

How Christian Women Should Dress In Church

In my youth I used to attend church in a black suit, a white shirt, cuff links, a very narrow tie. It was a very skinny tie. That was the style some years ago. Then the style for men's ties changed and the skinny tie became a wide tie. Now, I do not care about the style, I just pick a tie from what I already have. The styles of what people once wore to church have changed in most American churches. In fact, the styles cycle. Old styles will repeat again sometime in the future. But for now, many men do not wear a suit or a sports coat to church. In fact, some men wear cutoff pants to church, and a few appear to have just gotten up out of bed.

But the greatest change has occurred in women's styles. It used to be that women always came to church in dresses or skirts. Their dress lengths

go up and down like a roller coaster. Their hairstyles always change, as do their shoes, purses, and jewelry. Some of the styles in women's dress and attire seem new to us, but they are not actually new. King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:9,

... that which has been done is that which will be done.

So there is nothing new under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NASB)

He is correct. In most of the world, women change their clothes, hairstyles, jewelry, and cosmetics for their faces in an effort to be more attractive. A trip back into history reveals that times may have changed, but clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics are recycling like a merry-go-round. The new styles are

often revisions of old styles or products.

For example, ancient history tells us that women's lipstick existed in Sumerian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Grecian, Roman, and Japanese cultures. Some lipsticks were made from henna, fruit, tar, clay rust, and beeswax. We know it existed at the time of Queen Elizabeth I. Reportedly, her face was white and her lips were painted with brightly colored lipstick. In 1885 a French company named Guerlain began to commercially distribute lipstick. Then in the 1900s it exploded into

a major industry offering a wide variety of colors.

Historical documents reveal that women's dress styles are also cyclical. There is even some ancient evidence that Dhaka muslin existed for a very long time. It was a very thin, see-through mate-



rial. It is claimed that Marco Polo referred to it in his book titled, The Travels in A.D. 1298, which means it existed before his travels.

Jewelry existed in antiquity. For example, in Exodus 32:2-3 we are told that women wore gold earrings.

Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. Exodus 32:2-3 (NASB)

Exodus 35:22 says women wore brooches, bracelets, and other gold jewelry. The verse says,

Then all whose hearts moved them, both men and women, came and brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and bracelets, all articles of gold; so did every man who presented an offering of gold to the LORD. Exodus 35:22 (NASB)

Genesis 24:22 also refers to gold bracelets. Ezekiel 16:8-11 reveals that women wore embroidered clothing, sandals of porpoise skin, fine linen and silk, as well as bracelets, necklaces, nose rings, earrings, and crowns.

Song of Solomon 1:10 indicates that women had ornaments in their cheeks. Chapter 4, verse 3 seems to suggest that Solomon's bride may have worn lip coloring, and rouge. Verse 10 refers to some type of perfume. 2 Kings 9:30 and Jeremiah 4:30 also indicate that women painted their eyes. Proverbs 31:22 refers to purple linen garments. Jeremiah 4:30 also refers to scarlet dresses.

Psalm 45:13 refers to a king's daughter having a dress interwoven with gold.

The King's daughter is all glorious within;
Her clothing is interwoven with gold.
Psalm 45:13 (NASB)

It must have looked exquisite. Now it is important to notice that all of these articles and items not only existed in the past but are used today. Solomon was correct when he said there is nothing new under the sun. There is nothing new for us here on planet earth.

Now why do women wear all of these? Jeremiah 4:30 tells us the obvious. Women do this to make themselves appear beautiful—to be attractive. We understand men and women wanting to be attractive to a future wife or husband. We understand men and women wanting to be attractive to other people and not for sexual reasons. We are usually drawn to people we think are beautiful or handsome. So, we fix our hair, put on attractive clothes, and maybe add jewelry so that we have a good appearance.

OUR STUDY — 1 TIMOTHY 2:9-10. But how are we to dress in church? That is the subject of our study today from 1 Timothy 2:9-10. The passage says,

Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 (NASB)

The passage can be outlined in three sections. The first section is “Women’s Proper Worship Attire” (verse 9a, c). The second section is “Women’s Proper Worship Attitude (verse 9b), and the third section is “Women’s Proper Claim to Godliness” (verses 10).

