

The Church and Moral Problems — Immodest Apparel and Worldliness

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Introduction

The church and the world are to be kept distinct because they **are** distinct. There are so many places in the Word of God that emphasize this. In Colossians 1:13 Paul said, “We have been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of the Son of his love.” The contrast there is unmistakable between a realm of darkness in which men lived before they obeyed the Gospel of Christ and the kingdom of the Son of God's love (Christ Jesus our Lord), which of course is His church upon this earth

The church must be kept pure of immoralities. The kingdom on earth is not to allow immorality to dwell in its bosom (1 Cor. 5). If we allow it to dwell in the kingdom on earth, we shall not inherit the kingdom of Heaven (6:9–11). The devil has many ways of trying to contaminate, destroy, and corrupt the church of the Lord. He tries to do it through false doctrine, of course. He tries to do it through apathy and indifference. He tries to do it in many ways, but surely, immorality is one of the principal ways.

We live in a day of great immorality. Things that were in one age (even in an earlier time in the lives of many of us) unspeakable are headlines on the front pages of the newspapers today — openly discussed, openly reported — because they are openly practiced. The kinds of materials that are being circulated that are filled with immorality and that stir up unbridled and unlawful passions were never to be seen on the public market when I was a youngster. If they were to be found at all, they had to be smuggled. They were found under the counter, or they were found in the back room of any store that would dare to carry them; and most stores would not allow such filth in them. Today, however, they are out in plain view of everybody, and I suppose (in most places in our nation, anyway), even little children can (and do) go in and buy them.

We have constant warnings in the New Testament to beware of immorality, of things that corrupt, and to be God's separate and separated people. The significant words *saint*, *holy*, and *sanctified* all principally focus on being a distinct people, a separated people, a people dedicated in a peculiar way to God's use. When we become saints (i.e., those who compose the church) we are to be that distinct and separate people dedicated to God, not for ordinary, common, and certainly not for profane use anymore.

In 2 Corinthians 6:17-18, Paul quoted a ringing challenge from the Old Testament and applied it to the church; “Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. And I will be to you a Father and ye shall be to me sons and daughters.” This statement is a conditional one, although it is not stated in an actual conditional form. It does not have the “if” in it, but the “if” is distinctly implied: “only **if** we will come out, and **if** we will be separate, and **if** we will not touch the unclean thing” — **then** and only then will He be pleased to be our Father in a special spiritual sense, and He will be pleased to call us His sons and daughters.

Two of the many problems related to immorality that we face in the Lord's church are those of immodest apparel and worldliness.

Immodest Apparel

General Considerations

In 1 Timothy 2:9, Paul wrote, “Let the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefastness [shamefacedness, KJV] and sobriety.” I know that's only the first half of the verse, but that's really all that we'll be able to discuss and apply in my remarks.

The word here translated “modesty” is one, according to the *Arndt and Gingrich Lexicon*, that means “respectable,” or “honorable.” Now there are some who say that Paul was just discussing here the fact that women ought not to wear gaudy apparel, they ought not to wear apparel that is extravagant in cost, or they ought not to wear apparel that would attract attention to themselves, whether by the color or the expense of the apparel, or whatever else it might be. I understand that to be included, at least partially, in what Paul said here. I think that the word “modesty,” however, must go further than that in this context.

Look at the second statement: “in modest apparel with shamefastness.” What does this term mean? It means the ability to blush. It's talking about having a sense of one's own decency and modesty, and likewise, having the ability to feel a sense of shame when one does not behave modestly or decently. It is the ability to blush when that line has been crossed. That seems to me to be something in terribly short supply in the general populace today — the ability to blush. When was the last time you saw anybody blush? It doesn't matter how raunchy, ugly, or filthy the story is, or how gross the profanity is, when have you seen somebody blush at it? That which permeates the world will sooner or later infiltrate the church. There are many in the church of the Lord today who have not the capability to blush, it seems.

There is a third word here: *sobriety*. Women are to adorn themselves with modesty, shamefastness, and sobriety. When we think of *sober*, we automatically think of *drunk*. Further, *sober* in the New Testament conveys the idea of one who is in possession of his mental faculties because they haven't been dulled or damaged by drunkenness from strong drink or other drugs that would take away one's normal reasoning abilities. The sober person has his mental powers under his **own** control, rather than under some other controlling factor.

