

# Personal Appearance in the Light of God's Word

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How do I look? How should I wear my hair? What length dress? Heels? Does my purse match my outfit? Is this suit, dress, pair of shoes still in style?—and on and on!

Personal appearance has been a great concern to men and women throughout history. Why does the average person give so much attention to it? Does he do it “to be seen of men” or to please God?

Suppose we knew that for an entire day we would be seen only by God and His holy angels. Would this affect our appearance? How?

Does God care how a man looks? Does He look on the outside as well as on the heart? Does man's outward appearance have anything to do with his relationship to God? Or, to reverse the question, does a person's inward relationship to God affect his outward appearance?

Answers? Yes.

Someone has well said, “There is nothing on the outside but what something on the inside put it on.” Man's outward appearance most assuredly reveals a heart condition. God has provided the remedy for man's “desperately wicked” heart. God has also spoken to this much-talked-about subject of man's outward appearance.

Both the Old and New Testaments reflect God's will regarding man's personal appearance. And God's will is what we want to know—what we must know! For God is our Creator and will be our final Judge.

Therefore, let us give serious attention to God's dress principles and standards for man in the Scriptures. New Testament principles on which we base Christian applications are the same as those found in the Old Testament. Thus we begin with the Old Testament as a proper foundation in approaching this study.

# Biblical Principles for God's People

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## In the Garden of Eden

Sin and clothing have the same birthday. With sin came the necessity of covering nakedness. Adam and Eve made clothing to cover their nakedness, but what they designed was inadequate. *When God came on the scene, Adam still considered himself naked* (Gen. 3:8-10). Fallen man's clothing design did not satisfy himself when in God's presence, nor did it satisfy God. He clothed Adam and Eve with coats of skins (Gen. 3:21). Nakedness had to be covered. The *coats* provided by God covered much more than the *aprons* Adam and Eve had made.

## In the Wilderness

Through Moses, God gave His people some specifics about dress. In Numbers 15:37-41, He commanded them to wear a fringe with a blue ribbon on the edges of their garments. God designed it, not as a fleeting fashion nor for a designated age group, but for all of them "throughout their generations."

The purposes and principles unfolded in this Scripture merit special attention. The conspicuous "extra" on their garments had specific purposes:

1. For *them* to look at, not as a witness to the ungodly (v. 39).
2. To help *them* to remember all of God's commandments and do them (v. 40).
3. To keep *them* from going their own way (v. 39).
4. To keep *them* holy—set apart for God (v. 40).
5. To help *them* remember God (v. 40). The world's clothes make people forget God.

God wants man to remember and obey Him. Immediately preceding this passage, the stoning of a Sabbath-breaker gravely manifests the importance of remembering and keeping *all* of God's commandments. God instituted for Old Testament saints certain things for them to do and look at (i.e., the various feasts, distinctive attire) to help them to

remember Him. Likewise, in the New Testament, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, and said, "This *do* in *remembrance* of me."

God gave another word to His people regarding dress in Deuteronomy 22:5. Here He commanded that men and women dress differently. God detested the practice of men and women wearing the same form of garments and strictly forbade it. The New Testament reinforces this principle, as we shall see later.

## In the Land of Judah

About seven hundred years later, the Lord pronounced judgment upon the women of Israel for their pride (Isaiah 3:16-26). They manifested pride in the way they walked, by the look in their eyes, and by the way they adorned their bodies. *God most surely looks on the outside, for here He names twenty-one ornaments of pride.* A careful check on the original meanings of the things named reveals their showy construction and the purpose for their being worn, namely, to attract attention to themselves and their bodies. Worldly fashions and adornment do not grow out of or promote humility.

In observing yet another Old Testament Scripture, we note that God pronounced further punishment on His people who were "clothed with strange apparel" (Zephaniah 1:8). To be clothed with strange apparel indicates they had forsaken what God commanded (as in Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:5), and had accepted sinful man's designs. God classed them with the idolaters, and promised to punish them with the idolaters and those who turned back (verses 5-9).

## In the New Testament

The example of Jesus deserves attention. The reference to the hem (Greek: *fringe, tassel*) of His garment in Matthew 9:20 and 14:36 verifies His obedience to Numbers 15:37-41. In Revelation 1:13 John sees the glorified Son of man "clothed with a garment down to the foot." These Scriptures show that He adhered to God's ordained uniform pattern for Old Testament Israel and that His body was fully covered, even in His glorified state.

