

The Evolution of Modesty & the Unchanging Word

By Steve Higginbotham

Several years ago, on a Sunday morning, just before worship services started, I was talking to several young people sitting in the “youth group section” at the front of the church building. While I was talking to them, one of the teenage boys, gathered up his Bible, politely excused himself, and went and sat by himself at the far end of the pew. I didn’t know what had happened. I wondered if someone had offended him or made him mad, so when I went over to where he was sitting and asked, “What’s wrong?” His response shocked me on several levels. He said, “Look down there were I was sitting and look that the way the girls are dressed. Tell me how I could possibly sit there with them and have my mind on worship?” Do you see why I was shocked? Not many teenage boys would have the boldness to act on their convictions. And, as I looked at the other end of the pew, I had to agree with this young man’s observation.

It was at that very moment that I decided that I needed to address the topic of modesty. The purpose of that sermon was not to embarrass or shame anyone, but it was to bring our lives into conformity with the word of God.

Preaching on modesty is a delicate matter. While human sexuality is a Bible topic, it is also a very sensitive topic. And as I did then when I preached on this topic, I will do the same today, and that is, I will assure you that I am aware that this is a mixed assembly with regard to gender as well as age and will do my best to speak as clearly as I can while remaining in the realm of what I believe is appropriate and polite.

Several years ago, when I decided to preach this sermon on the topic of modesty, out of curiosity, I went online to a database that contained over 150,000 sermons. That’s fifteen hundred years of preaching twice on Sunday. I wanted to see just how many sermons on the topic of

modesty were in their database. Would you like to guess how many sermons they had archived on the topic of modesty? Seven! Just seven sermons out of 150,000 sermons addressed the topic of modesty. Just seven sermons on Modesty out of what amounted to more than 1,500 years' worth of weekly sermons! Judging from their sermon archives, either modesty is not an issue in our culture, or preachers are reluctant to preach on this topic and congregations are satisfied with their silence.

I could easily join the crowd and say nothing about this Bible topic, however, if I did, I would be unfaithful as a preacher. Someday, I want to be able to stand before God and say as did the apostle Paul, "I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God." (Acts 20:27). Modesty is as much a biblical issue as baptism or the Lord's Supper. Would we idly sit by in our churches and watch as God's truth on baptism or worship was hijacked or discarded? Surely not. Then why would we idly sit back in our churches and witness God's truth on modesty being ignored? If I were to lack the love and courage to speak the truth in season and out of season, then I would need to step down out of this pulpit. In order to be faithful to God and true to my vocation, I must be willing to "reprove" and "rebuke" as well as "praise" and "edify" the body of Christ.

Today I ask that you give me your ear. I ask that you listen with an open and honest heart. I ask that you not try to justify and defend yourself, but rather justify God and defend his holiness and his high standard for our lives.

Brethren, we have an unspoken problem in our congregations. It's unspoken, but it's not a hidden problem, for we all see it. We just haven't said much about it, and I suspect that is due to the sensitive nature of the problem. You see, we have a problem with modesty. And if I can illustrate that problem by referencing a fairy tale, I will do so.

Do you remember reading or having read to you a fairy tale by Hans Christian Anderson

entitled “The Emperor’s New Clothes?” According to the story, there was once an emperor who loved beautiful clothes. He spent a small fortune on fine clothes. He loved to parade around his kingdom, showing off his fine clothes to his subjects. One day, two swindlers came to his kingdom and told the emperor that they were weavers and claimed to know how to make the finest cloth imaginable. Not only were the colors and the patterns extraordinarily beautiful, but in addition, this material had the amazing property that it was invisible to anyone who was incompetent or foolish.

The emperor thought how wonderful it would be to have clothes made from that cloth. Then he could know which of his men were unfit for their positions, and he would be able to discern between the wise and the unwise. So, the emperor paid these two swindlers a great sum of money to weave him some clothes from this cloth.

The day finally arrived that the clothes were completed. But because everyone knew that it had been said that only the “unwise” could not see the clothes, they all pretended to see the emperor’s new clothes. Even the emperor himself. So, the emperor put on his new clothes and paraded down the streets of his kingdom.

