opposite. We want to uphold the dignity of Christian women so that they are not cheapened by conformity to the standards of this world. Since Scripture specifically refers to female modest apparel, modest dress, then it is right that it should be explained.

**Sixthly**, we must not assume a bad motive in any sister in Christ who dresses in a manner that is sexually immodest. It is a Christian's duty to be charitable in his judgements and if at all possible to impute the best motives regarding what other Christians do. There are some Christian women who have no idea of the effect of their mode of dress upon men. We must not assume otherwise without good reason. Nor must young men who struggle with sexual sin become embittered and assume evil of their sisters in Christ.

**Seventhly**, any failure in Christian women in this regard must also be viewed as possibly a failure of Christian husbands and Christian fathers. Men are not meant to be spineless, they are meant to lead and govern their own households. Immodesty in women, if the husband or father is a Christian, must raise the question as to whether or not he has told them how men think? Husbands who allow their wives to dress immodestly are at best negligent – perhaps they have got so used to their wives that they've become oblivious to the effect of their appearance on men. Fathers can be simply weak in not wanting to tell their daughters the truth about dress or expect them to step out of line with their friends; the result of that is the lowest common denominator of dress. Or perhaps a father can be so used to thinking of his daughter as his little girl that he becomes oblivious to the fact that his little girl has become a woman and an object of desire to other men.

**Eighthly**, this subject must never be used as an excuse for male sin. If a man lusts after a woman who is not his wife, he sins. Islam is particularly bad in offloading the responsibility for male sexual sin onto women. Dr Patrick Sookhdeo says of the Islamic view of women, "They are therefore considered a source of temptation to men and must be protected from their own weaknesses." (*Islam – The Challenge to the Church*, 2006, p.32). In Islam the blame for sexual sin is largely heaped upon the women. The truth is that all male sexual lust is sin and it is his sin. It only becomes a woman's sin as well if she provokes to it by behaviour or dress.

**Ninthly**, a woman's responsibility is limited. A woman is not required or responsible to prevent all male lust, only to ensure that she does not provoke or invite that lust. Men can and do engage in sexual lust after women, no matter how women dress. Should they wear sackcloth from neck to toe, men are still capable of heart adultery. Islam is living testimony to the futility of thinking that outward constraints will solve sin. It is also a testimony to the futility of false religion to change the heart. We were astonished to read recently of missionaries in a Moslem country stating that in the local market, where the women are dressed so that nothing is visible but their eyes, they are subject to constant male harassment of one kind or another. They are manhandled, touched and sexually molested even though their looks are concealed; the men still sin in this way. Martin Luther, before his conversion, said that he broke the seventh commandment more in his monastery cell than outside. Sin can operate in the heart and mind with no visual stimulus whatever.

**Tenthly**, our purpose is not to make women excessively introspective and self-conscious about themselves, but to produce a healthy and balanced consciousness of the need to dress to God's glory; to think about how they dress. We want to bring out some broad guidelines that will hopefully prove of use to this end. We are seeking not a morbid outlook or a morose pre-occupation, but a robust concern to follow the Word of God. So much, then, for the scope of our subject.

### **The Difficulty of the Subject**

There is the sheer embarrassment of this subject. It is a difficult subject to listen to and, be assured, it is an even more difficult one on which to speak. This is why it is a subject that is frequently ignored in Christian circles. Everyone pretends there is no problem. It's the elephant in the room syndrome where everybody knows the elephant is there, but nobody mentions it. And so it is that Christians are frequently aware of the problem, but nobody wants to be the one that actually says anything. Ministers often keep quiet, not surprisingly. Those who speak up are seen as extreme or as having a personal problem of some kind. And we confess that we ourselves have hardly rushed into looking at this subject. It has been referred to occasionally over the last 20 years in the course of preaching. We have had these monthly after-church meetings now for 11 years and it has taken us that long to look at it, so it can hardly be thought of as a hobbyhorse. But we do look at it now. We announced the subject with rather more advanced notice than normal and that helps. It helps the speaker not to put off and leave it to another time even though, in one way, this is what we would cheerfully do. The truth is, the vast majority of men battle against sin in the sexual realm and they do find immodest dress makes it much harder. At least 95% of men would acknowledge this, unless they are liars, and the subject has to be addressed for that reason. If it is never referred to, then standards will not improve and may possibly decline further.

