Modest Dress for Women
Scripture: 1 Timothy 2
Code: BQ102913

The Appearance of Women

Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing … not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; (2:9a, c)

Likewise refers to verse 8, and marks the transition to a new aspect within the same overall subject (cf.. 3:8, 11). Having discussed the conduct of men in the gathering of the church, he now turns to that of women.

The verb in this sentence must be supplied from verse 8. As noted in the discussion of that verse, **want** is from *boulomai,* and could be translated “I command,” or “I purpose.” Paul is not expressing his opinion or giving advice. His words carry divine authority. Men are commanded to pray and **likewise** women are mandated to adorn themselves in a manner fitting worship of God.

Adorn is from *kosmeo,* from which the English word “cosmetic” derives. It means “to arrange,” “to put in order,” or “to make ready.” A woman must arrange herself appropriately to join God’s people as they worship. Part of that important preparation involves the outside, the wearing of **proper clothing. Proper** translates *kosmio,* which, like *kosmeo,* derives from the noun *kosmos. Kosmos* is often translated “world,” but it really means “order,” or “system.” It is the antonym of “chaos.” *Katastole* (**clothing**) encompasses not only the clothing itself, but also the look—the whole demeanor. Women are to come to the corporate worship ready to face the Lord. They must not come in slovenly disarray or personal display because of an unbecoming wardrobe or demeanor. There is a place for lovely clothes that reflect the humble grace of a woman, as evidenced in Proverbs 31:22, “Her clothing is fine linen and purple.” Proper adornment on the outside reflects a properly adorned heart.

From the general principle in the first part of verse 9, Paul moves to specifics in the latter part of the verse. In so doing, he hints at some of the practices that were causing confusion in the assembly. He starts with commenting about **braided hair,** a term that can generally mean “hair styles.” His point is not that women should be indifferent to their hair. That would contradict what he had just said about careful preparation to put oneself in order. Paul’s intent is not to forbid certain kinds of hairdos, as if some reflected a more worshipful attitude than others. He is confronting any gaudy, ostentatious hairdo that would distract attention from the Lord and the purposes that are holy. Women in that culture often wove **gold, pearls,** or other jewelry through their hairdos to call attention to themselves

and their wealth or beauty.

There is nothing wrong with owning jewelry. Solomon's bride in Song of Solomon wore gold and silver jewelry (Song 1:10–11; 4:9), as did Rebekah (Gen. 24:53). There is an appropriate time and place for that, as affirmed by the words of Isaiah 61:10: "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." But jewelry was (And is) often used as a way of flaunting a woman's wealth or calling attention to herself in an unwholesome way. It is that preoccupation which Paul forbids in the place of worship.

When a woman dresses for the worship service to attract attention to herself, she has violated the purpose of worship (cf.. 1 Peter 3:3–4). The fourth-century church father John Chrysostom wrote,

And what then is modest apparel? Such as 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 broidered hair and ornaments of gold? Are you come to a ball? to a marriage feast? to a carnival? There such costly things might have been seasonable: here not one of them is wanted. You are 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. Away with such hypocrisy! (Cited in Alfred Plummer, "The Pastoral Epistles," in *The Expositor's Bible,* ed. W. Robertson Nicoll [New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1903], 101)

Another way women in Paul's day flaunted their wealth and drew attention to themselves was by wearing **costly garments.** The expensive dresses worn by wealthy women could cost up to 7,000 denarii. Pliny the Elder, a first-century Roman historian, described a dress of Lollia Paulina, wife of the Emperor Caligula, which was worth several hundred thousand dollars by today's standards (*Natural History* 9.58). Dresses of the common women could cost as much as 500–800 denarii. To put that into perspective, the average daily wage of a common laborer was one denarius. Because of the extreme expense, most women probably owned only two or three nice dresses in their lives. For a wealthy woman to enter the worship service wearing an expensive dress would shift the focus of attention to her. It could also stir up envy on the part of the poorer women (Or their husbands).

Such showy displays were criticized even by nonChristian writers. In his sixth satire, the first-century Roman poet Juvenal wrote,

There is nothing that a woman will not permit herself to do, nothing that she deems shameful, and when she encircles her neck with green emeralds and fastens huge pearls to her elongated ears, so important is the business of beautification; so numerous are the tiers and stories piled one another on her head! In the meantime she pays no attention to her husband!

In his work *The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel,* the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo described a prostitute. He portrayed her as wearing many gold chains and bracelets, with her hair done up in elaborate and gaudy braids. Her eyes were marked with pencil lines, her eyebrows smothered in paint. She wore expensive clothes embroidered lavishly with flowers.

The wearing of expensive clothes and jewelry that drew attention away from the Lord was obviously inappropriate for women in the church. They were supposed to be demonstrating humble godliness, not appearing like prostitutes or showy pagan women. To come to church so attired was at best a distraction from honoring God, and at worst an attempt to seduce the men of the church.

How does a woman discern the sometimes fine line between proper dress and dressing to be the center of attention? The answer starts in the intent of the heart. A woman should examine her motives and goals for the way she dresses. Is her intent to show the grace and beauty of womanhood? Is it to show her love and devotion to her husband and his goodness to her? Is it to reveal a humble heart devoted to worshiping God? Or is it to call attention to herself, and flaunt her wealth and beauty? Or worse, to attempt to allure men sexually? A woman who focuses on worshiping God will consider carefully how she is dressed, because her heart will dictate her wardrobe and appearance.

The Attitude of Women

modestly and discreetly, (2:9a)

These two attitudes are to characterize a woman's approach to her appearance in worship. *Aidos* (**modestly**) appears only here in the New Testament. It refers to modesty mixed with humility. At its core is the idea of shame (cf.. the Authorized Version's translation "shamefacedness"). A godly woman would be ashamed and feel guilt if she distracted someone from worshiping God, or contributed to someone's lustful thought. A woman characterized by this attitude will dress so as not to be the source of any temptation. The word also has the connotation of rejecting anything dishonorable to God. Some would even suggest the meaning of the term as grief over a sense of sin. A godly woman hates sin so much that she would avoid anything that would engender sin in anyone. This is certainly consistent with the words of our Lord, who said,

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! … See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 18:6–7, 10)

Better to be dead than lead another believer into sin!

The basic sense of *sophrosunes* (**discreetly**) is self–control, especially over sexual passions. It, too, is a rare word, appearing twice in this passage (cf.. 2:15), and in Acts 26:25. The Greeks valued this virtue highly. Euripides called it “the fairest gift of the gods” (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 4:224). Plato, in *The Republic,* called it one of the four cardinal virtues. Women are to exercise control so that neither their passions nor anyone else’s are excited.

The Testimony of Women

but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness. (2:10)

Those women who profess godliness should support that testimony with their demeanor and appearance. Beyond those areas, they are to support it by being adorned **by means of good works.** *Agathon* (**good**) refers to **works** that are genuinely good, not merely good in appearance. That **befits women making a claim to godliness. Making a claim** is from *epangello,* which means “to make a public announcement.” **Good works** must mark Christian women, who by virtue of their profession of love to Jesus Christ have publicly committed themselves to pursuing **godliness. Godliness** translates *theosebeia,* which refers to reverence to God. To affirm that you are a Christian is to claim to love, worship, honor, and fear the Lord. A woman cannot claim to fear God and yet disregard what His Word says about her behavior. She cannot contradict God’s design for her in the church and yet claim to love Him.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2014 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).