

# Position Paper – Modesty

## Statement of the Problem

Many Christians, particularly women, struggle with the issue of modesty. What does it mean to be modest, specifically in the area of clothing? Should women wear only dresses and skirts? Is it allowable to wear jewelry and make-up? What length and style of dress is allowable, and are women masculine if they wear pants? These questions and others are important and need to be answered from Scripture.

## Summary Answer

A modest man and woman will so order their conduct and appearance as to clearly establish both their gender and their relationships to one another and to God. To this end, men are to adorn their lives with sound doctrine, humility, and godliness. They are not to dress in women's clothing. Similarly, women are to adorn themselves with propriety and reverence, distinguishing themselves as women, as helpmeets to their husbands, and as faithful daughters of God. They are not to dress in men's clothing.

Nothing in this conclusion should be construed as forbidding women to wear nice clothing, colorful clothing, jewelry, or make-up. Women are directed in Scripture to be modest, which by definition is moderate and self-controlled. They ought neither to be sensuous, nor ought they to be drab.

Ultimately, our outward appearance reflects the attitude and disposition of our hearts. When Solomon says in Proverbs 31:30 that "Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised," he does not decry beauty. He does, however, state that reverence is a far better attribute. Men and women need not fear being either handsome or beautiful, but "beauty is only skin deep" as the cliché goes, and their focus must remain foremost upon the quality of their inner character. A man or woman who is humble and honoring of God and their spouse will desire to so order his or her outward appearance that these traits are clearly expressed. Clothing or other apparel will not be used to entice other men or women, nor will it be used to flaunt wealth.

## Definition

Hebrew: Hatsana - “To be modest; humble”

*Mic 6:8: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk **humbly** with your God?”*

Greek: Kosmios - “Ordered; adorned”

*1 Tim 2:9-11: “In like manner also, [I desire] 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 Peter 3:3-6: “Do not let your **adornment** be merely outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel – rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also **adorned** themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.”*

*Rev 21:2: “Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride **adorned** for her husband.”*

*Figurative Usage: Titus 2:9-10: “Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may **adorn** the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.”*

The word “modesty” comes from the Latin “modestus” which means “measured.” It is related to the word “moderation” in that it implies a “measuring” or a controlling of one’s character and outward appearance so as not to be extreme. Modesty is not a passive word. Rather, it denotes an active ordering and adorning. Of course, order implies purpose and thus we might ask to what purpose modesty is employed. The Bible reveals that the purpose of modesty is defined relationally, specifically by the context of marriage. The Church is to walk “modestly” with Her God and will be one day “adorned” by Him as a Bride. A wife is to adorn herself in proper relationship to her husband.

## Exegesis

While discussion of modesty is often directed to women, men are also commanded to be modest. Titus 2:10 is a good example: “Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may *adorn* the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.” The modest application (adornment) of doctrine to life involves obedience, meekness, faithfulness, and a pleasant demeanor towards those in authority over us. Servants are commanded to be modest with regard to their masters, wives to their husbands, and all people to God.

Of special interest to the Apostle Paul, and thus to the Church, is the modesty of women. In 1 Tim 2:9-11, Paul writes: “In like manner also, [I desire] 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.” Though Paul speaks of this as his personal “desire,” it is clear from verse 7 that Paul believes even his desires to be directed by God: “I was appointed a preacher and an apostle...a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.”

What constitutes “modest apparel”? First, note that Paul, in keeping with the straightforward meaning of the word, defines modest in contrast with extremity – “not braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing.” Second, note that Paul associates modesty with “propriety and moderation.”

According to Bible Life and Times, by Reader’s Digest, “In the ancient Near East, men and women used a wide range of preparations to enhance beauty and soothe skin parched by the hot, dry climate. Men rubbed oil onto their skin, hair, and beard. The oil was extracted from almonds, olives, and fish and animal fat was perfumed with fragrances such as saffron, balsam, and cinnamon. Oils offered some protection from the sun and masked body odor in a time when bathing was infrequent.

“Women additionally used body oil, as well as eye paint, rouge, powder, and perfume. Minerals were often crushed and mixed with gum or water to create kohl or antimony, and the eyes might be heavily outlined with this paint. Egyptians painted the upper eyelid black and applied a green paste made from ground turquoise or malachite to the lower lid. Mesopotamian women used red and yellow paints. Eye paint not only accentuated the eyes but also protected against the glare of the sun and insects” (p87).

The Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible, by J.I. Packer adds: “The Israelite man’s ‘inner garment’ resembled a close-fitting shirt. The most common Hebrew word for this garment (*kethoneth*) is translated variously as *coat*, *robe*, *tunic*, and *garment*. It was made of wool, linen or cotton. The earliest of these garments were made without sleeves and reached only to the knees. Later, the inner garment extended to the wrists and ankles...The man’s girdle was a belt or band of cloth, cord, or leather 10 cm. or more wide. A fastener attached to the girdle allowed it to be loosened or tightened. The Jews used the girdle in two ways: as a tie around the waist of the inner garment or around the outer garment. When used around the inner garment, it was often called the *loincloth* or *waistcloth*. The use of a girdle increased a person’s gracefulness of appearance and prevented the long, flowing robes from interfering with daily work and movements.

"The Hebrew men wore an outer garment consisting of a square or oblong strip of cloth, 2 to 3 m. (80 to 120 in.) wide. This garment (*me'yil*) was called the *coat, robe, or mantle*. It was wrapped around the body as a protective covering, with two corners of the material being in front. The outer garment was drawn in close to the body by a girdle."

"Women wore clothing that was very similar to that of men. However, the law strictly forbade a woman to wear anything that was thought to belong particularly to a man, such as the signet ring and other ornaments. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, women were also forbidden to use the weapons of a man. By the same token, men were forbidden to wear the outer robe of a woman (Deut. 22:5)" (p480-482).

Clearly then, much of the apparel employed by men and women was chosen to correlate with the environment and to distinguish the genders. Since women wore clothing very similar to that worn by men, they also wore jewelry and colored oils (make-up) as a means to display their femininity. Peter's admonition in 1 Peter 3:3-6 is helpful in this regard: "Do not let your adornment be *merely outward* – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel – rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God." Peter acknowledges the common practice of outward adornment and does not condemn it. Rather, he uses common practice as an analogy – let your inward adornment be similar to your outward adornment. In other words, while you arrange your hair, put on gold, and put on fine apparel, don't just stop there. Rather, attend to your inner character with the same focus upon careful and purposeful order.

Paul creates a greater restriction, however, when he says *not* to braid the hair or put on gold, pearls, or costly clothing. This need not be a contradiction to Peter. Peter makes an analogy from culture, but Paul addresses culture directly. Braided hair, gold, pearls, and costly clothing attracted the attention of others. Pearls were as valuable to ancient Israel as diamonds are to Americans today. To have adorned one's self with such expensive apparel revealed pride. It proclaimed superior social status, an attitude that conflicted with humility. In other circumstances, bright clothing, exaggerated cosmetics, and haughty mannerisms were used by harlots to seduce men. Thus, Paul encourages propriety and moderation, so that a woman's outward appearance would match her inner character.

In all of this, one must be careful not to misinterpret Paul. Like Peter, Paul does not forbid the wearing of *any* jewelry, make-up, or nice clothing. He advises moderation. In Ezekiel 16:9-14, God describes how He adorned Israel: "Then I washed you in water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth and gave you sandals of badger skin; I clothed you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck. And I put a jewel in your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty. Your fame went out among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through My splendor which I had bestowed on you." If any of these items (jewelry, make-up, nice clothing) were inherently evil, why would God so adorn His Bride?

## History and Application

Deut 22:5 reads: “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the LORD your God.” Now Deuteronomy 22 also says a few other things as well. Verses 11-12 state: “You shall not wear a garment of different sorts, such as wool and linen mixed together. You shall make tassels on the four corners of the clothing with which you cover yourself.” Most would agree that these latter two verses are cultural prescriptions, but what about verse 5? While one might argue that the definition of “man’s clothing” and “woman’s clothing” is culturally relative, doubtfully one could successfully say that what was an “abomination” to God a few thousand years ago is acceptable to Him now. God does not change with the culture; clearly He desires that men should look like men, and women should look like women.