WOMEN’S PROPER WORSHIP ATTIRE (v. 9a, c). We will start with verse 9. This verse is about women’s proper attire in worship. But we will skip the phrase “modestly and discreetly” and discuss it later. Here is the first section. It says,

Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing . . . not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments . . . 1 Timothy 2:9 (NASB)

The word “likewise” in this verse refers back to verse 8. In verse 8 Paul said,

Therefore I want the men in every place to pray . . . 1 Timothy 2:8a (NASB)

The Greek word for “I want” is *boulomai*. It is better understood as a combination of a desire with an implied command. Therefore, the word “likewise” refers us back to Paul’s command about how men are to worship. This helps us understand that Paul is going to tell women how they are to conduct themselves during the church service or in a Bible study.

Adorn Themselves. This helps us understand that Paul was giving a command when he said, “I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing.” The Greek word for “adorn” is *kosmeo*. From this word we get the English word “cosmetics.” But this word does not mean “cosmetics.” The word “is a technical military term for the placing of a host or the ordering of combatants.”¹ The word generally means “to bring to

1. Hermann Sasse, “Κοσμέω, Κόσμος, Κόσμιος, Κοσμικός,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 867.

order.” Paul is not just telling women how to conduct themselves during a worship service in the church, but also in a general sense. Now it is important to notice that what follows is not just the teaching of the apostle Paul. It is from our Lord. Therefore, our Lord is commanding women about how to arrange or order their external appearance when they come to worship or are in a Bible study.

Proper Clothing. Next, Paul says that women are to arrange or order themselves by having “proper clothing.” The Greek word for “proper” is *kosmios*. The word is best understood as a combination of “self-controlled” and “honorable.”² It is a picture of someone who is honorable because of their self-controlled behavior.

The next word that Paul uses is “clothing.” The Greek word is *katastole*. It refers to both the clothing and the behavior of the individual. That is, the clothing reflects the individual’s conduct. Her character determines her behavior and affects the clothes she chooses to wear.

If we combine “proper” and “clothing” we have a woman who is dignified or honorable in her clothes, and her behavior matches how she dresses. She is an example of a woman who is controlled and not wild, careless, or frivolous. If she is not a habitually lazy woman, then her clothes will reveal she is not lazy. Edmond Hiebert offers this helpful comment about Paul’s command.

... Say what some will about Paul, he here states that women are to dress in good taste when they arrive to attend church. ... Slovenliness in dress and appearance is unbecoming a Christian woman.³

We should add quickly, the same is true for men.

Costly Jewelry. Then Paul talks about women’s hair and jewelry. He has already said,

Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing...

Now he adds,

... not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments ...

1 Timothy 2:9 (NASB)

The Greek word for “braided hair” is *plegma*. It refers to hair that has been intertwined, woven, or braided. Paul is not saying that a woman must have straight and unkept hair. He is not saying women cannot style their hair. Paul is referring to elaborate hairstyles and to very expensive jewelry. He is referring to styles that are designed to attract attention and to flaunt wealth.

The Greek words for “gold,” “pearls,” and “costly garments” have the same meaning as the English words. Notice his emphasis on expensive jewelry. He is not saying that women cannot wear rings, earrings, brooches, and other jewelry. Paul is describing very costly and elaborate hairstyles, jewelry, and garments. Now we have already learned that women wore a wide variety of jewelry in the Old Testament. This helps us understand that Paul is condemning hairstyles, jewelry, and clothing that draws inappropriate attention to women from men and even from other women. But, this does not mean that wives cannot wear seductive clothing for their husbands in privacy. The point is that women can have braided hair today, wear jewelry, but they should avoid that which draws inappropriate or improper attention to themselves. For even in Isaiah 3:16-24, God condemned women for wearing elaborate and seductive attire. The point is that she must not seek to attract attention.

