

Modesty, Misogyny, and #metoo: A Biblical Exploration
of Modesty and Why it Matters Today
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This paper will argue modesty is an important theological concept that should be affirmed and embraced by Christians despite current challenges against it. The paper will survey arguments against modesty, explore biblical passages related to modesty to clarify the concept, respond to arguments undermining modesty, and explain the scriptural significance of pursuing modesty. My primary conclusion is that based on a Scriptural understanding of modesty, believers (both men and women) should evaluate their self-presentation by 1) what it may communicate in the particular context, 2) how it aligns or does not align with Christian virtue, godliness, and right relationship to others and God, and 3) how it may affect an unbeliever's receptiveness to the gospel.

Current Attitudes Towards Modesty and Factors that Are Undermining Modesty

Objections to Christian Teachings Associated with "Evangelical Purity Culture"

- According to Rachel Joy Welcher, 'evangelical purity culture' is associated with "a movement that utilized pledges, books, and events to promote sexual abstinence outside of marriage"¹ which fostered "the idolization of virginity," pitched "marriage and sex as the reward for chastity," stereotyped "men as lust machines," and taught that women are "responsible for the purity of men."²
- In relation to modesty, women and girls are "taught to be aware of how their actions, glances, and dress could inspire male lust"³ and to take care to avoid being "stumbling blocks" to men by dressing in ways that might inspire such lust.
- Critics of purity culture teachings argue:
 - PC teachings often overemphasize women's clothing and self-presentation and rarely address that of men.
 - The suggestion that women and girls can be "stumbling blocks" (based on Rom 14 and 1 Cor 8) objectifies women and girls, blames them for men's sinful and abusive actions, and teaches them that their bodies are dishonorable or evil.
 - Rather than women and girls covering more of their bodies, men should learn to treat women and girls with respect, control their own thoughts, desires, and actions, and not objectify women and girls' bodies.
 - PC depicts men as having nearly uncontrollable sexual desires that are considered natural and are attributed to the way God designed men and that it places a burden on women to keep men's impulses under control based on the assumption that if women dress modestly, men will have less temptation.
 - PC depicts women as being uninterested in sex or having a much lower, more readily controlled sex drive than men, which trivializes, overlooks, or ignores women's struggles with sexual temptation.

¹ Rachel Joy Welcher, *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality* (IVP, 2020), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

- PC teachings on modesty can result in women internalizing the idea that their bodies cause others to sin, resulting in women believing that their bodies are dangerous and evil and that there is something intrinsically wicked about being female if an essential and immutable element of their being (i.e., their gendered body) is a cause for others' sin.

Expressive Individualism and Feminist Empowerment

- Expressive individualism and feminist empowerment are powerful and pervasive ideologies. Carl Trueman describes expressive individualism as finding “meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires”⁴ and asserts that “the expressive individual . . . grants his own personal preferences the status of universal moral imperatives.”⁵
- To be authentic and true to themselves, women and girls should be allowed to express themselves as they wish without regard to others' opinions or moral struggles.
- These ideas are often coupled with feminist empowerment that insists that women should have the freedom to express their authentic selves as they see fit, and such expression is essential to women being empowered.
- Calls for modest clothing are oppressive and misogynistic because they restrict women's authentic self-expression.

The Problem of Defining Modesty

- There is no consensus on what clothing counts as modest or immodest, and if modesty cannot be defined, it cannot be assessed, much less achieved.
- Paired with expressive individualism and feminist empowerment, calls for modesty may be viewed as bigoted, because modesty is “in the eye of the beholder” and one person's standards for modesty should not be imposed on anyone who defines it differently.

A Survey of Biblical Passages Related to Modesty

Given the pervasiveness of current objections against modesty, the concept warrants further investigation for believers to know how to understand what biblical modesty is and how to present themselves modestly. Four key passages frequently cited in relation to modesty are 1 Timothy 2:8-15, 1 Peter 3:1-6, and the two stumbling block passages, Romans 14-15:7 and 1 Corinthians 8:4-13.

The Concept of Modesty 1 Timothy 2:8-15

⁸I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹likewise also that *women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire,* ¹⁰but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. ¹¹Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived

⁴ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they *continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.* (1 Tm 2:8-15)⁶

First Timothy 2:8-15 is in the context of Paul’s instructions to Timothy for prayer. Paul urges Timothy to pray for all men (2:1) so that they may live a quiet, peaceable, godly, reverent life (2:2) because God desires all men to know the truth of the gospel (2:4). Therefore, Paul instructs that men ought to pray in a certain way (2:8) and women should dress with modesty and propriety (2:9), pursue godliness, do good works (2:10), relate to men’s leadership in the church appropriately (2:11-14), and persevere in faith, love, holiness, and self-control.

