

POSSESSING OUR VESSEL IN SANCTIFICATION AND HONOUR

by David E. Moss

When warm weather strikes people take to the outdoors in a completely different wardrobe than they wore during the cold winter months. As a result, the rising heat and humidity raises an issue that every Christian should be concerned about -- MODESTY.

The weather is one factor that regulates how we dress. To a certain extent this may be appropriate. However, as Christians, we know that the flesh has all kinds of interests and values and desires that are incompatible with holiness and spirituality.

How we dress, even in the warmest of temperatures, is very much a part of our Christian conversation. God says "that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel (body) in sanctification and honour; not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God." In other words, the visible expression of our physical bodies should stand out in contrast to the suggestive fashions of the world. In no way should our physical appearance contribute to the lusts associated with ungodly behavior.

Many Christians just do not think seriously enough about clothing and fashion and, as a result, they comfortably conform to the world in this matter. Yet many contemporary fashions promote lust and sensuality. Paul Harvey noted the philosophy of the woman who invented the miniskirt: "Mary Quant, London designer, mother of the miniskirt, said on November 13, 1967, 'Miniclothes are symbolic of those girls who want to seduce a man...' And , as if to confirm her conclusion, the years the skirts went up, crimes against women demonstrated a parallel increase." He also sites the philosophy of fashion designer Leo Narducci, "The woman who wears his revealing styles is one who is 'sure of herself, who thinks of sex more openly...she is not concerned about nudity, she has a body and she knows it!" Often, people who speak out about standards in practical areas like this are accused of exaggerating the significance of worldly elements. But these words come directly from those who are creating these "fashions." By their own testimony, they intend their clothing to be sensual and immodest.

Modesty is a difficult subject to discuss, even with Christians because it is so personal. Some resent having the subject raised. But where is the sensibility of the Christian who finds it so easy to neglect sanctification and honour? Will you please consider this matter with me from a Biblical perspective?

Modesty

The word "modest" is used one time in Scripture, and that in relationship to "apparel." I Timothy 2:9 says "...that women are to 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."

The intent is for women to order their lives, including how they dress, so that everything about them makes a statement concerning their spiritual condition (which ought to be a profession of godliness). I do not believe this is exclusive to women. In other words, what do your clothes say about you? Are they compatible with your verbal profession of godliness? Every time a Christian clothes himself he ought to ask, "What statement is this making about who I am? Is this statement compatible with my verbal testimony of belonging to God?"

Society is filled with symbolism and clothing is very much a symbol of what exists in a person's heart. Modern day fashion is intended by its own admission to "make a statement." Too many Christians refuse to accept this reality. One cannot deny, however, the highly charged symbolism of the bizarre outfits worn by those in the rock and drug culture. The same

goes for the shocking fad of young men donning earrings. There is no question that there is symbolism accompanying this. In fact, it is very important to these young “men” to which ear the earring is attached because of what each ear symbolizes! Yet Christians are unwilling to accept the symbolism of miniskirts, short shorts, skimpy tops, or brief swimsuits. We view these things as cultural and put them on our bodies without a thought to what statement other people are reading when they see us wearing them. The real danger is that while Christians ignorantly wear these clothes, the world is reading the message loud and clear. When people hear a Christian profess godliness with his mouth and then read his or her immodest clothing, they cry “Hypocrisy!” and justifiably so.

Furthermore, modesty is not just a matter of how much we have on, but concerns the whole statement we are making by what we have on. The Scriptures use two antonyms of “modesty” which suggest that modesty is the opposite of unruliness (I Thessalonians 5:14) and the opposite of disorderliness (II Thessalonians 3:7). I Timothy 2:9 clearly declares that our apparel is to be of such a fashion that agrees with our profession of godliness. It is not to be that which symbolizes unruliness and disorderliness in our heart.

Nakedness

Another word in Scripture that instructs us on this subject is “nakedness.” Today, the term “naked” makes us think immediately of someone totally bare or without clothing. The use of the word in the Bible, however, suggests another idea. Both the Greek and Hebrew forms are used frequently in the sense of “lightly clad” or, “without an outer garment.” In Job 22:6, for example, the naked are “stripped of their clothing.” How can one have his clothing removed, if he has none? In I Corinthians 4:11, the Apostle Paul said he was hungry, thirsty and naked. Does this mean he was writing the letter to the Corinthians believers without any clothes on? The thought is ludicrous. The imagery of the word in the minds of Paul’s readers would have been, “without sufficient clothing.”