By implication then, the figurative significance of the term *sober* has to do with rational, correct thinking as a constant behavior rather than merely the absence of drunkenness. Those (especially the women being addressed here) are to dress in a way that is sober, that reflects the correct way of thinking, and that they are thinking as the Lord would have them think. When we overexpose the film in our cameras, a dark, defective result occurs. When men and women overexpose the flesh of their bodies, the indecent exposure produces a dark and defective result. Overexposed flesh is a common sight in our world. Movies, television, magazines, books, and even the billboards in the United States constantly parade it. Everything from bulldozers to toothpaste is sold with a woman wearing less than a half-ounce of clothing. One cannot drive to work or shop in the area where we live in Denton, Texas, and the Dallas-Fort Worth area, without being exposed to pornography on the billboards, if nowhere else. It is prominent in the very marketplaces where we daily shop and trade.

Consider with me a few of the special areas of temptation for Christians regarding our apparel.

Mixed Swimming

Several years ago, in a place where I preached in west Texas (I'd been there a only a short while), a social function for college-age students was hosted by some members of the church. It occurred at a place by a river, and some of them went swimming. Of course, they stripped down to the appropriate attire for swimming. There were boys and girls and men and women of various ages involved in doing so. I brought up my concerns in the next elders' meeting, asking if they didn't have any standards or guidelines at all for such church-related activities relating to their apparel. One of the elders said "Oh, the subject of mixed swimming is a dead issue." In more recent years, I've begun seeing in the church bulletins that come across my desk that some of the "youth ministers" and parents are planning swimming parties for their young people—boys and girls together. They'll go out to the house of some church family that has a swimming pool; they'll all undress together and have a swimming party. I suggest to

you that a normal teenage boy or man cannot look at and long associate with a girl or a woman in a modern swimming suit without having the wrong kinds of thoughts. Is this sort of situation not what Jesus was addressing in Matthew 5:28 when he stated that “a man who looketh upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart”? I will not leave the men and their apparel out of my comments on this subject, but I think we are fully in keeping with the tenor of Jesus’ words, in that He recognizes the natural, biological difference in the passions of men and women. This is why He says a man (male) who looks upon a woman (female) to lust after her commits adultery in his heart. That is the “normal direction” of sexual desire—the man toward the woman. Anything that unnecessarily stirs that up needs to be avoided. Let me also point out that Paul’s admonition in 1 Timothy 2:9 is addressed to women. The women are to be adorned in modest apparel. Again, men are not exempt from dressing modestly, but still, the primary application, for **some reason**, in the words of Paul have to do with the clothing of women. By implication, the Lord’s statement does, also.

Some man or boy may say, “Well, that doesn't bother me, to go to the swimming pool, or to the beach where all the women and girls are more naked than they are clothed.” One of the following things is true about a person who would claim as much. He’s either too young for it to bother him, he’s too old for it to bother him, he’s abnormal, or he’s lying. Now those are the four alternatives. Man is so made by God that it **would** bother him; and it will.

A woman at the beach, in her modern two-piece bathing suit (**maybe** it has two pieces) may say, “It doesn't bother me to be there with all those men more undressed than dressed.” Even if she could truthfully say it doesn't bother her, her responsibility doesn't end there. In Matthew 18:6–9, Jesus warned about causing others to stumble by one’s behavior. Did He not say that to cut your hand or foot off or pluck your eye out would be preferable to causing someone to stumble? It would be better for one to be cast in the depths of the sea with a millstone about his or her neck than to cause someone to stumble. He wasn’t talking about causing someone to **grumble**. Some people are ready to criticize others as a career. Jesus was talking about causing someone to sin unnecessarily by our behavior, by something we simply choose to do as an exercise of our own legal liberty and “rights.”

God’s Word is clear: Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8:9–13, about such an innocent thing as eating meat, “If it cause my brother to stumble, I'll eat no flesh forevermore.” He also said that such behavior was not only a sin against a brother, but a sin against the Lord (vv.11–12). How

much more ought we to thus think about that which is totally unrelated to a necessity of life, (i.e., eating meat) and be willing to lay it aside lest we cause another to stumble?

Someone has suggested, “Well, maybe a spiritual giant could go to the beach or go to the swimming pool and be around all those unclad bodies, be one of them himself, and not have the wrong kinds of thoughts.” In the first place, even spiritual giants can be tempted. Paul said, “I buffet my body... lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected” (1 Cor. 9:27). In the second place, you won't find any “spiritual giants” at the beach, or at the swimming pool more undressed than dressed. Have you ever tried to picture Jesus in a swimsuit, out on the beach by the Sea of Galilee, with the 5,000 there to be fed (besides the women and children) saying “Let's go for a swim after supper!” You just cannot picture it, can you? Can you picture the apostle Paul under such circumstances as brethren try to justify for themselves today in that regard? Absolutely not! These hypothetical scenes are totally out of keeping with what we see in our Lord and his apostles — and those men and women who are truly seeking to serve Him faithfully today.

