



Mixed-messages of MODESTY

BY RACHEL RAMER

During my sixth grade year, when the orchestra director asked me to play a viola solo for the elementary school student body, I knew what I would wear. My mother had purchased a red and white plaid dress with a flared skirt; a sailor collar; and a broad, floppy, blue tie—my favorite dress. The skirt reached to about two inches above my knees when I stood, but spread out over them when I sat. It was a modest outfit in the midst of the mini-skirt craze of the 1970s.

The morning of the performance, my mother came into my room and insisted that I wear something else. We had begun attending a more conservative church and, feeling pressure to enforce a more strict standard of modesty, she picked out another dress, one that I was required to wear to church. It reached below my knees.

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I was mortified. I reminded her that this was the day of my solo. I would be on stage in front of the entire school. Surely she would not require it on this particular day.

I pled with her. I cried. A few hours later I stood on stage in front of the assembly, tucked my viola under my chin next to the floppy blue tie and sailor collar, and played a song that I now cannot recall.

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I had petitioned for just one day of grace, but my mother dropped the issue entirely, leaving my sister and me to fight our own dress battles with a strict father, in a tug-of-war between church and society—not to mention the constant tussle with our own consciences. On the surface, it appears that my mom capitulated. I realize now that when she saw my reaction, she weighed the fragile days of my pre-adoles-

cence against a confused definition of immodesty. She saw humiliation in front of my peers as a greater threat to me than any speculated danger related to visible knees.

Ironically, in a few short years I adopted the below-the-knee standard for myself, the inner pressures of guilt and shame from our new church too strong to deny. Much later I would work my way out of the emotional abyss of legalism

while maintaining a relatively high standard of modesty.

Some would have counseled my mom to follow the dictates of the church instead of the self-serving, social concerns of an immature daughter. Yet, she instinctively knew that this was about more than a few inches of cloth, and that it had little to do with modesty. This was a clash of cultural expectations colliding in the life of a twelve-year-old girl.

Relative or Absolute?

We need to travel back in time only a few hundred years, or across the globe a few hundred miles, to find that dress standards vary even among modesty-conscious people. In the 1940s, C.S. Lewis must have shocked his British readers by announcing:

The Christian rule of chastity must

not be confused with the social rule of “modesty” (in one sense of that word: i.e. propriety, or decency). The social rule of propriety lays down how much of the human body should be displayed and what subjects can be

is a cultural commentary borne on the backs of little girls who had no choice.”

For many, church-generated propriety and modesty standards are less about listening to

GRACEFUL and EMBARRASSING TO GODLY MEN EVERYWHERE” (Text format in original).³

Shame and fear often provide the foundation for modesty teachings. Hillary McFarland, author of *Quivering Daughters*, shares the message she received growing up:

Lust was a huge issue talked about frequently, which is why modesty is important because secretly, every man wants to rape a woman (not in those words, but the message was clear). And as we (I) were scrutinized, that in and of itself became a violation. I wrote in my journal something to the effect of: it seems like every time my parents look at me they are examining me completely and I just want to become invisible!⁴

While immodest apparel focuses attention on women as sexual objects, obsessive teaching on dress codes creates the same focus. Preachers and other spiritual leaders reinforce the destructive message that women and girls are so distracting sexually that they must be covered up beyond cultural sensibilities.

The deeper qualities of women—intelligence, gifts, skills, creativity and contribution to society—take a back seat to the idea that they are sexual stumbling blocks to men. This concept implies that all women are dangerous, and it is not too far removed from the wearing of the scarlet letter “A,” despite the absence of the accompanying sin

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referred to, and in what words, according to the customs of a given social circle. Thus, while the rule of chastity is the same for all Christians at all times, the rule of propriety changes. A girl in the Pacific islands wearing hardly any clothes and a Victorian lady completely covered in clothes might both be equally “modest,” proper, and decent, according to the standards of their own societies; and both, for all we can tell by their dress, might be equally chaste (or equally unchaste).¹

The larger our sense of awareness of other cultures, the more we understand that modesty is a cultural interpretation of chastity. Religious communities often condemn the whims of culture, but lose sight of the fact that the standards they set are also cultural expressions. Women in particular feel pressure to conform to detailed, set requirements, even though these restrictions are either misapplied

God, and more about following the culture within a sub-group or denomination. Modesty is relative to culture, yet many groups use absolute standards of accepted fashion to define modesty. Motivated by concern for relativism, churches often adopt rules for attire that they enforce as fixed indicators for godliness.