Maybe a good illustration is that we were once in a church, where many women would buy new clothes to wear on Easter Sunday morning to church. This happened every year. Then on Easter morning the women arrived in their fancy hairstyles, new hats, new clothes, and new shoes. The women looked at each other, and talked about one another’s clothes. The men looked at the women too! It was a fashion show. Easter Sunday for some women was more about new clothes than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is a good illustration of what concerned Paul. The women were attracting attention to themselves. They wanted other women to notice them and hopefully the men.

Philo, an ancient Jewish writer, lived about 20 B.C. to A.D. 50. During that time he wrote a document called, *The Sacri-*

2. Ibid. p 896.

3. D. Edmond Hiebert. *First Timothy*. Moody Press. 1957. p. 58.

fices of Abel and Cain. In this document he describes the dress of prostitutes. Listen for the various types of hairstyles, jewelry, and expensive clothes they wore in his time. Philo wrote,

Accordingly, the one comes to us luxuriously dressed in the guise of a harlot and prostitute, with mincing steps, rolling her eyes about with excessive licentiousness and desire, by which baits she entraps the souls of the young, looking about with a mixture of boldness and impudence, holding up her head, and raising herself above her natural height, fawning and giggling, having the hair of her head dressed with most superfluous elaborateness, having her eyes pencilled, her eyebrows covered over, using incessant warm baths, painted with a fictitious colour, exquisitely dressed with costly garments, richly embroidered, adorned with armlets, and bracelets, and necklaces, and all other ornaments which can be made of gold, and precious stones, and all kinds of female decorations; loosely girdled, breathing of most fragrant perfumes, thinking the whole market her home; a marvel to be seen in the public roads, out of the scarcity of any genuine beauty, pursuing a bastard elegance.⁴

This is an amazing description. Frankly, I was surprised when I read this from Philo. He reveals that women at the time of Christ and the apostles dressed as some women do today, including having their eyes penciled and colored.

The early church father, John Chrysostom (A.D. 347 – 407) was preaching to his congregation from 1 Timothy 2:9-10. Notice what he says about women's attire and makeup.

But what is modest apparel? Such attire covers them completely and decently, and not with superfluous ornaments; for the one is [decent] and the other is not. What? Do you approach God to pray with broided hair and ornaments of gold? Are you come to a [dance]? to a marriage? to a [carnival]? There such [costly things] might have been seasonable: here not one of them is wanted. Thou are to come to pray, to ask pardon for your sins, to plead for your offences, beseeching the Lord, and hoping to render him propitious to you. Why do thou adorn thyself [this way]!
...

And if [Paul] would remove those things which are only the indications of wealth, as gold, and pearls, and costly array; how much more those things which imply studied ornament, as painting, coloring the eyes, a mincing gait, the affected voice, a languishing and wanton look; the exquisite care in putting on the cloak and bodice, the nicely wrought girdle, and the closely-fitted shoes?⁵

What have we learned? Paul's command about a woman's appearance transcends culture. It does not apply just to the culture of Paul's day. It is obvious from our historical sketch that some women have always wanted to be the winner of a beauty contest, even at church. This was true in the Old Testament, during the time of Christ and the apostles, during the era of the early church fathers, and today.

WOMEN'S PROPER WORSHIP ATTITUDE (v. 9b). So, how should a woman dress? We have been given only part of the answer. The two words "modestly and discreetly" give us the other part of the answer. They are found in the middle of verse 9, which says,

Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments . . . 1 Timothy 2:9-10 (NASB)

The Greek word for "modestly" is *aidos*. It has a moral sense. In this verse, it has a sense of shame if the woman violates the Lord's command that has been given here. The Greek for "discreetly" is *sophrosyne*. It refers to "moderation," or "self-control." The word can also be defined as "to rein in all sexual passions." This means that a woman must control her own sexual desires to attract men when at church or in a Bible study. The point is, failure to act modestly results in shame. Failure to be discreet reveals a lack of personal self-control. In addition, she must avoid stirring the sexual passions of men. She must avoid being a stumbling block (Matthew 18:7-8). Imagine, a man trying to worship God and learn the Word of God with an immodest and overtly sexy woman nearby. They will not be able to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