The man in the country of the Gadarenes (Luke 8:26-39) strikingly portrays the difference in outward appearance resulting from a change of masters. When possessed with devils he wore no clothes (v. 27). Later the same man, "out of whom the devils were departed," was sitting at

the feet of his new Master, fully clothed (v. 35). A person's relationship to the Lord *does* affect his outward appearance.

The first eleven chapters of Romans describe man's sinful condition, and how both Jew and Gentile can be saved, purified, and justified. But Romans 8:23 makes clear that man's *body* is not yet redeemed. So how shall an unredeemed body, housing a redeemed person, appear and be used?

Some answers to this question are found in Romans 12:1, 2.

1. He is to present it in an acceptable way unto God (rather than to make a "hit" with society).
2. He is to keep it holy.
3. It is to be a very-much-alive sacrifice unto God.
4. He is not to fashion it according to this age.

And this use and appearance of the Christian's body is a most "reasonable [rational, intelligent] service" Why would anyone whom the Lord has so gloriously saved and delivered consider it *unreasonable*?

The word *conformed* (v. 2) literally means "fashioned," and is so translated in 1 Peter 1:14. Every New Testament occurrence of this word has reference to the outside, never to the inner nature. Therefore, the Christian's attire and appearance should not make him appear to be one with this world and its fashions that promote ungodliness. Instead, the Christian is to be transformed (metamorphosed)—a radical and thorough inward conversion that is reflected outwardly.

Why is the Christian's attire not to be fashioned like this age? Why is he to be a transformed person, inside and out? *So that he "may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."* The Christian's clear-cut detachment from the world, even in appearance, enriches his own life. It leads him to a fuller understanding of God's good and perfect will, and therefore helps him obey the rest of God's commandments. Likewise, it communicates to others a holy and most convincing testimony. For, is not visible proof of the perfect will of God the world's most needed testimony?

How these two verses in Romans 12 ring harmoniously in principle and purpose with the Numbers 15 Scripture mentioned earlier! The application of the principle may vary. This is understandable. The child of God living near the equator and the Christian in the Far North would hardly apply these principles in the same way. *But every Christian must apply them!*

Continuing through the New Testament, the teachings regarding the believer's outward appearance become more detailed. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:6, 14, 15, speaks to the much-discussed subject of the hair. The godly woman is not to cut her hair, neither *some* of it nor *all* of it (v. 6). Likewise, the man who is a follower of Christ will not wear his hair long (v. 14).

According to 1 Timothy 2:9, 10, people professing godliness are to wear modest clothing. "Bashfulness toward men and modesty toward God, with awe and reverence"—this is the meaning of *shamefacedness*. *Sobriety* in this context means "self-control, discretion, and soberness in outward appearance." Showy, ornamental hairdressing comes under condemnation. The wearing of gold, pearls, and unnecessarily expensive clothing is likewise forbidden.

Notice the authority with which Paul pens these lines: In verse 7 he states his credentials, declares that he is writing nothing but the truth, and affirms that he is a teacher in faith and verity (truth). The child of God should ponder prayerfully the importance of his words, including these detailed instructions about dress.

Another principle comes into focus from 1 Peter 1:14-16. Obedient children of God do not fashion themselves according to their former fleshly desires. They are holy (pure, godly, set apart for God's glory and service) in *all* of life and behavior. Peter reinforces the Numbers 15 and Romans 12 principle and purpose: our manner of dress is closely connected with *all* of life in Christ.

Peter answers more questions about outward adorning and its purposes in 1 Peter 3:1-5. He again joins outward appearance with a total life of purity (v. 2). Putting on the unnecessary for show or to conform to whatever everyone else is doing is not fitting for a redeemed person and is condemned by God.

Observe that this passage speaks to a Christian wife whose husband does not obey the Word of God. He needs to be won, and she wants to win him. How shall she win him if he will not listen to the Word? By becoming like him to win him? By dressing like the world so he won't consider her odd or call her a goody-goody?

No! God says, "Be holy in all of life"; and then He particularly speaks to the point of outward appearance. Verse 4 indicates the definite connection between the heart condition and the manner of dress. In these five verses the Lord clearly shows that an inner transformation that changes the outside will be most effective in convincing the disobedient

and bringing them to salvation. Conversely, when Christians conform to the world's pattern of outward adornment, they actually hinder the winning of the unsaved to the Lord. *O church, hear the Word of the Lord!*

Revelation 17:4, 5 vividly describe harlots' attire. Ornamented with various kinds of jewelry, this harlot also appears in very bright red and purple. Red has ever been and still is associated with prostitutes.

