

# A Dressing Down on Dressing Down

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DO BELIEVERS need a dressing-down on their dressing? 'Surely not!' the hopeful would say, 'we are after all a people who have been taught the Word, and are careful to apply it.' But the realist is compelled to be cautious.

This writer has received no fewer than five communications over the past few months from godly and mature Christians who raise this problem, saying typically: 'I notice the fashion of the world creeping into the church through the dressing of our young people. Many of our young people are showing off their midriff and wearing low-cut jeans that reveal too much flesh when they sit. There are also other clothes inappropriate for church. Can we do something about this? Matters could get even worse, with young people who do not follow the trend coming under a lot of pressure.'

Why should incautious dress be apparent, when separation unto holiness and modesty have been taught? Is it a matter of ignorance, indifference, or rebelliousness? It could be any of the three.

We are naturally concerned, because it is the quest of every believer to grow into Christ-likeness: to have temperance and control over the body; to cultivate a sound mind, and to be wise in all spiritual things. In other words, we are to be transformed from and not conformed to this world.

The teaching of Scripture is the rule of our faith and practice. However, we do not grow as Christians by imbibing biblical facts alone, but by the practice of our faith in obedience to Scripture. In order, therefore, to understand the implications of clothing, it is important to know what Scripture says.

## The Need for Principles in Dressing

But what does Scripture have to say about dressing that can be relevant to this day and age? After all, fashions and culture change. For example, where people in the past would wear linen and wool, the range of fabrics now used is much greater; and instead of tunics and sandals, we wear T-shirts and trainers. So how can the Bible provide reasonable guidelines that are relevant to us today?

According to Scripture we are to stand out as lights in the world and to be different, and this must surely be reflected in our dressing. If the clothing of the world is contrary to biblical guidelines, then we need to consider whether we are dressing like the world.

*1 John 2.16* tells us: 'For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.' When the word 'world' is mentioned, it does not refer to every single person in the world, for then we would have to dress differently from everyone else and have a distinctive Christian uniform. The word 'world' refers to the evil and the wickedness of the world.

This subject might not have needed to be raised 150 years ago because the world, although wicked, was restrained in many respects. But that is not how it is today. The world is becoming worse and worse. Crime is increasing, and so is immorality, and the Bible tells us to separate from the wickedness of this world and pursue holiness.

## Separation unto holiness

But just how wicked is the world getting? Whatever is happening in Singapore is part of the trend elsewhere, and it is the increasing sensuality that is making the greatest difference in clothing. A few years ago a study of the sexual habits of final year students (carried out by the National University Hospital of Singapore) showed that one in three non-medical students staying in the hostels were sexually active. Six out of ten of these had casual sex for the first time at the age of 18. Interestingly, only one out of seven medical students admitted to having sex before marriage. Religious beliefs and a higher view of marriage were some of the reasons for abstinence among medical students.

However, later statistics based on the general populace are even more alarming. In a survey on sexual perceptions, only a slim majority of 51% of adolescents surveyed said that pre-marital sex was wrong. 41% looked upon sex before marriage as acceptable if mutual love existed and marriage was the ultimate goal. 9% did not feel that pre-marital sex presented any problem. Ominously, thought is transmitted into action faster than people realise.

These statistics are now a little dated [UK figures are considerably worse] and the situation is probably more shocking today. The trends in morality certainly affect the way people behave and act. It would be naive to deny that sensuality is far more apparent today than previously, and worldwide moral decline has obviously affected clothing.

The human drive to preen is immensely strong, energising the market for cosmetics, fashionable clothes, and perfumes, many of which are intended to be overtly sensual. No longer is it just lipstick, but lip gloss, lip wax, and lip liner, all to make the lips appear fuller for kissing. Clothes, originally intended to cover, are today meant to reveal. Spaghetti straps are now a common sight along with body-hugging outfits. Men are as culpable, if not responsible. Somewhere in the last ten years, pumping iron has given rise to tighter shirts.

This is the condition of the world, and the Christian is exhorted to separate from such wickedness. *Leviticus 11.45* tells us, 'For I am the Lord that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.' The word 'holy' means consecrated or set apart, that is, separate. The Lord is separate and set apart from all ungodliness and all appearance of wickedness. And because he has redeemed the Christian from spiritual Egypt – from sin and its bondage – the command is for the Christian to be separate and set apart from all appearance of wickedness.

If some of the clothes of today have been heavily influenced and driven by sensuality, then the Christian should entertain no thought of wearing them.

Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land they were given a host of instructions on how they should conduct themselves, dress, and go about their occupations. Instructions were given ranging from practical to religious matters. *Leviticus 19.28* tells us: 'Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord.' The people were to be different from pagans who tattooed themselves.