As in Bible times, clothing has been used throughout the Church’s history to distinguish between the genders. At times, that distinction has blurred. Until the late 1700's, upper-class European men dressed as elaborately as women, and it was acceptable for the men to wear bright-colored or pastel suits trimmed with gold and lace, hats decorated with feathers, high-heeled shoes, and fancy jewelry. By the mid-1800's, men had abandoned color and decoration in favor of plain, dark-colored wool suits. People considered this new fashion democratic, businesslike, and masculine – obviously an attempt to once again distinguish men from women.

The most consistent trend in clothing has been the wearing of dresses (robes, skirts, etc.) by women. The transition for men from tunic to pants seems to have been tied to issues of comfort, climate, and the transition from agriculture to industry. In time, pants naturally became associated with masculinity. Until the early 1900's, European and American women rarely wore trousers, and their skirts almost always covered their ankles. By the 1920's, however, standards of femininity had changed to the point that women began to wear both pants and shorter skirts. Today, we have once again blurred the distinction between male and female. Women commonly wear pants and t-shirts, and some men wear cosmetics and jewelry. However, in examining our cultural symbols (such as icons on bathroom doors, pictures in newspaper ads, stereotypes in movies, etc.), it seems obvious that dresses, at least, are considered “feminine.” Very few men today would be caught in public wearing a dress. Why? Because the dress, more than any other article of clothing, is regarded as a symbol of femininity.

Should pants be regarded as feminine? In Biblical times, when men and women each wore long flowing tunics, the genders were distinguished by color, style, and accessory apparel such as tassels and jewelry. This may provide a parallel for today’s culture. Many pants made for women similarly often evidence a different cut, color, and material. However, it must be remembered that the wearing of pants by women also correlates with the rise of the feminist movement in the late 1800s and the gradual “unisexual” of our society. Much of what sells as “women’s pants” today is hardly distinguishable from men’s pants. The choice, then, to wear pants must be made soberly and with a clear eye to femininity.

## Frequently Asked Questions

*Q. What kinds of dresses and skirts are appropriate? How short is too short?*

There are no magic formulas. Dress and skirt length and style have changed over the centuries. However, it is not until the last century that dresses and skirts have shortened so dramatically. With the increase in sexual promiscuity and the exploitation of women, clothing styles for women has become more and more revealing. A modest woman, reflecting the propriety described by Paul in 1 Timothy 2, will desire to avoid the improper revealing of her body to men other than her husband. Thus, dresses and skirts should be longer rather than shorter.

A woman ought to ask her husband about appropriate length. Since modesty is partially a relational concept, a woman's outward adornment displays her honor for God and her husband. A husband should never be caused embarrassment or concern at the length of his wife's clothing.

*Q. Aren't passages like 1 Timothy 2 and Deuteronomy 22 culturally relative? If not, why don't we go back to wearing tunics and sandals?*

According to Genesis 3:7, 12 the origin of dress is associated with the sense of shame. It is a shame to be naked before anyone other than one's spouse (Gen.9:22-23) and we find this the fate of prisoners and fugitives (Isa.20:4; Amos 2:16; Mark 14:52). God was the first to clothe man and woman as a way to cover this shame and as a symbol of His forgiveness.

Since the time of Adam and Eve, clothing has undergone change through every generation. Thus, it would be difficult to point to any specific era as defining God's preferred style. What we do have in passages like 1 Timothy and Deuteronomy is a normative principle that God despises effeminate men and masculine women. Thus it behooves us to determine what is masculine and feminine in our own culture, environment, and time.

*Q. What about swimming?*

As mentioned above, it is a shame to be naked in public. The amount of coverage that modern bathing suits provide to the body is akin to the scant coverage provided by the "loin coverings" (NKJV) that Adam and Eve fashioned to cover their nakedness. Genesis 3:21 describes how God took these insufficient coverings and replaced them with "garments."

Why would God want to cover more of Adam and Eve's bodies? The Bible is replete with passages about sexual sin, and exposure of the body invites others to lust. Statistics, for example, have shown that the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition continues to be most frequently purchased periodical for men between the ages of 18 and 45. Exposure also is reflective of rash and improper behavior. Noah, for example, because of drunkenness allowed himself to be exposed. His sons, Shem and Japheth, walked backwards to cover their father's nakedness with a garment.

As Christians, we should avoid the appearance of evil in all circumstances. If men, women, and children desire to swim, it should be with modest clothing that covers the body appropriately and does not overly reveal the body when wet. It may even be appropriate, in some circumstances, to separate the genders for swimming activities.