- Αἰδώς is the term in 1 Timothy 2:9 that is translated ‘modesty.’ The BDAG identifies αἰδώς as modesty, reverence, or respect and describes it as expressing “the opposite of considering or treating something in a common or ordinary manner; a respect for convention.”⁷ Modesty is presented as desirable along with respectable apparel, self-control, appropriateness, godliness, and good works and is contrasted with braided hair and expensive jewelry and clothing.
- In the first century Ephesian context, πλέγμα, ‘braided hair’, denoted extravagant hairstyles associated with wealth⁸ and sexual immorality.⁹
- Paired with the admonitions in close proximity to the instruction to present oneself modestly, ‘modesty’ gives the sense of propriety as opposed to licentiousness or ostentatiousness—one factor being of a sexual nature and the other of inappropriate displays of wealth or status.
- Paul has a concern that women’s self-presentation and behavior honor God and point people to the truth of the gospel. He gives an admonition that women should dress in a manner consistent with moderation and propriety. Instead of drawing attention to themselves through their appearance—whether in an ostentatious display of wealth or in a sexually suggestive or provocative manner—they should pursue godliness, do good works, relate to men’s leadership in the church appropriately, and persevere in faith, love, holiness, and self-control.

The Concept of Modesty in 1 Peter 3:1-6

¹ Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ² when they see your respectful and pure conduct. ³ Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— ⁴ but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. ⁵ For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, ⁶ as Sarah obeyed

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

⁷ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 24.

⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, Third edition. (Crossway, 2016), 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53. Some scholars also believe it was related to the Artemis cult. See Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 148.

Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. (1 Pt 3:1-6)

First Peter 3:1-6 is in the context of instructions to persecuted Christians in Asia Minor for living in such a way that others will see the believer's good deeds and glorify God (2:12). Preceding sections address submission to government (2:13-17) and submission of slaves to masters (2:18-25). It is immediately followed by an admonition to husbands to honor and respect their wives, with the rationale that men and women are heirs of God's kingdom together (3:7). Peter's subsequent focus is how believers should endure suffering (3:8-5:14), which is the overarching concern of the entire letter.

- Thus, Peter's instructions regarding the self-presentation of women are tied to living a virtuous life that points others to Christ. Like Paul, Peter enjoins women to avoid elaborate hair braiding and ostentatious, excessively expensive, or seductive clothing and jewelry¹⁰ and similarly directs them instead to pursue virtuous character and behavior: "respectful and pure conduct," "a gentle and quiet spirit," proper interactions with their husbands, good works, and courage.
- "Respectful and pure conduct" encompasses more than moral and sexual purity and "is used here in the broader sense of good, sincere, honest, acceptable behavior."¹¹
- Peter's call for women to have a "gentle and quiet spirit" is frequently misunderstood to be promoting 'gentle' and 'quiet' *mannerisms*; however, the terms actually carry the idea of *virtue* in the forms of strength, self-control, humbleness, considerateness, calmness (not being easily disturbed or prone to anxiousness), dignity, and strong character.¹²

Based on these two passages, modesty can be understood as having *outward*, *inward*, and *relational* aspects and being *not* primarily sexual in nature. Both Paul and Peter teach that women should dress modestly, emphasizing self-presentation that aligns with virtue, godliness, and right relationship to others and God with a special concern that the gospel message be promoted rather than hindered.

Christian Liberty: Avoiding Causing Others to Stumble

¹As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 153-54.

¹¹ Daniel C. Arichea and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on the First Letter from Peter*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), 89.

¹² David Walls and Max Anders, *I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude*, vol. 11, *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 49; Arichea and Nida, *A Handbook on the First Letter from Peter*, 91.

⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. ²⁰ *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.* ²¹ *It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.* ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Rom 14-15:7)

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. ⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ *Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.* ⁹ *But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.* ¹⁰ *For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?* ¹¹ *And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.* ¹² *Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.* ¹³ *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.* (1 Cor 8:4-13)

The “stumbling block” passages found in Romans 14-15:7 and 1 Corinthians 8:4-13 are often used to admonish women to dress modestly to avoid causing men to stumble into sexual temptation. Critics of purity culture challenge this application because, in context, the passages are related to mature believers causing immature believers to violate their consciences by eating food that they think is sinful, not about inciting lust by dressing immodestly. The purity culture argument, though, is that by dressing immodestly, women entice men to lust and sexual sin, so women should dress modestly to prevent or at least lessen men’s lustful thoughts and behavior.