For women, the modesty debate is no small matter. Around the world, women face this issue even to the point that violating modesty standards could cost them their standing in a community, their marriages—or even their lives. Recently, in Saudi Arabia, one Muslim cleric announced that women should wear veils that expose only one eye. The reason for a standard that even impairs their vision? Two eyes tempt them to be seductive with the use of eye make-up.²

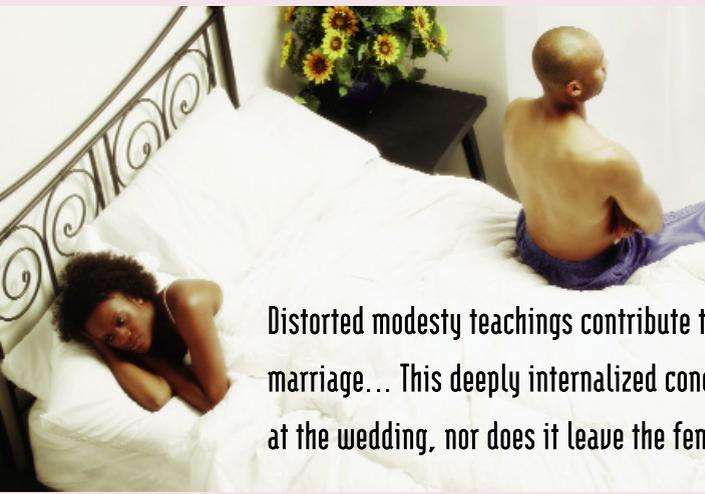
Even Christian leaders enforce minute modesty rules by referring to extremes in a secular society to question the motives of Christian women. Note this statement found

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Scripture or not found in Scripture at all. Rick Presley, co-founder of www.ill-legalism.com, watched his little sister struggle with a theology that forbade females from wearing slacks even in the frigid winters of Northern Michigan. He stated, “It

on The Elijah Project website: “Women today, even Church women, are absolutely OBSESSED with DISPLAYING THEMSELVES... IT IS SHAMEFUL and DIS-





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of adultery—a letter worn by Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* while the pastor, equally guilty, bore no public shame.

Inadvertently, the focus on female modesty and guilt labels men as victims of their own sexual impulses. It tends to absolve men of responsibility if they lust after or commit sexual crimes against women. This “blame the victim” argument appears in religious tracts claiming that rape and premarital sex are the result of improperly dressed women. Yet problems of incest and premarital sex occur among groups such as the modestly dressed Amish.

In the Image of a Creative God

Distorted teaching about modesty also advances the subtle message that a proper Christian woman should avoid physical beauty and shun the creative aspects of her personality, expressed through clothing or adornment.

I Peter 3:3-4 is the often quoted scripture about female modesty: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.” Legalists often interpret this to mean that women should have little interest in outward beauty—even to the point that creativity should be abandoned.

McFarland explains:

I was quite an accomplished seamstress and made children’s clothes

that won grand prizes at local fairs, and I even sold one item for \$250 at a 4-H auction. My dream was to be a “fashion designer.”

However, my mother was in despair because, “that is just SO WORLDLY!” I made a case that Jesus loves those in the fashion industry and could use someone who loves him to be a light to the world. However, my parents felt that it was unnecessary, impractical, worldly, ungodly...etc.⁵

McFarland then adds insight into how deep this rejection of creativity can reach: *What follows with this—and everything like it—joy seeps out and what is left becomes a chore or obligation.⁶*

Are not women made in the image of a creative, beauty-loving God? Instead of an either/or ap-

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proach, Peter addressed priorities. Rather than making outward beauty a top priority, women (and men) should highlight inner qualities. Issues of beauty should not be ignored or shunned in order to be godly. Rather, “godliness” embraces creative expression. This is one way we reflect God’s image.

Emotional Confusion

How harmful are the mixed messages of modesty teachings? They create emotional confusion for females.

On the one hand, the church teaches females to be submissive and compliant to male authority and to be highly influenced by male opinion. On the other hand, the church expects females to oppose male sexual advances—advances the women themselves

somehow provoke. Voices of authority mix this disapproval about female sexuality with messages of imbalanced responsibility for sexual sins.

Distorted teachings about modesty contribute to sexual difficulty in marriage. Men are ready for sexual activity and expect sexual freedom within marriage. Women struggle to overcome the messages of shame and guilt placed on them simply for being sexual creatures. This deeply internalized conditioning does not evaporate at the wedding, nor does it leave the female personality unharmed.

Is modesty an important issue for the church to address? Most certainly. Yet legalistic standards of modesty can do more harm than good. Instead of reacting to the culture around us, we can recognize culture as a valid component to Christian expression.

What should our standards for modesty be? That depends. We must ask ourselves: *When do the standards help and when do they harm?* If they treat women as stumbling blocks, they diminish

women and men alike. If their rigidity elevates religious legalism, they are misguided.

If, on the other hand, standards allow us to properly prioritize our lives, with sexuality as a God-given component but not the main focus, they are standards that promote creative godliness and healthy relationships. □

1. Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1943, p. 88.

2. “Saudi Cleric Favours One-eye Veil” BBC NEWS posted October 3, 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

3. Tuberville, T.L., “Modesty: Just How Should the Church Define it?” The Elijah Project. <http://www.elijahproject.net/>

4. <http://www.quiveringdaughters.com/>

5. *ibid*

6. *ibid*

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