This idea of sufficiency in clothing should be of great concern to the Christian. First, Adam and Eve’s very first thought after they sinned was that they were insufficiently clothed. Even man’s first fashion, aprons of fig leaves, was insufficient as far as God was concerned and He made them coats of skins.

Secondly, “nakedness,” or insufficiency of clothing, is always in Scripture a matter to be corrected and not promoted. Jesus said that clothing the naked was the same as ministering unto him (Matthew 25:26,38,43,44). In the church letters, the same idea is taught (James 2:15).

Thirdly, incidents in the Bible where men were caught “naked,” were embarrassing situations. Peter was naked on the fishing boat (John 21:7) after the resurrection. When Jesus appeared on shore, Peter quickly girded his fisher’s coat around him. Peter was clothed only in his undergarment rather than in a proper tunic, or second layer of clothing. Even in his hurry to be with Jesus, he took the time to wrap his fisher’s coat around him because he did not want to be indecent in the Master’s presence. This undergarment is described by the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia in the following way: “male and female, dressed in a moderately tight garment, fitting close to the neck and reaching almost to the ankles...short sleeves, reaching half-way to the elbows.” Think about the implication of Scripture when it calls people “naked.” A person, clothed with a garment that resembles an old fashioned night shirt is considered insufficiently clothed by the Word of God.

SHAMEFACEDNESS

The root problem to our modern day Christian ethics concerning modesty is a lack of shamefacedness. In I Timothy 2:9, modest apparel is qualified with shamefacedness. This is the opposite of shamelessness. To be shameless is to lack the ability to be embarrassed. To

be shamefaced is to possess the ability to be embarrassed. When Adam and Eve were embarrassed they covered up. When Peter was embarrassed, he covered up. When heathen tribes in third world countries are converted to Christ, they become embarrassed about their nakedness and cover up. But because they live in a "civilized culture," many American Christians seem to have lost their ability to be embarrassed and do not see the necessity of covering up.

It is a good thing to have the ability to be embarrassed. It is a wonderful warning signal that God has placed within us. Sometimes we follow the world's fashions so that people will think well of us. Then we find ourselves constantly tugging at the clothing we have on, hoping it will cover just a little bit more. If you find yourself doing this, take it as God intended: a warning that we are insufficiently clothed. It is sad, however, when Christians become so accustomed to immodest fashion that they stop tugging. This is a form of having the conscience seared. But if we follow the instincts of Adam and Eve and understand the standards of God our Father, we will be a lot better off.

Conclusion

How we dress is often determined more by man's wisdom than by God's wisdom. For example, comfort is the rationale used by many Christians to justify their use of immodest clothing. "It is so hot. I could not stand it if I did not dress comfortably." But is comfort for the body a sufficient reason to disobey the Biblical mandate of modesty? We must always start with truth and then make our choices. If obedience to the truth does not satisfy our flesh, then truth must prevail, even if our flesh is uncomfortable.

A child of God should examine each piece of clothing he puts on as to its acceptability unto God. Of course, God's standards are usually higher than our own just as Adam and Eve's aprons of fig leaves, did not measure up to God's coats of skin. So if we think something is modest, we would do well to go at least one step further for good measure.

Modesty is a Biblical policy. Shamefacedness is a spiritual quality. Remember, man looks on the outward appearance. It is all that man can see. Only God can look on our hearts. So whether in words, or attitudes, or actions, or clothing, everything visible about our lives should agree with our profession of godliness.

Such a discussion usually raises questions. Should a woman's skirt be to the top of the knee, or is one inch above the knee okay, or should it be below the knee, etc., etc.? Is it appropriate for men to wear shorts, and if so how short may they be? I do not believe it is necessary to answer detailed questions like this. I do believe it is necessary for every Christian to work diligently at developing the character of shamefacedness. With this mechanism in place in the believer's life, each Christian will know in his own heart when he has crossed the line of immodesty.