- Principles of Christian liberty still apply to modesty in certain ways because Christians are obligated to look out for the interests of others before their own (Phil 2:4) and the way one dresses can impact others.
- Romans 14-15:7 and 1 Corinthians 8:4-13 present principles for determining how to interact with other believers who have different views on the morality of certain behaviors.
- Paul instructs:
 - “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (Rom 15:1)
 - “take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Cor 8:9).
 - “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”
- As mature believers are instructed to refrain from eating certain foods if their eating them will encourage a less mature believer to sin against his conscience, believers who see nothing wrong with certain types of clothing should consider refraining from wearing clothes that will exacerbate another believer’s temptation to sin sexually.
- Christians can choose to dress in ways that communicate virtue and to avoid wearing clothing that is likely to elicit sexual thoughts in their cultural context. No one can control another person’s thoughts or actions, but most people know generally what elicits a sexual response in their contexts and can choose to avoid clothes that will draw sexual attention to them.¹³
- Those who teach modesty from these passages must be clear that men bear the full weight of their sin and that women’s and girls’ bodies are not evil, but it is not inappropriate to suggest that believers take each other’s weaknesses into consideration when exercising their own freedom. Of course, the same admonition should be given to men.
- Clothing can also be a “stumbling block” in the sense that it can elicit sinful thoughts that are *not sexual*, including feelings of jealousy, covetousness, pride, inferiority, superiority, partiality, and judgment.
 - Pride and envy contrast with the virtue of Christian love, which “does not envy or boast” and “is not arrogant” (1 Cor 13:4).
 - Treating people differently based on their appearance, especially when it conveys wealth or poverty, is an action explicitly condemned in James 2:1-9.

¹³ Missionaries and people who visit other cultures often take pains to ensure that their clothing and behavior are acceptable in the other culture so as not to offend or cause trouble. Believers should attempt to do the same in their native cultures.

- Such attitudes and actions conflict with Christian virtue, godliness, and right relationship to others and God and can deter others from coming to Christ.

Part of being in a right relationship to other people is seeking their welfare and helping them follow Christ. Believers should consider others' weaknesses, whether sexual or otherwise, when choosing clothing because they should care about others' spiritual and emotional well-being. The choice to set aside personal freedom and preference to present oneself modestly can be motivated by a concern for the good of others and their relationship to God.

The Relationship of Christian Liberty to Expressive Individualism and Women's Empowerment

The concepts of Christian liberty also counter the idea that clothing choices are a means of self-expression that is crucial for women's empowerment. See 1 Corinthians 9:12 and 10:23-24,31. Here again, the good of others, the glory of God, and the furtherance of the gospel are elevated over personal preferences. While our culture promotes expressive individualism and feminist empowerment through self-presentation, the Bible teaches believers should yield their liberties for the sake of the gospel and God's glory and put others first more than seeking their own empowerment through clothing and appearance.

Clothing as a Form of Communication

A survey of biblical passages that describe various types of clothing suggests that clothing is a form of communication that gives different messages in different contexts, some aligned with Christian virtue and others not.

Examples of the significance of clothing in the Bible include clothing that indicates

- sexual availability or unavailability (Gn 38:14-17, 2 Sam 13:18),
 - Gn 38:14-17: Tamar's initial outfit was indicative of her status as a widow, but when Tamar put on clothing that suggested she was a prostitute, Judah readily recognized her clothing as inviting a sexual encounter.
 - 2 Sam 13:18: Tamar the daughter of David wore "a long robe with sleeves" that indicated she was a virgin and the daughter of the king, not open to a sexual encounter.
- special celebrations (Mt 22:11-12),
- social status (Est 5:1),
- allegiance to Yahweh or foreign gods (Nm 15:38-40, Dt 22:12, Zep 1:8),
- solemn occasions (Ex 19:10-11, Est 5:1),
 - Esther wore her "royal robes" when she went to see the king while he was holding court, appropriately signifying her role as well as the seriousness of the occasion and setting.
- roles or duties (Ex 28:40-43),
 - Priests had special garments reserved for their use, including underwear designed to keep others from seeing their genitals as they performed priestly duties.
- emotion (2 Sam 13:19, Est 4:1),
- social relationships (Gn 24:65),

- Rebekah veiled herself when she was about to meet Isaac for the first time, exhibiting modesty in the presence of the man whom she would soon marry.
- wealth or poverty (1 Tim 2:9-10, 1 Pt 3:3, Jas 2:2-3), and
 - James warned not to show partiality based on whether a person wears clothing that indicates that he is rich or poor.
 - Paul and Peter’s assumption was that expensive clothing and braided hair can communicate messages at odds with Christian living.
- gender (Dt 22:5).