But it is okay for a wife to dress seductively for her husband

4. Philo. The Sacrifices of Abel and Cain. V. 21. C. D. Yonge. The Works of Philo. Hendrickson Publishers.193. p. 96.

5. John Chrysostom. Homily VIII. Homilies on Timothy (1 Timothy 2:8-10). Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Hendricksen. 1995, p 433.

at home, just as Solomon's wife did (Song of Solomon 1:10-11; 4:1, 4, 11). It may be okay to dress up for a restaurant, the music hall, or a wedding with jewelry and expensive clothes. It all depends upon the situation and the heart attitude of the woman. But it should always be with modesty and the correct heart-attitude.

WOMEN'S PROPER CLAIM TO GODLINESS (v. 10). Verse 10 adds to the command in verse 9. It says a woman must order or arrange herself with modesty and discreetly,

... by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. 1 Timothy 2:10 (NASB)

That is, she is to give herself to good works, and not to becoming the stunning sensation at church.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee made this great statement in his commentary on this passage,

I want to make it clear that I feel that a woman should dress as nicely as she possibly can. There is nothing wrong with a woman dressing in a way that is appealing to her husband (or, if she is single, to a man). I have made this statement before, and one lady wrote me in reaction to it:

I never thought I'd see the day when I would feel a need to take you to task over anything. Usually I agree with you on everything that you say. But on Friday morning in your last study on Proverbs, I guess you hit a raw nerve. You were admonishing young men on choosing a wife, and you said, "First of all, make sure she's a Christian." I agree with that. Then you said, "And if possible, choose a pretty one." Really, Dr. McGee, do you think that's quite fair? After all, there are far more plain, ordinary-looking girls and women than really pretty ones, and pray tell, where would they be if men chose only pretty ones? I happen to be one of those plain, ordinary-looking women, and I'm so glad my husband didn't choose one of the pretty ones, or I'd have missed out on twenty-five years of happy married life. I'm not really angry with you. How could I be when you've taught me so much of the deep truths of God's Word? I just wanted you to know that I think you ought to say a little something for us women whom the Lord did not choose to bless with physical beauty.

I want to say something to that woman and to others: Have you ever stopped to realize that when your husband fell in love with you he thought you were beautiful? Yes, he did. I shall never forget the night that I met my wife. It was a summer night in Texas, and we were invited to the home of mutual friends for dinner. Frankly, these friends were trying to bring us together. I didn't want to go because I had an engagement in Fort Worth that night. My wife didn't want to go because she was going with another fellow! But that night when I saw her - I never shall forget her dark hair, her brown eyes-there in the candlelight. I looked at her, and I fell in love with her. I proposed to her on our second date, and the reason I didn't propose on that first date was that I didn't want her to think I was in a hurry!

I have a notion that your husband thought you were beautiful also, and there is nothing wrong in dressing in a way to be attractive to your husband. But when you go to God in prayer, you do not need that outward adornment. You need the inward adornment.⁶

And John MacArthur makes this helpful comment,

Women are to exercise control so that neither their passions nor anyone's are excited.⁷

CONCLUSION. We must remember what the apostle Peter wrote to women in 1 Peter 3:3-4. He said,

Your adornment must not be merely external — braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. 1 Peter 3:3-4 (NASB)

So our Lord wants women to dress in good taste as becomes a godly woman. She is to give herself to good works and adorn herself on the inside with a gentle and quiet spirit. That is pre-

6. J. Vernon McGee. 1 Corinthians through Revelation. Thru the Bible. Thomas Nelson Publishing. 1983. V. pp 439-440.

7. John MacArthur. 1 Timothy. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Press. 1995. p. 82.

cious in the sight of God.

Before concluding, we should remember that God has given older women a very important and wonderful responsibility. Titus 2:3 says older women are to teach the younger women how to live in a righteous manner. It says,

Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. Titus 2:3-5 (NASB)

The word “pure” captures what has been taught in this study. This is how women can honor the word of God.