The Scriptures reveal much about man's outward appearance. Consider these facts and principles:

1. The Bible talks about dress from the fall of man to the end of time.
2. Sinful man designs fashions that are not pleasing to God.
3. God designed clothes to cover the body, not to display it.
4. Men and women are to have different types of clothes.
5. Old Testament saints were to wear a distinctive, uniform garb.
6. Nothing is to be worn for show or pride. Clothing is not to be ornamental.
7. The godly woman should not cut her hair.
8. The godly man should not have long hair.
9. Conspicuous and ornamental hairstyles come under condemnation.
10. Harlots are pictured wearing red.
11. The New Testament forbids the wearing of jewelry.
12. The Christian's testimony is affected by his appearance.
13. The saint is not to be fashioned as he formerly was when he was a sinner.
14. The Christian is not to be fashioned according to this age.

# Who Shall Apply These Principles?

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The world uses clothes to advertise the body by exposure, color, and fit. What shall the Christian do in the midst of such practices? He must have a standard that upholds the principles of the Word and exalts not self, but the Lord.

Shall each person set his own standard? Many churches have followed this course: their members usually appear (and often act) no different from the unredeemed around them. Other churches that once held church-established standards of modesty and Christian simplicity have also tried this course. They, too, find themselves surrendering to world fashion.

Regulation of dress by the Christian church is a way to deal with specific dangers and evils of worldly dress.

“But,” someone may ask, “can we not dress according to Bible principles without church regulation? Certainly with the Holy Spirit’s help we should be able to.” Realistically speaking, where is the church where that has been done? Churches have proven, again and again, that where there is no standard, there is no place to stop. If an individual does not align himself with a church that has a standard of modesty in attire, and if he does not practice it, this sinful age will almost inevitably regulate his dress.

But are not church regulations man-made rules? Yes, they are, and they are valid, providing they are applications of Scriptural principles made by men of God guided by the Holy Spirit. The world’s fashions are also man-made rules, but are prompted by the god of this age. “Choose you this day whom ye will serve.” Following the fashions of an ungodly world is walking “in the counsel of the ungodly.”

Does the church have the right to require certain forms and standards of dress in line with Scriptural principles? Matthew 18:15-20 impresses us with the great authority given to the church by Christ her Head. Paul recognized this when he wrote, “And the rest will I set in order [institute, prescribe, command] when I come” (1 Corinthians 11:34). The church has not only the authority but also the responsibility to interpret and apply Bible principles by whatever rules or standards needed to do so.

“But,” someone asks, “is there not a danger of a church-prescribed attire becoming an end in itself; of members focusing on dress rather than on heart transformation?” Certainly, there is that danger, and disciplined churches must beware of it and consistently and persistently teach the Bible principles underlying the practices so that neither they nor their members fall into this trap.

The government prescribes uniforms for its soldiers, the railroad for its employees, the hospital for its nurses. The church is a people disciplined according to God’s Word; otherwise she is not the church. The real question is not “Does the church have such rights?” but rather, “Do I choose to be a part of, submit to, and support such a disciplined group?”

Holy people want to look like blood-washed saints, citizens of Heaven, and followers of their blessed Lord. They do not want to exhibit pride and sex appeal, or to look like those who serve the god of this age. They do not want to imitate the world’s changing fads. Why would a Christian want to look like the sinner on the broad road to Hell?

More than one Christian has testified to the habit of praying before shopping for clothes, for help in choosing garments and materials that are pleasing to the Lord. What guides us in selecting and designing our clothes—love for Christ and His church, or love for the world? “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” The Christian’s style of clothing should be modest and unassuming, and should not change when society’s styles change. A Christian’s clothing changing with the styles of the world indicates a spiritually dangerous connection with this world.

This points again to the value and importance of the church making decisions about attire. John Horsch wrote, “The claim to stand for the simple life and for nonconformity to the world has a real meaning only where definite restrictions are observed, and transgression is made an occasion for discipline. In the absence of such restrictions it is impossible for a church to handle this question according to Scriptural requirements.”