The messages conveyed by clothing vary from context to context, but to those familiar with the context, the messages are generally clear.

It is difficult to determine definitively what constitutes modest or immodest clothing in a universal sense. Fortunately, most people are aware of what various forms of clothing communicate in their own contexts, and there is no need to universalize specific principles for fashion—what is too short, too tight, too gaudy, and the like. Instead of an “I know it when I see it” approach to evaluating modesty, believers should assess 1) what it may communicate in the particular context, 2) how it aligns or does not align with Christian virtue, godliness, and right relationship to others and God, and 3) how it may affect an unbeliever’s receptiveness to the gospel.

Further Theological Reflections: What Critics of “Purity Culture” Get Right

There are many valid critiques of modesty as it has been taught in churches in recent decades, and these should be acknowledged.

- Believers should affirm:
 - Modesty is not exclusively a women’s issue. The biblical call for modesty applies to both men and women.
 - Men (and women) should be responsible for their own lustful thoughts and actions. (Mt 5:28-29)
 - Individuals are culpable for their own sin, but believers can escape sexual temptation with God’s help. (1 Cor 10:13)
- Christian leaders need to make a distinction between noticing another person’s attractiveness and looking with lust.
- Too often, purity culture depicts men “as monsters who cannot control their lust,” which is dehumanizing.¹⁴ Christians should be concerned with developing men’s character and promoting right relationships between men and women where each sees the other “as brothers and sisters, image bearers, and coheirs of the kingdom of God.”¹⁵
- Just as men (and women) should take responsibility for their own thoughts and actions, they should also be regarded as culpable for their actions, regardless of the circumstances or source of temptation. (Gn 3:12-19)
- Believers should also acknowledge that self-presentation is not always a factor in sexual abuse.

¹⁴ Welcher, *Talking Back to Purity Culture*, 63, 65.

¹⁵ Welcher, *Talking Back to Purity Culture*, 63.

- Regarding abuse of infants and children, critics of purity culture are also correct in contending that Christian leaders should unequivocally condemn pedophilia and ephedophilia and disavow any implication that a child deserves sexual attention.¹⁶
- Abuse should not be tolerated in churches and victims should be protected.

Every man, woman, and child's life and body matter to God as He made each of them in His image and sent His Son to die for their sins so that they can be reconciled to Him and experience abundant life, beginning in this life in part and experienced gloriously in full in the life to come. Abuse desecrates God's sacred image, and when Christians treat abuse lightly, they act inconsistently with the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and denigrate the sanctity of human life. As abuse in churches continues to surface, Christians' responses can tell the world that human life is sacred and that people matter to God or that some lives are worth more than others and God does not care about those who have been violated, harmed, and treated shamefully. The Christian response to abuse has the potential to point people to Jesus and show them God's goodness and love or to turn them away from Christ. It is difficult to handle abuse cases with integrity, justice, and compassion, but it is also critical for the well-being of those who have been abused, others affected by the abuse, and the watching world that often judges Christ—for good or bad—by the actions and attitudes of His Bride.

Conclusion: The Importance of Pursuing Modesty for Christian Men and Women

Modesty in the Bible includes but is not limited to hairstyles, jewelry, and apparel and is not primarily about restricting clothing as a means for controlling others' lust. For believers, modesty matters because one's self-presentation is an indicator of virtue, godliness, love and concern for others, love for God, and a desire to please and honor Him. This includes acting in ways that attract others to Christ and do not hinder evangelism. Out of love for God and love for others and a desire that all people might come to know Christ, believers should affirm and embrace biblical modesty while rejecting misconstruals of modesty; condemning mistreatment, manipulation, and abuse of women resulting from twisting and misapplying biblical teachings; and repudiating arguments against modesty based on expressive individualism and feminist empowerment.

¹⁶ Gregoire, Lindenbach, and Sawatsky, *The Great Sex Rescue*, 95. Leaders should care for those who struggle with sexual attraction to children and should do what they can to help them overcome such temptation.