*Leviticus 21.5* says, 'They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corner of their beard, nor make any cuttings in their flesh.' The Canaanites wore their hair in all manner of ways and their priests shaved the sides and backs of their heads, and so the Israelites were forbidden to appear like them in order to remain distinct. Without this distinctiveness, their witness would have been lost.

How may a Christian lady minister the Gospel to an unbeliever, explaining the importance of purity and chastity, when she is clad in the highly immodest fashions of today? It would be an altogether incongruous thing.

Therefore separation from wickedness and all appearance of wickedness is a vital guideline

and principle. But another guideline is just as important, and is more specifically related to clothing – that of modesty.

## Defining modesty

What is modesty? Modesty is ‘being restrained by a sense of propriety; not forward; unpretending; free from anything suggestive of sexual impurity; moderate; not excessive, extreme, or extravagant.’

*1 Timothy 2.9-10* exhorts us – ‘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.’ Here we are told that the Christian has an obligation to dress in a manner that is consistent with his or her status as God’s child.

We see in *Isaiah 3.16* how the prophet opposed and derided the immodesty of the women: ‘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 . . .’

In *1 Peter 3.4*, Peter says that ‘the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit . . . is in the sight of God of great price.’ This is what modesty is – focusing on the inward rather than the outward. And once the Christian has developed inward beauty, his maturity and love for Christ will manifest itself outwardly.

We are also exhorted by the apostle Paul to reflect our status as saints by our holy living. *Ephesians 4.1* says, ‘I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.’

But what exactly is the purpose of modesty? From these texts we see that it is an endeavour to develop inward beauty. It is also a restraint upon us. *Romans 14.13* instructs us ‘. . . that no man put a stumbling-block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.’ A stumbling-block is any cause of stumbling; something which forms a difficulty in one’s way or which causes offence. Immodesty is obviously such a cause of stumbling to others.

## A balance for beauty

But while we must be careful of having any appearance of evil, and take precautions against it by modest dressing, the Bible is not against beauty and good appearance. Indeed, this is praised in Scripture. We know this because various women are complimented on their outward appearance, such as Rebekah, Rachel and Esther, who were described as very beautiful. The cultivation of good appearance is approved of, but this must be practised with maturity and modesty in the use of clothing.

Furthermore, the Bible is not against the human body. Nor is it against intimate affections, but these are only to be enjoyed within the marriage covenant. In *Proverbs 5.19*, the son is advised to be wholly satisfied with bodily intimacy with his own wife.

Unfortunately, much of the clothing marketed today is gravely inconsistent with the principles of modesty and bodily appreciation within marriage alone. Then should there not be rules and regulations provided by the church as to what Christians should wear? Unfortunately, this would not be easy to implement, for it could lead to legalism. Besides, in this New Testament age, believers have liberty to be responsive to their own conscience. Nevertheless, Christians can abuse that liberty, leading themselves into licentious (morally unrestrained) living.

## Towards maturity

It is precisely because of a lack of Christian maturity and charity that there needs to be a dressing-down, although we engage in this with much trepidation.

The lack of caution in clothing may be caused by one of three different factors, as we have mentioned, namely ignorance, indifference, or rebelliousness.

To those who are ignorant, we pray that the instruction given would be sufficient to evoke a quick spiritual response. But to those who are indifferent or rebellious, we believe this is an indication of their poor level of maturity and charity. We echo C H Spurgeon's sentiments when he said, 'it is not for me to set myself up as a universal censor of the church, but I must be honest and say, that spiritual life, and fire, and zeal, and piety, seem to be absent from the church in ten thousand instances.'

We believe one of those instances is a lack of caution in personal grooming. Some believers are not as careful as they should be, and seem unwilling to move towards maturity. When godly and mature Christians and leaders of the church caution us in this area, we should listen. This in turn builds maturity and charity in us.

Spurgeon also said, 'As we grow in grace, we are sure to grow in charity, sympathy, and love. We shall, as we ripen in grace, have greater sweetness towards our fellow Christians.' Have we considered the effect of our clothing on others?

Let believers, therefore, cover up more, raising the standard by lowering the hemline of the skirt, revealing their increasing maturity by hiding more flesh, and tightening their reins on worldliness with somewhat looser clothing.

And to those readers who are more mature and godly, the task of admonition is yours too! Speak up! – but gently. Counsel! Admonish! Good convictions on dressing don't happen overnight. Imagine the advance in Christian maturity if more of us were to speak up! This dressing-down is for the mature also.

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