

A dying virtue
Modesty in dress from a woman's perspective

by Laura Kuruvilla
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About ten years ago, as I can recall, it became common for young women -- my peers -- to wear spaghetti strap tank tops, leaving their bra straps visible to the public gaze. When this practice first came to my attention, I was, in agreement with my mother and grandmother, horrified. Just a few years later, I had somehow overcome these qualms and taken up the fashion, revealing what I had once considered private with many other women of my generation.

I relate this true anecdote to exemplify the ease with which sensibilities can change. In a few years, what had once seemed inappropriate and even appalling to me now seemed perfectly normal and attractive.

This sort of change in sensibilities is exactly the difficulty when broaching a topic such as modesty. No one could deny that the Bible mandates modest dress, specifically for women. Paul writes to Timothy: "I desire [...] that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness -- with good works" (1 Tim. 2.8-10). (Of course, modest dress is necessary for men as well. But Paul, in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, focuses on women here because this is an area in which women are more likely to sin.)

A primary difficulty with applying this passage is the definition of "modesty." In a single week, I have first seen modesty defined as nearly ankle-length, long-sleeved loose dresses for all the women in a congregation and secondly heard biblical modesty exhorted by a young Christian woman in skin-hugging jeans and a shirt cut three or four inches below the nape of her neck. I do not write this to deride the second young woman but merely to note that the practical definition of modesty -- enunciated by what a Christian woman chooses to wear -- can be a profoundly wide-ranging and slippery one.

So where might we begin to discover a definition of modesty that would accord with, as Paul writes, "what is proper for women who profess godliness"? The world's definition of modesty would surely be something to the effect of "less provocative clothing than what is fashionable; the least revealing choice among mainstream fashion." The problem with this definition for Christians, however, is that the world is always growing more sinful, the "times of difficulty" Paul speaks of in which evil men will "go [...] from bad to worse" (2 Tim. 3.1,13).

Even my own brief experience proves this. My parents took a photograph of me ready to leave home on the first morning of my senior year of high school. I'm standing in our driveway, wearing loose, long pants and a button-up shirt, with another shirt underneath. Fast forward six years: to my shame, a search in my closet would have, at that time, revealed skin-hugging jeans and form-fitting shirts. And in both cases, I was merely following the fashion trends -- that is, in biblical terms, conforming to the world (Romans 12.2).

Take a single clear-eyed glance with me at the direction of women's fashion in the past decade. Jeans have grown progressively tighter and lower; one can hardly purchase a shirt in the large, mainstream chains catering to the young and middle aged that is not extremely snug. It is plain to see that the world, at least for the past decade, if not longer has been embracing ever tighter, ever more revealing clothing for women.

It is apparent that fashion trends, and along with them social definitions of acceptable dress, modest dress, and provocative dress, change with the times. God's word, and his standards, however, are surely unchanging. Unfortunately, the church has generally followed the world, particularly in its fashions. Francis Schaeffer once remarked, "Tell me what the world is saying today, and I'll tell you what the church will be saying seven years from now."¹ Sadly, in the area of dress and fashion, Schaeffer's words are all too true.

How, then, can we begin to define modesty, if we seek to uphold God's word and discover what is acceptable to him? First, we might consider the history of fashion. In the course of history, the baring of skin is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. From ancient times up to the first world war, women's skirts fell to the floor, revealing nothing more than the feet. Indeed, only in the mid-1920s were skirts introduced that revealed the calf.²

While history does not have the final say in interpreting the Bible, we might take a cue from the wisdom of these centuries before our own, which remain unanimous in their declaration that the legs should be covered.

Nancy Leigh DeMoss in her teaching on modesty, poses a powerful question, useful as a daily self-diagnostic: "If the Lord were to dress me this morning, what would I be wearing?" We know from Matthew 5 that Jesus would not condone any clothing that would prove sexually enticing to a man, for he taught: " 'You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So if your eye.even your good eye.causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell'" (Matthew 5.27-29, NLT). We usually consider this passage as directed largely to men, since women are, I think, less likely to lust after a stranger passed on the street. But there is wisdom here for women as well. First, Jesus confirms that men are likely to lust in just such a situation -- simply by sight, without physical contact. We women must take this into account, even if and especially because it is different from our personal tendencies. Secondly, I think we would be wise to remember that sins often come in pairs; thus if men are more prone to lust at the sight of a woman, women are more likely to revel in vainglory over their appearance -- to be overly concerned -- if not obsessed -- with our own physical beauty. Moreover, there is a companion verse to Matthew 5.27 that must be applied to women. In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches, "'Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire'" (Matthew 18.7-9).

According to Jesus, it is a sin for a man to lust after a woman, and it is equally a sin for her to tempt him to do so -- to tempt him by provocative dress, speech, or actions. How Satan must delight in using this sin pair against the church, Christ's body on earth! He has tempted women, and Christian women among them, to forget the need for modesty -- to accept a loose, worldly definition of modesty in order to satisfy our own sinful desire to be considered fashionable and attractive. And by tempting women thus, the Enemy has already secured for himself a victory over men as well. If Jesus calls the lusting man to gouge out his offending eye, does he not equally call women to purge our pride, our desire to be thought "attractive" (i.e., sexually appealing) by the world?

This is not a tirade against beauty; God made the female form and his word notes that a woman's hair is her glory (1 Corinthians 11). The sovereign Lord and his word are not ignorant or contemptuous of female beauty; rather, he asks women who profess to be his followers to expose that beauty appropriately, to be modest before the world and to save sexual allure for our husbands. Are we willing to consider how the Lord would have us dress each morning as we stand before the mirror? For one day, we will stand before him and give an account of why, by our careless or willful satisfying of our pride, we have caused men for whom Christ died to sin.

These words are a challenge to me as well, for at this point, God is still, in his mercy, convicting me on a regular basis of clothes that I own and have worn that he would not choose for his daughter. I will mention just a few here: the current fashion for tight pants for women. If we consider this honestly, we cannot pretend that skintight jeans are more comfortable or practical than loose ones; they are simply more sexually enticing. The same must be said of form-fitting shirts; this is not for comfort, but again to ensure that no curve remains unseen. Sheer fabrics, spaghetti straps, shorts, and short dresses and skirts must also be considered. I myself originally objected to this conviction from the Lord; "It's hot outside" was my initial reply, my rationalization for skirts above the knee and sleeveless shirts. But, are shorts and short skirts truly more cool than a long linen skirt? And even if this were not the case, shouldn't we be willing to sacrifice a bit of comfort in obedience to our Lord and in regard for our brothers? Finally, can bathing suits, of any sort, be considered modest? I'm inclined to say no.

I offer these thoughts not in self righteousness, for I have sinned greatly in my dress. I am grateful to the Lord that he, in his mercy, has been patient to teach and convict me in this area, and so I write these reflections only in the hope that they may be of help -- eternal help -- to any Christian sister.

May these words be to the glory of God.

Laura Kuruvilla

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Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Elisabeth Elliott, "The Essence of Femininity: A Personal Perspective," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem.
2. Michael Batterby, *Mirror, Mirror: A Social History of Fashion*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977) 278, 296.



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