The Lost Virtue of Modesty

I don’t know if modest is hottest, but I do know that modesty is biblical.

It is one of the marks of the confusion of our age that so many teenagers and young adults are more ashamed to dress with modest reserve than to very nearly undress entirely. Even after we give full throat to the necessary caveats—being pretty (or handsome) is not a sin, working to improve your appearance does not have to be vanity, the line between modest and immodest is not always black and white—we are still left with the undeniable biblical fact that God considers modesty a virtue and its opposite a vice.

Here are five biblical reasons Christians should embrace modesty as a God-designed, God-desired good thing.

1. Modesty protects what is intimate. There is a certain strand of feminism which says women should be proud of their sexual prowess and that any insistence they cover up what they don’t feel like covering up only serves to reinforce patriarchal notions that men have the right to determine what women do with their bodies. But the Bible’s call to modesty is not based on the supposed naughtiness of the female form. God’s good command to cover up is not meant to punish, but to protect. As Wendy Shalit writes, “The pressure on girls today to take sexy selfies comes out of a culture that routinely equates modesty with shame, instead of recognizing it for what it really is: an impulse that protects what is precious and intimate.” The common refrain of the bride—“do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” (Song of Solomon 2:7)—is a call from one woman to a group of single women to save sexual arousal and sexual activity for its proper time, with the proper person, in the proper place.

2. Modesty accepts that our bodies also live in community. What does that mean? It means that while it sounds nice to say, “It’s my body. If I want to let it all hang out, that’s my business.” This is to forget that our bodies exists in a wider network of relationships, just like our speech does, and our actions, our will, and our desires. How we dress is not determined by how others wished we would dress. And yet, it would be sub-Christian to act as if the spiritual state of those around us was inconsequential.

Before going any further, let me state this as clearly as possible: men are responsible for their adultery, for their fornication, for their pornographic viewing, for their lust, and for their (heaven forbid) sexual assault, regardless of how a woman dresses. The Bible does not enjoin modesty on either sex because the opposite sex is simply incapable of keeping its pants on and its thoughts in check. Listen men: if Potiphar’s wife were to barge in and dance a bare-bellied jig on your kitchen table and strip you down to your birthday suit, you would still not be excused in committing adultery with her. The absence of modesty in one party does not justify the absence of restraint in another.

Having said all that, does not the law of love suggest that we should want to avoid enticing others into sin? The phrase “with lustful intent” in Matthew 5:28 is translated by some scholars (D.A. Carson among them): “so as to get her lust.” The meaning, then, instead of being about lust in the man’s heart, would be about the man wanting to get a woman to lust after him. Whether one accepts this minority position or not, it’s still a fair application to think that Jesus’ statement forbids us from having a heart attitude that lusts and a heart attitude that wants to be lusted after. Some people want to see pornography and others want to be pornography. Maybe not in a literal sense, but there are men and women...
who crave the power, the attention, and the status that comes from being noticed and sought after. This entices others to sin and is in itself sinful.

3. Modesty operates with the Bible’s negative assessment of public nudity post-Fall. From Adam and Eve scrambling for fig leaves (Gen. 3:10), to the dishonorable nakedness of Noah (Gen. 9:21), to the embarrassingly exposed buttocks of David’s men (2 Sam. 10:4), the Bible knows we inhabit a fallen world in which certain aspects of our bodily selves are meant to be hidden. Indeed, this is precisely what Paul presumes when he speaks of “our unpresentable parts” which must be “treated with greater modesty” (1 Cor. 12:23). There’s a reason momma called them private parts.

4. Modesty embraces the strong biblical admonition to refrain from sensuality. Sensuality (Gk: aselgeia) is a distinguishing characteristic of the flesh and one of the marks of the pagan world (Gal. 5:19; Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:21; 2 Pet. 2:2, 18). Does the word give us exact instructions on where good taste trips over into sensuality—how long skirts can be, what sort of bathing suit to wear, or whether beefy men need to run around shirtless when it’s 60 degrees in Michigan? No. But surely we can agree that it is not uncommon for men and women to dress in ways which only add to the look and feel of our culture’s ubiquitous sensuality. If the word aselgeia suggests sexual excess (TDNT), we would do well to consider whether the desire behind our deportment is to starve this sensual beast or to sate it.

5. Modesty demonstrates to others that we have more important things to offer than good looks and sex appeal. The point of 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3-4 is not an absolute prohibition against trying to look nice. The prohibition is against trying so very hard to look good in all the ways that are so relatively unimportant. The question asked of women in these verses—and it certainly applies to men as well—is this: will you grab people’s attention with hair and jewelry and sexy clothes or will your presence in the room be unmistakable because of your Christlike character? Immodest dress tells the world, “I’m not sure I have anything more to offer than this. What you see is really all you get.”

Let me state the obvious: the Bible has no pictures. There is no inspired how-to manual for getting dressed in the morning. There are matters of culture, conscience, and context which surely come into place. I have no checklist to check off before you head out the door.

But if the Bible is to be believed, this whole business of modesty is not irrelevant to Christian discipleship. Our bodies have been bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body (1 Cor. 6:20). Which means we don’t show everyone everything we might think is worth seeing. And it means we won’t be embarrassed to keep most private those things that are most precious. Shame is a powerful category, in the Bible and in our own day. The key is knowing what things we should actually be ashamed of.