In a comparatively small gathering, the potential embarrassment is accentuated. For that reason, we will do what we normally don't do - much less state - and declare that we are taking account of the fact that this address is being recorded. We do so, not because what is said is of no application to those present, but it may not be that every detail of what is said applies to someone who is present. Don't sit there thinking, "I

wonder who he's referring to now?" If something does apply to you, take it to heart. If it doesn't apply specifically to someone here, it may apply to someone who listens at a later stage. But we all do need to know the Biblical teaching and not only individually. Christian women themselves – yes – but also parents need to know. Parents need to be 'on the ball'. They need to train their families, their daughters, to have a right outlook on this matter.

Then, there is the difficulty of defining modesty and even finding a starting point. Where do we begin? There are so many variables that this might suggest that this subject is virtually impossible to address. Yet it is in Scripture, as a requirement for Christian women, so it must be capable of being addressed. But there are the variables that make it difficult. Men vary; they vary in what affects them, not all that much perhaps, but they do vary. They vary physically; they vary mentally. No doubt those brought up in a Christian home and blessed by the Spirit of God early in life and who have had their minds early filled with good things before sinful thought patterns have become entrenched, have a head start. Also there is the desensitising that comes from usage. A fashion that is highly provocative and sensational when it first comes out can become comparatively mundane with the passage of time. All these variables!

What are we going to do? Can we hope to set some lines of definition as to what modest apparel is? First Timothy 1:9 says that the women are to be adorned with "modest apparel", becoming apparel, "with all shamefacedness" - the idea is of a proper reserve, sobriety, moderation or restraint. Now the second half of the verse deals with showiness, flashiness, because it is dealing with public worship and that the attention, the focus, is to be upon God and a woman is not to dress in a manner that causes everyone to look at her. Although the second half is about showiness, the first half certainly includes, and is aimed at, the question of sexual modesty. The battle against sin never stops in this world and the battle against sin does not stop when we come to church. But the church of God should be a place where Christian men, though still they have to battle against sin because they're sinners, are not provoked to sin by their sisters in Christ. The starting point must be the Biblical purpose of dress.

### **The Biblical Purpose of Dress**

The Biblical purpose of dress must be where we begin in endeavouring to define this required modesty in its sexual aspect? We do not claim to be able to give a complete blueprint, but we can get some idea if we begin at the beginning. Why do we dress? In winter it is partly to keep warm, but that's not the only reason, is it? Because even when it is warm weather and even in hot climates, we still dress. Why? Referring to man before the fall of man, we read, "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). After Adam had sinned, we are told, "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 (Gen 3:7)", and then, "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them" (v.21). Leaving aside all other considerations, it is evident that the purpose of clothes was to cover, even though there was at this stage only Adam and Eve. The sense of sin brought with it the sense that life could not now go on just as it had before; that sin meant that there was a necessity to cover nakedness. This is why naturism, as it is called, or nudism, is a denial of the fall of man. It exists among

people who don't believe man is fallen. The principle purpose of clothing, then, is a covering of nakedness.

Let us make a couple of provisos before we summarise what we can learn from this Biblical principle concerning the basic purpose of dress. Firstly, female beauty is God-given and to be unashamedly acknowledged. Scripture itself acknowledges the beauty of Sarah, Rachel and Job's daughters. No doubt they dressed exceedingly modestly, but they were reckoned and regarded as being beautiful women. And though that beauty can become an occasion of pride in a woman, yet the beauty itself is God-given and it is not even automatically a sin for men to recognise such beauty. The Bible, the Word of God, does so. Secondly, Scripture does not condemn beautiful clothing. It does not require deliberate drabness.

We can say, however, that if clothing fails to perform this basic function of covering, then such forms of dress, though fashionable, are to be rejected. In order for this talk to be of any practical use, we must now engage in a measure of explicitness, hopefully not in bad taste, but Scripture itself is sometimes very blunt and direct and there is sometimes need for that. The alternative is that everything is left in such vague terms that everyone says, "well, that's fine", but learns nothing and our gathering is a pleasant waste of time. But we shall not be any more explicit than we believe the subject actually requires. You need to know what we are talking about. And we can consider three elements that make particular modes of dress immodest.

