

# *COVER UP!*

*~Dressing Modestly~*



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“Cover Up: Modesty in Dress”  
1 Timothy 2:9-10

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, *"I have heard with admiring submission the experience of the lady who declared that the sense of being perfectly well-dressed gives a feeling of inward tranquility which religion is powerless to bestow."* Clothing sometimes makes a powerful impression not only on those who see us wearing them, but even upon ourselves as well. Clothing is a powerful form of non-verbal communication. Take for example the uniform worn by a policeman. The moment you see the uniform, it communicates a very clear message to you. Immediately you recognize that the person before you is performing an official and public duty on behalf of the government agency that hired him. The same is true of a civil court judge who wears a robe when performing his public duties in the courtroom. The robe is a non-verbal way of communicating that the person wearing it is acting, not as a private person, but in the official capacity of a public servant. Clothing communicates. Some uniforms communicate a person's official position. Other uniforms tell in what kind of work the person wearing it is engaged; a soldier, an airline pilot or stewardess, or a worker at McDonald's. However, clothing does not just communicate a person's position or the type of work he does. Often clothing communicates one's status or ambition. Throughout the history of mankind clothing has been used to

communicate a whole range of things, from authority to solemnity. It has even been used to communicate interest in or to attract interest from potential mates.

One of the difficult issues of Christian behavior to address is the matter of how one clothes himself. As Christians we are to be careful not to clothe ourselves in such a manner as to cause problems for those around us. Some forms of clothing could be offensive. This is most often the case with regard to clothing that does not adequately cover the body and thus presents the possibility of evoking sexual lusts in those around us. The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith Question 138 addresses itself to the application of the Seventh Commandment, "*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*" The question is put, "What are the duties required in the Seventh Commandment? And the answer given includes among many things, "*modesty in apparel.*" We must not dress in such a manner as to be a stumbling block to those around us. Our dress is to be modest so that we do not evoke ungodly desires in those who see us.

Thus the Apostle Paul gives Timothy instructions regarding the manner in which a woman should clothe herself. In chapter 2, Paul addresses the need for men to be devoted to the practice of prayer in the church. Prayers are to be offered up for all kinds of people. He then addresses the need for women to be particularly careful about the manner in which they dress themselves.

The call to prayer and the Christian life is a reverent pursuit and particularly places upon women the duty of modesty in dress. (verses 9-10)

<sup>9</sup>*"Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; <sup>10</sup>but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness."*

This duty is particularly applicable to and is addressed to women as over against men, or in distinction to men. Men seem to be more and more distracted by the visible appearance of women. For this reason, I think that they may be more often led astray by the **lust of the eyes**; especially with respect to sexual lusts. This then is, at least in part, the reason that Paul addresses women with regard to their responsibility to dress modestly. Not that men are allowed to dress immodestly, and I suppose that they can, but Paul is directing this instruction to women as women because it is peculiarly applicable to women as women.

Also this duty is particularly applicable to those times in which the Church is gathered, but it is certainly applicable to all times and places. In other words, there is no time or place when a woman is allowed to dress in an immodest manner.

First, Paul addresses the outward appearance! (verse 9) <sup>9</sup>*"Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments."*

Paul states that their clothing must be proper! The word translated "*proper*" is literally, "*orderly.*" The idea is that the clothes should fit the occasion, they should be ordered according to the event or occasion. We have a sense of what this means in our own context and culture. We know that it would not be

appropriate or proper to wear an old worn out T-Shirt, gym shorts, and tennis shoes to a funeral or a wedding. This would not be “orderly” or “proper.” There are some kinds of dress that are not appropriate in particular situations. Special occasions require special dress. Even the **MTV** crowd acknowledges this at the time of their **AWARDS**.

So Paul says that the women need to be mindful of their dress, especially when they are gathered together with the Church. Some had adorned themselves in an inappropriate manner and Paul is correcting them. He gives them some particular instruction: positive and negative.