We cannot avoid all exposure to the undressed males and females about us, but we can prevent purposely placing ourselves in a circumstance where we know that is what will happen. We may run into them in the supermarket or in the drugstore or on the way somewhere here or there, but there is a great deal of difference in that and in undressing ourselves and going to the beach, or in just going to the beach to fill our eyes. We simply dare not do that. How can we pray, “Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” and then go to such a place as that, where we know temptation will abound? What a hypocritical prayer that would be!

Daily Dress

Women must understand the influence they have on men by the way they dress or undress. We're not trying to place all the blame on women and none on men; but women do affect men by the way they dress or fail to dress. The Bible demands that women dress so as to be chaste — c-h-a-s-t-e (1 Pet. 3:2). There are many women, and unfortunately some of those are Christian women, who apparently dress to be chased — c-h-a-s-e-d — and there are plenty of men who are willing to chase them, sometimes Christian men, sad to say.

An amusing incident occurred in 1973 at the Freed-Hardeman College Lectureship. Brethren Gus Nichols and Guy N. Woods were dear friends. They differed on a few points, but not on any matters that affected their friendship or fellowship. A question had been asked in the

Open Forum, which brother Woods conducted for more than 30 years. The incident occurred about the time when it was becoming popular for women in our country to wear pantsuits, and the question was submitted, "Is it wrong for a Christian woman to wear pantsuits?" As brother Woods would often do, he asked brother Nichols to come up and give his answer to the question before brother Woods responded to it. Brother Gus did so, citing Deuteronomy 22, which forbids a woman to wear the garments of a man, and vice versa. Then he proceeded to some other comments, concluding with his view that a woman should not wear pantsuits.

When he sat down, brother Woods came to the microphone and said, "Now brother Gus, I'm surprised at you. In the first place, we are not under the Old Testament. In the second place, if we're going to cite any of Deuteronomy 22 as binding on us today, then we'll have to take it all. Every time any of us builds a house he'd better put a battlement around the roof. You can't sow more than one kind of seed in the same field. You can't plow with two different animals hitched to the same yoke. You'll have to get rid of all of these blended-fabric garments you are wearing, because Deuteronomy 22 forbids those too." Brother Woods went on to say that he did not advocate women's wearing pantsuits, but that they were far more modest than some of the other garments women were wearing and that he believed it was just a matter of custom. He further said that women's pantsuits were not men's garments anyway and that he "wouldn't be caught dead in one."

Brother Gus had his hand up by that time, earnestly saying "Just another word, brother Woods." He came to the microphone and acknowledged that what brother Woods had said was true about Deuteronomy 22. Then he said, "What I really object to, brother Woods, is women who wear these tight pants that call unnecessary attention to their ..., their..., (he was searching for the right word and finally blurted out), their **femininity**!" The roof almost collapsed from the uproar of laughter.

He had a good point there. Those garments that would call undue attention to a woman's femininity, I think, would come under the purview of what the Lord said and what Paul wrote. Certainly, short shorts (as we call them in the United States), "halter tops," and skimpy swimsuits (as we have already mentioned) have been around for years, and girls and women have become increasingly brazen in wearing such in public places. One can also wear a pair of pants that are so tight that the wearer looks as if she has been poured into them, with every outline of her body placed in stark relief. Those certainly call undue attention to her "femininity," as brother Nichols put it.

Now we are seeing the extremely short skirts of the 1960s revived. Some of you younger people may not know that the short skirts of this year's fashions are simply a recycling of the miniskirts of 1964. In that year the miniskirt (not m-a-n-y, although there were **many** miniskirts) took the fashion world by storm. Interestingly, during the five years preceding the introduction of the miniskirt and its sudden rise to popularity, criminal sexual offenses had been decreasing in our nation. But beginning with the introduction of the miniskirt, they began to rise remarkably. That was hardly a coincidence.