### **Elements that Constitute Immodesty and Specific Examples**

**Firstly**, an improper level of exposure. This is fairly obvious. Here we must illustrate from various fashions that have appeared. The mini-skirt came about in the sixties and the woman credited with inventing it, Mary Quant, said this, "It was for the purpose of making sex more available in the afternoon. Mini-clothes are symbolic of those girls who want to seduce a man." Could anything be plainer than that? The mini-skirt was designed to be immodest and to tempt men. In Isaiah 47:2&3 we have Babylon pictured as being like a woman unwillingly exposed. "Take the millstones, and grind meal: uncover they locks, make bare the leg, uncover the thigh, pass over the rivers. Thy nakedness shall be uncovered, yea, thy shame shall be seen: I will take vengeance, and I will not meet thee as a man." In verse 2 the picture is that Babylon, who is used to a life of luxury like a queen, suddenly becomes a servant girl who has to cross rivers to get to the mill and she has to expose her thighs and to lift up her skirt in order to do that. Verse 3 seems to take the picture further of being utterly disgraced and being stripped naked. But at least verse 2 does indicate that the exposure of the thighs was a disgrace, an exposure of that which is normally covered, though in this case due to necessity, whereas the min-skirt wearer does it entirely by choice. And any man will tell you that the mini-skirt, which was designed to promote lust, does do just that.

The breasts are referred to in the context of a husband's faithfulness to his wife, "Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love" (Proverbs 5:19). The exposure of the breast is envisaged as only legitimate between husband and wife, otherwise they are to be covered in the presence of men. We may safely conclude that a woman's body from

the breast to the thighs is intended under all normal circumstances to be completely covered in the presence of men except for her husband if she is married. So the breasts, the midriff, the thighs are not meant for general exposure and dress should cover them whether a woman is standing up, sitting down or even if she has to pick something up off the floor.

**Secondly**, selective exposure of what should be covered. It is not a matter of how many square millimetres are exposed. Rather, it is a matter of where the exposure is. A little bit of cleavage, a little bit of midriff gap (front or back), a slit up the skirt which exposes a little bit of the thigh, exposes a little of what should be totally covered. It will not do to say, "But it's only a little bit." These parts of the body should be covered. Limited exposure is seductive to men. If you don't believe that, ask your Christian husband or father or brother. If he's an honest man, he'll tell you. The fashion industry constantly looks for ways to maximise sexual appeal by subtle and selective exposure of what should be covered.

**Thirdly**, skin covering with no form covering. The mere covering of the skin, the flesh, that fails to cover anything of the form or contour or outline of the body is not modest. Textile techniques have progressed. Man being a sinner, he is an inventor of evil things or he puts inventions to bad use. So, for example, jeans that technically cover the body, but no more cover the form of the body than if they were sprayed on as paint, are not modest even though not a square millimetre of flesh is actually exposed, because they do not conceal the form of the body even though technically they cover the actual surface. The same is true of tops and skirts that are skin-tight. Honest men will confirm these things.

### **Objections to This Standard of Modesty**

We have not gone into much detail, but we have tried to give some broad outlines which we believe Scripture will support and that most honest men will confirm. But we must look at possible objections.

**First objection:** Are we not in danger of looking odd and old-fashioned? This cry sometimes takes on the form of a phantom threat to the church's image of pseudo- or neo-Puritanism; the alleged danger is that we are trying to impose a form of dress that belongs to the seventeenth century. What is the answer to this? The answer is, first of all, that to dress modestly does not require frumpishness; it does not oppose smartness of dress. But there is a difference between looking smart and looking sexually provocative. They are not the same thing. This distinction has been so obliterated that many modern young women, especially among non-Christians, are now no longer aware that the distinction even exists. And so they dress immodestly the rest of the time, then when some special occasion arises - even a funeral - they put on their best version of the same kind of immodest garments that they wear at other times. Not even the dignity and solemnity of a funeral alters the basic immodesty, because it has become so entrenched and normal. There is, however, a distinction between neatness and even beauty of dress on the one hand and sexually immodest dress on the other. There is a difference and it is an important one.

A second point of response to this objection is that oddness, when Scripture requires,

is a duty. “Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you” (1 Peter 4:4). What is stated here about behaviour applies also, in principal, to dress. When the norm is sinful, we have to be abnormal. It really is as simple as that. Better to be quaint and modest than contemporary but indecent. Better to seem unusual than to be normally sinful. We certainly should follow the Puritans in their concern for modesty of dress because this is as much a Biblical requirement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in the 17<sup>th</sup>.

However, by way of help, if it does help, let me say that the degree of being out of step required today is vastly less than in the 1960s and 1970s, at least in England (where we lived at that time) and perhaps here in Northern Ireland too. In those days virtually every woman wore a mini-skirt. It was almost universal practice and to do otherwise really was to seem very weird indeed. Christians were presented with a straight choice: be indecent or be odd. Indecency was uniform. The mini-skirt took over and it was exceedingly difficult for Christians even to find clothes that were decent, if they wanted them. Concern for modesty has not increased at all, but there is much less uniformity than there was then. Now, even ungodly women, for whatever reason, sometimes dress modestly. The godly may well still stand out because they do so all the time, but at least you can wear a decent length of skirt without being utterly bizarre. That was not the case in the past.