Positively, women must dress themselves <sup>9</sup>“...modestly and discreetly. . .”

The word “modest” is the word which literally means “a sense of shame.” In other words a woman should dress in such a manner so as not to be embarrassed or in such a manner as would not be considered “shameful.”

The word “discreet” is literally “of a sound mind” or is sometimes translated “sound judgment” or “self-control.” In other words a woman must use sound judgment when she dresses. She must consider the occasion and ask herself if what she is wearing is appropriate? Will it be shameful? Tight form-fitting, low cut dresses are not appropriate dress for worship - if anywhere?

Negatively, women must not dress themselves in an ostentatious manner. Paul states in verse nine that women should not dress themselves, <sup>9</sup>“...with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments.” In other words, “Don’t try to make a show!” These particular items mentioned by Paul are not evil in and of themselves. Braids are not evil! Gold is not evil! Pearls are not evil! Costly garments are not evil! Rather it was the custom of the women of Ephesus to dress themselves up in a *showy* manner.

**Hendriksen** observes in his remarks on this text, “No expense was spared to make them (the braids of unbelieving women of Ephesus) dazzling. They actually sparkled. The braids were fastened by jeweled tortoise-shelled combs, or by pins of ivory or silver.”

In other words they were dressing themselves in such a manner as to call excessive attention to themselves, either to make a display of their wealth, their position in society, or to seductively attract attention from men. This should not be the focus of Christian women with respect to the clothing they choose to wear. Here I think that we are or must be **counter-cultural**. We cannot blindly follow the styles of our culture in this regard! The cultural trends of our day are for clothing that is more and more revealing and less and less discreet. The styles of clothing for young women are becoming less and less modest.

Now what would be proper dress for Christian women? What is modest and what is discreet? I am in agreement with the statement of **John Calvin** when he writes, “. . .since dress is an indifferent matter, (as all outward matters are) it is difficult to assign a fixed limit, how far we ought to go.”

So without getting too much into particulars let me make a few observations and suggestions, particularly with regard to services of worship. Worship is public, not private; formal, not informal. We are meeting in the

presence of the Living God of Heaven and Earth who is holy and pure and full of loving-kindness and mercy. Here then are some extremes to avoid:

1. Avoid clothing that unduly calls attention to yourself! Do not make yourself a distraction to others who are trying to worship!
2. Avoid clothing that is revealing! Too loose is better than too tight! More is better than less! Now I am not suggesting that Christian women wear a sack, but they need to know that they can be distracting to the men who are gathered to worship, if their clothing is too tight fitting and too revealing.

Now lest we fall into the trap of legalism we need to notice the major focus that is set before us. Paul is not just addressing the outward appearance of women. He is also concerned about the inner "*appearance*" of the soul. He states in verse 9, <sup>9</sup>*"Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves. . .<sup>10</sup>but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness."*

In a similar fashion Paul writes bond-slaves in **Titus 2:9-10** and says something similar <sup>9</sup>*"Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, <sup>10</sup>not pilfering, but showing all good faith that they **may adorn the doctrine** of God our Savior in every respect."*

Here is the real focus! It is a life of outward holiness, of good works in obedience to God and the development of a godly character that will most improve your appearance before God and man! If you want to call attention to yourself, dress yourself up in the good works of obedience, the godly character of holiness, and the pure doctrine of truth.

I think that for most of us, men and women, we would be a lot better off if we spent less time in front of a mirror and more time in front of the Lord in prayer and the study of the Bible.

**1 Peter 3:3-4** affirms the teaching of these verses in 1 Timothy as well. <sup>3</sup>*"And let not your adornment be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; <sup>4</sup>but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God."*

After someone has been in your presence for a time and then they leave, what is the impression with which they leave? My, what a beauty! Man, what a braid? Or, that is a godly woman!

Older women should set a good example for younger women to follow. Mothers should be careful to instruct their daughters in how to dress modestly and explain to them why it is important to do so.