The introduction of the miniskirt was one of several signals that the "sexual revolution" had really begun. It had been boiling in the background for several years. Hollywood had been pushing it and television had become increasingly loose, morally. Then they raised the hemlines. It was almost like pouring fuel on smoldering coals. Mary Quant, the mother of the miniskirt, was very blunt about her novel fashion, and about those who adopted it: She explained, "Mini-clothes are a symbol of those girls who want to seduce a man." I wonder, brethren, how we can be so blind as not to realize that the sex capital of the world (Paris, France) dictates and dominates the fashion of women's clothes? Sometimes, they are fairly modest. Sometimes they are brazenly indecent.

Not only do some women and girls who are members of the church sometimes wear clothing that is scantily shameful and shamefully scanty in public places; sometimes they wear them to worship, at least in the United States. A brother in the mid-sixties, when the miniskirt was so popular, told me he would no longer be able to serve the Lord's Supper to the congregation because "the hemlines are so high when the women are seated that as I try to serve them, there is no way I can keep my mind where it is supposed to be." I don't know at exactly how many inches the line really should be drawn for modest dress length. It is not my intent to try to draw that dogmatically or legalistically. But I'll tell you, when a skirt is so short that when a woman sits down it won't cover her underwear (and we do not mean her petticoat), it is indecent and immodest. That's how short they were originally, and they're coming right back up again. The problem with some (with many, it seems) is not so much with the miniskirt, but the "mini-morals" that allow ladies to wear such shameful clothing and still call themselves Christians.

Who is More to Blame?

Who is more to blame, the male who has impure thoughts when the unclad females parade before him, or the female who unclothes her body and parades it before the male? Some

women excuse their immodest apparel by saying, “Well, men just have evil thoughts, and they’re just evil-minded,” regardless of how said women may have unclothed themselves. The Lord did not agree. Otherwise, he would not have couched what he said in Matthew 5:28 in the language in which he couched it: a “**man** who looks upon a **woman** to lust after her commits adultery in his heart” (emph. DM). Males are more easily aroused sexually. Surely, that is fundamental biology. One may as well dangle red meat in front of a dog and expect the dog to ignore it as for an unclad female to parade in front of a normal man and not expect his attention to be attracted to her. Both reactions are instinctive.

When a man sexually attacks a woman who has tempted him by parading in public barely draped, has the woman no blame at all? Do not misunderstand me; the man is surely guilty. He is surely and certainly to be blamed. I am simply asking if the one who has (either consciously or unconsciously) seduced him by the way she has dressed or undressed is not also culpable? If we can understand that men must practice self-control in fulfilling their sexual drives, then can we not also understand that women must practice self-control in the way they dress? Surely, the latter is not more difficult (or obligatory) than the former.

I once saw a poster that said, “If it's not for sale, don't advertise it.” Think about how that applies to this subject. What are women doing when they take off more clothes than they leave on in public? They are “advertising” something, whether or not they intend to “sell” it. It is not too difficult to see how someone might assume that what is being “advertised” by an unclad girl or woman is “for sale.” (Let no reader think for one moment that I am implying any excuse for immoral behavior on the part of a “buyer” in the aforementioned situation.). A Christian must be ever conscious of what he or she advertises in every area of life, including the manner of dress.

Solutions to the Problem

Self-control in modesty, in shamefacedness, in sobriety will not allow a Christian girl or woman to wear that which is even questionable. I believe another thing that will help solve this problem is fathers and husbands who will exercise the spiritual leadership in the home that God has given to them and for which He will hold them responsible. They can solve this problem. Some of them may need to clean out the closets of their wives and their daughters if they will not do so themselves. Ephesians 6:4 tells fathers to nurture their children in the chastening and admonition of the Lord, and that surely includes what the children (boys **and** girls) wear. When wives rebel against the headship of their husbands, it is rebellion against

Christ (assuming that he is leading them in the way of the Lord [1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-24]), and when children are disobedient to their fathers, they rebel against the Lord (Eph. 6:1).

Men and Women Must Dress Modestly

The principles that we have thus far discussed have been applied mostly to women, but let me now emphasize that men must likewise be pure, modest, and decent in their behavior in every way, including the way they dress. Timothy was to be an example of the believers, among other things, in purity (1 Tim. 4:12). Therefore, men likewise must clothe themselves modestly and decently. Paul's plea in Romans 12:2 (especially the ASV) well applies here: "Be not fashioned according to this world." Don't let the world dictate the "fashion" for you. I realize that this word includes more than just clothing fashions, but surely it includes the very clothes that we wear. Don't let the world determine how you are going to dress; let the Lord tell you how.