But the whole thrust of Scripture is not to warn against excessive oddness. We do not say we should be unnecessarily odd - of course not! But the Scriptures are not full of warnings such as, “Now be careful that you’re not too unusual!” That’s not what we find. We find the exact opposite. “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). In any case, where are all these supposed seventeenth century look-a-likes? Where are they? They don’t exist or if they do, we have yet to meet them. The danger of excessive oddness is trivial compared with that of indecency - absolutely trivial! And even if there were unnecessary oddness involved, that will not ruin the church, but sensuality and uncleanness and filthiness - that certainly will. It’s like someone adjusting the cushions on the settee because they’re not tidy when the house is on fire! Yet ministers trot out the foolish and dire warning about the danger of excess of oddness, of living in a time warp – as if that is the great threat. And in so doing, they distract from the real danger. Indeed they encourage immodesty because they tend to make women so nervous about seeming seventeenth century and about seeming odd that they are afraid to risk this and, in the process, end up conceding to immodesty.

The testimony of the church will not be wrecked because Christian women are different, but it will be wrecked by women looking as though they’re dressed to go to a disco. So far as the world is capable of some kind of respect for the church, it respects consistency. And this cry of the threat of neo-Puritan seventeenth century dress discourages faithful women who are seeking to dress in a Biblically modest way and it makes their hearts sad whom God has not made sad. Ministers would be better saving their fire power for the real enemy, the real danger and if they stuck to the Word of God, they would forget about this virtually imaginary danger and warn against immodesty as the Scriptures do.

**Second objection:** A single woman may say, “How will I get a husband if I don’t

make myself attractive? I have to look my best.”

Answer: firstly, you do not have to look drab to dress modestly. Modesty and good taste is your "best". Secondly, any male attention you get which is dependent on your dressing immodestly isn't worth two pence. And any husband you get by such means is not likely to be a husband who will do you much good. A man who is lecherous before he gets married, will be so after he's married. Marriage helps men pursuing holiness; it does not cure men who are not. Sexual attractiveness is not unimportant in marriage, but a godly man will keep it in proportion. He will not feel the need to see you immodestly dressed to decide whether you would make a good wife in every way, including the physical.

Thirdly, immodest dress will discourage godly men from considering such a woman. They will wonder whether you are serious about following Christ and whether you will still want to dress like that when you are married. So there is no advantage to a Christian woman in immodesty. None.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this address has been to bring the Scriptures to bear on a particular aspect of conduct. There is no intention on our part to become a policeman in the congregation or to engage in any cultic “heavy shepherding”, nor have we covered every detail, nor could we do so. But we hope enough has been said to indicate the main lines of consideration in avoiding current immodesty in a society that despises God and couldn't care less about Biblical standards; a society that thinks it can play with sin and nobody will get hurt. The latter is a lie. But this is the arrogance of twenty-first century man in this part of the world; that he can play with sin and everybody will play by the agreed rules - it doesn't work. It isn't working now and it never will. By contrast, we have given some main things to avoid in dress out of love to the Saviour. The purpose is not embarrassment, but rather that we should all know – not only our women, but fathers and husbands as well - how to order this part of life in a manner which honours the Saviour.

We hope that now, if not before, we all see that dress is an area of submission to Christ. Christian women need a mindset of godly modesty in place in their thinking, an awareness that they cannot afford to just thoughtlessly follow every fashion that this world throws up; God's glory must be considered in deciding how to dress. That's what's needed, isn't it? We freely acknowledge that many Christian women don't think about the issue and that is a major part of the problem. We don't attribute ill motive unless there is no alternative. But now that you do know, then start to distinguish between what is smart and what is sexually provocative. The one is fine. The other is not. Love the Lord, love the Saviour. Adorn the Gospel of God our Saviour in all things including dress. The Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died to redeem his people from all iniquity. Shall we not honour him in all things, men and women, and in this particular area of dress, which is particularly applicable to women? Will you not honour the Lord Jesus Christ and love him who first loved you? “Hate evil, ye that love the Lord.” Turn from that which is wrong. Cling to Biblical standards. Delight in the law of God after the inward man and in outward practice and glorify our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