While everyone could see that the emperor was naked, no one wanted to be viewed as being foolish, so they pretended to see the King’s new clothes. Finally, the emperor walked by a little child, and the child looked at the emperor and said, “The King doesn’t have any clothes on!” Then one by one, the people came to their senses and agreed with the child that the emperor was indeed naked.

The intent of this lesson is to verbalize what we’ve all been thinking to ourselves but have been reluctant to say openly. The truth that so many of you have witnessed, and have whispered about in your pews, and have talked about in hushed tones on your way home or to lunch so that

the children don't hear, needs to be spoken aloud. The pretending has gone on long enough.

Henry Van Til, a former professor of Bible at Calvin College once observed that, "Culture is religion externalized" (Til 200). By this he meant that the culture of a nation reflects the true faith of that people. The way people live, talk, dress, and work all reflect the standards and priorities of the people.

Along that same line of thought, I would like to suggest that "dress is also religion externalized." Cultures that are enslaved to material possessions tend to fall prey to an enslavement to high fashion. Cultures that treasure sensuality tend to dress immodestly. And cultures which embrace true Christian piety will seek to make personal holiness the driving standard for their dress code. In short, what I'm trying to say is that "dress is not neutral." It speaks, and it speaks volumes.

The way people dress reveals much about their character, what they value, and what they are pursuing and trying to achieve. Some people dress in a way that speaks "success." In fact, our society has coined the phrase "dressed for success" to describe a specific type of clothing (Matt. 11:8). The Bible provides us an example of dress that makes a religious statement (2 Sam. 3:31; 14:2; Matt. 11:21). Sackcloth was worn to proclaim one's penitence and humility before God. The Bible even records for us that clothing makes a moral statement as well. Solomon spoke of putting on the "clothes of a harlot" (Prov. 7:10; Gen. 3:15).

Some clothing not only speaks "sexuality," but it screams it! Clothing designers have all but stolen the innocence of childhood. Little girls wear under-garments as well as outer-garments that have caused our society to coin the phrase "prostitots." Do we really want our six-year old girls dressing "sexy?" And fathers, do you really want your daughters to be ogled by hormone driven young men because your daughter's clothing teases and tantalizes their lusts? And as we

look around, or when you go to the mall, just take a minute and watch the people as they walk by. What kind of message are they conveying? Success? Religion? Morality? Rebellion?

As you are sitting here today, your dress speaks. And those around you are listening to your dress and are logically and legitimately drawing conclusions about your character. My question is, when one listens to our dress, are they getting a message that is consistent with our profession?

I never cease to be amazed at the irony of some who lament the fact that they aren't taken seriously and are simply treated as little more than a sex object, or they resent being treated, not as a person, but as a thing. And yet these same people often dress suggestively and sensuously.

I think we all recognize the maxim which states, "Your actions speak louder than your words." This truth is born out in the way we dress. People can profess godliness and Christian virtue all they want with their words, but if their dress professes sensuality and provocativeness, people won't hear their words, they'll hear their dress.

I understand that modesty is a controversial issue. No matter how one approaches the subject, he will be judged a legalist by some, or a libertarian by others. However, I assure you that my objective is not controversy, nor is it to bind my scruples or opinions on you. If you think I am about to get out a ruler and tell you how many inches constitute too short or too low-cut, you're mistaken. Even the Lord did not do that as he addressed this topic through the inspired apostle Paul. What he did, however, was teach us the purpose of clothing and the message our clothing ought to send.

I think one of the problems we have with dress today is that we seem to have forgotten the fundamental purpose of it. Clothing was intended by God, to be worn to "cover" our bodies and to "hide" our nakedness (Gen. 3:21). However, today many wear clothing to "expose" their bodies,

draw attention to parts of the body that entice, tantalize, and excite the imagination. And that misses the God-ordained purpose of clothing.

Therefore, let's go back to the beginning. When God created Adam and Eve in the beginning, they were "both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25). They felt no sense of public disgrace or humiliation. However, after they succumbed to sin, their eyes were opened, having an awareness of shame, so they sewed fig leaves together to make a covering for themselves (Gen. 3:7). This covering they made would be akin to what we would call a "girdle" (Gesenius 260) or "loin covering" (BDB 292). God looked at their situation, and their feeble attempt to cover themselves, then killed animals and fashioned coats or tunics of skin to adequately, and more permanently cover them.