In Luke Chapter 8, we read that the Lord came across to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, and there found a man named "Legion." He was out of his "right mind" because of the demons that possessed him. He was so fierce he would break the chains with which men sought to restrain him. He lived in a graveyard and went about unclothed. The Lord cast out those demons into the herd of swine which ran and jumped over the cliff into the Sea of Galilee. Do you remember how the man was described after the Lord had cast out his demons? He was "... clothed and in his right mind" (v. 35). What does that suggest to us? When people are thinking sanely, they will cover their nakedness, and when they indecently expose themselves, they are not in their "right mind." That's how simple it is.

Worldliness

The Meaning of Worldliness

1 John 2:15 says, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." What is *worldliness*? It's not love of this material creation that God has made in all its beauty. It's not wrong to "love" the natural world that God has created as far as admiring it and appreciating it as the handiwork of God is concerned. That's not "loving the world" condemned by John.

Worldliness (i.e., "loving the world") does not mean loving the people who inhabit this world. "God so loved the **world** [i.e., the human beings in the world and their souls] "that he gave his

only begotten Son ..." (John 3:16). Indeed, if we do not love the world in that sense, we are not worthy to be called His children.

The "world" which we are not to love in 1 John 2:15, refers to worldly affairs, desires, riches, and pleasures that would seduce one from God and keep our minds on things of a material, physical, and fleshly nature. Galatians 1:4 calls it "this present evil world"; that is the world that we cannot love and love the Father at the same time.

Obviously, *worldliness* is a broad term which embraces every kind of evil, every kind of stumbling block, and everything that would distract us from Heaven and would keep us from being what the Lord would have us to be. Everything that Satan would throw in our paths can be termed a "temptation" to "worldliness."

The Gravity of the Problem

Worldliness is the source of all immorality. Name whatever kind of immorality you can think of: sexual immorality, drunkenness, illicit drug use, rape, murder, theft, and all such behaviors – worldliness is at its root.

Worldliness is the source of liberalism. Men are not content with that which God has ordained and authorized. It cares more for things pertaining to this world and selfish desires than for that which pleases and glorifies God; thus, worldly people run beyond His Word in an expression of worldliness.

At the same time, worldliness is the source of legalism, wherein one makes his own laws and says, "This is the way it's going to be," regardless of what freedoms God has granted. The legalist says that, because of his worldly desire to have his own way, his way is the way it must be – even though God has not so decreed.

Worldliness is the source of false doctrines on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. These errors represent efforts to conform to the practices of the world, to the thoughts and philosophies of the world, and to the desires of the world, rather than to the Word of God. They cause people inside and outside the church to go astray on this subject.

Worldliness is the source of stinginess and selfishness among those who are in the kingdom of God. Those who seek material things and seek to hold onto them, or who spend all that they have on things that are material and physical in nature and that will perish with the using, rather than generously supporting the progress of the Gospel of Christ – such are

worldly people. If space allowed, we could demonstrate that worldliness is involved in every other conceivable evil in any individual or congregation.

Why is Worldliness so Prevalent?

Why is worldliness so often seen in Christians? Perhaps it is because of a failure to honor the nature of the church of the Lord – that we are a called-out people, a separate people, a dedicated, devoted-to-God people.

Worldliness is a great problem because of the failure to love God supremely. If we love God as we ought, we cannot love the world. John made that clear in the text we noted earlier. If we love the world, the love of the Father is not in us.

By our failure to preach the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:20, 26), worldliness has invaded the church and is running rampant in it. Even in some places where the Gospel has been faithfully and fully preached, the ears of many are dull to it, and worldliness will always overcome such individuals. For failure to practice church discipline, worldliness is a great problem in the church of the Lord. We must be aware of worldliness, on guard concerning it, and ever be vigilant that we do not succumb to it.

Conclusion

Let me issue two challenges in closing:

First, let us ever strive to be pure in every deed and in every way, every word and thought, including the way we dress. If we do strive for purity before one another and before our pure God, then none of us will dress in any questionable fashion.

Second, let us understand the peril of worldliness. Demas, when he is first introduced to us, is introduced as a faithful and honorable disciple, a loyal companion and co- worker to Paul. But Paul's last words about him were, “Demas forsook me, having loved this present world” (2 Tim. 4:10). Brethren, that could happen to any of us: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). May we not let immodesty and worldliness overtake us.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Southeast Asian Lectures, hosted by the Jurong and Lim Ah Pin Churches of Christ, in Singapore, December 6–10, 1987.]

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