Although we have no "snapshots" of Adam and Eve's apparel, the Hebrew word "coat" or "tunic" refers to a long shirt-like garment (Pollard 25). The point is, God's expectation was quite different than man's. Man offered as a covering for himself that which was insufficient, so God intervened and clothed them himself. I don't think mankind has changed much from the days of our original parents. We are still dressing ourselves inadequately, and if God were to intervene, he would surely put more clothes on us. Not only does this passage address the issue of modesty, but it is rich with theological and redemptive truths.

As one comes to New Testament, he can read Paul's instructions regarding our dress. In 1 Tim. 2:9,10 Paul instructs women to "adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety [KJV - shamefacedness] and moderation...that which is proper for women professing godliness and good works." I suppose at this point we need to define some terms.

The term "modesty" is a broad concept not limited to a sexual connotation. In fact, in this context, it is addressing the problem of over-dressing. Modest has the general meaning of

respectable, and honorable, having a regard for decency of behavior or dress (Knight 133).

The term “propriety” or “shamefacedness” denotes a sense of shame that would cause one to shrink from trespassing the boundaries of what is modest (Hendriksen 106). The person Paul describes here is not one who tries to walk a fine line between modesty and immodesty, but rather shrinks in shame from the possibility of being immodest.

To summarize these terms, one could say that the way one dresses should not draw attention to themselves in the wrong way. One’s dress should not say “Sex” or “Pride” or “Riches,” but rather “Purity,” “Humility,” and “Moderation.” You say you can’t dress that way and be cool? You say you can’t dress that way and have friends, get dates, and fit in? My question is of what concern should “fitting in with the world” have to do with a Christian, and the choices he or she makes?

Paul literally begged us not to be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). Are we really so shallow and undisciplined that we are more concerned about what our friends think, than what our Lord thinks? Modesty is not first an issue of clothing, rather, it is an issue of the heart. And if one’s heart is right with God, it will govern one’s dress in purity and shamefacedness.

Modesty is not a “female” issue, but a human issue. Brothers and sisters, cover yourself, and do so in a way that doesn’t draw attention to your sexuality, but rather to your purity. Don’t wear clothing that teases, tantalizes, or that shows just enough flesh to arouse one’s curiosity or imagination. Don’t dress in such a fashion that leaves others wondering if you want to be chased, but rather confirms to us that you want to be chaste. Surely, none of us want to be a stumbling block that could trip up others. But I assure you that if your dress does not profess godliness, that is exactly what you are. I appeal to you to act in love toward others and seek their best interests.

Someone might say, “That’s all well and good, but how do you define modesty and

immodesty? Isn't it a cultural matter? The answer to that question is, "yes," and "no."

Culture does have a role in determining what is and what is not modest. Different cultures have different standards or definitions of modesty. This is born out in God's word. Do you remember the story of Tamar? The text says that Tamar took off her widow's garments (notice there was dress that indicated she was a widow) and covered herself with a veil. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot because her face was covered by the veil (Gen. 38:14-15). However, culture changed by the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians. For Paul said that for a woman not to wear a veil was a shame and a sign of an unchaste woman (1 Cor. 11:5-6).

So then, if modesty differs from time to time and culture to culture, how are we to define what is or is not immodest? Is it subjective? The answer is two-fold:

First, respect your cultural norms. If a certain type or style of clothing is seen as immoral, immodest, or indecent, avoid such clothing. If a culture thought that wearing red clothing was a sign of indecency, Christians in that culture should avoid such clothing. Even though there is nothing inherently sinful about the color, red, Christians should be sensitive to the culture in which they live (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Second, let the unchanging word of God serve as your unchanging standard. While cultures may vary from time to time and from place to place, we still have a constant, unchanging record of what God provided a man and a woman to remove their shame and modestly cover themselves. The tunic that God gave Adam and Eve in the beginning was a garment that was intended to cover their nakedness and went from the shoulders to at least the knees. This was God's remedy for immodesty, even before culture ever existed.

Brethren, I close this lesson with an appeal to love. I appeal that we act in love toward one another, and most importantly, we act in love toward our Heavenly Father. May we "shrink" from

any dress or conduct that is seen as indecent or immodest that fails to profess godliness.

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