But as illustrated by the daughters of Zion in Isaiah 3:8, 12, 16-26, rebellious human nature clashes with such a course. And so today the challenges against church decisions about attire come not primarily from the outside world but from within the church. Yet, in light of an unprecedented displaying of the body in America, *if ever we needed a Christian standard of dress, we need it now!* “Whenever a truth is unwelcome, it will soon be lost.”

When a church applies these principles, should it do so in a general way, or should it use specific terms? The world expresses itself in specifics. If the church speaks only in *general* terms, experience has proven that her members will eventually hear only the *specific* terms of unregenerate society. Shall we say little, and permit the world to regulate the dress practices of the church?

Let us come to some specifics.

## How Shall These Principles Be Applied?

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### The Upper Part of the Body Covered

Exposed bosoms and bared arms, at least above the elbows, do not enhance holy thoughts or holy living, either for the observer or for those baring their bodies. And remember, what covers adequately when standing or sitting may not be adequate when stooping or bending over.

The godly man will not consider himself modestly dressed without a shirt. The reason behind bodily display is most often for sex appeal, or the desire to be conformed to what others are doing. Any use of the body to excite illegitimate sexual desire in another is sinful.

### The Lower Part of the Body Covered

This sharply contrasts with the practice of society today. Widespread immodesty has blinded many minds to the sinfulness of exhibiting the body by wearing tight garments, shorts, short dresses, and for the man, shorts and tight, form-fitting trousers.

A number of years ago a lady in charge of a rescue home for fallen girls asked them what they considered their chief attraction in catching men. Their answer—the display of their legs.

The hemline of the Christian ladies' dresses will not go up or down with the prevailing style; *it will stay down*. Down how far? With *real honesty before God*, ask yourself how much of your legs you want to expose to public gaze. Why wear a lightweight hose or color of hose that gives the appearance of bare legs? Hose would need less emphasizing if

dresses were longer. And the wearing of hose does *not* justify or compensate for short dresses or miniskirts.

In 1 Timothy 2:9 the word *apparel* comes from a root word meaning “down,” a “down costume.” A dress should reach at least *well below the knee*, not merely covering the knee, whether the wearer is sitting or standing. It should be of such length that it does not compel a Christian gentleman to look in another direction every time a lady stoops.

Because men and women are made differently, a woman cannot fully understand a man’s temptation visually to sexual lust. Therefore, a godly woman needs to hear and take to heart what a godly man would have to say about modesty.

Bared female limbs and accentuated female forms naturally stimulate inherent sexual impulses in the Christian and non-Christian male alike. Judgments about female modesty must be made from the standpoint of normal male impulses and temptations to sexual sin rather than from a woman’s point of view as to what is modest. And they must especially not be made according to the careless whims of ungodly fashion designers. The Christian lady will try to avoid any practice that would add to another’s temptations. She will welcome Biblically-based dress directives for her own purity and for the sake of those whom she influences.

Someone may say such applications are too narrow and restricting. We need to remember that not so many years ago the bared knee was sensational in the burlesque show. Practices sanctioned by *society* have changed dramatically in the last century. Consider these quotes relating to the beach at Atlantic City, New Jersey, in the early 1900s:

“Custom as well as city rules made it necessary in the early days to cover the entire body, except face and hands, when on the beach or in bathing.”

“Bathers wore voluminous suits of wool flannel, with stockings and canvas shoes . . . Women’s bathing suits took seven yards of cloth, skirts and trunks of bathing suits reaching the ankles.”

“Women attempted to discard stockings in 1907, but beach superintendent John T. Beckwith issued an order on Sunday, August 25, 1907, that no female would be allowed on the beach without them. This order held until in the 1920’s when they first began rolling them down, and girls little by little overcame the prejudice of the authorities until by 1928 nobody made serious objection to bare legs.”

## Subdued Shades

The wearing of loud-colored clothes, particularly bright red, is Biblically associated with an attempt to make one's self fair, and with harlotry (Jer. 4:30; Rev. 17:4, 5). A few decades ago the harlot's den was identified by a *red* light, and women with bare legs sitting in front of it.

A father visited his daughter who was in voluntary service in one of our larger cities. After work she offered to take him on a tour through the red-light (note the name) district of the city. As they walked, he noticed that girls would come out on the sidewalk and invite men to come in and spend a night of sin and shame with them, and *every one of those girls wore red!*

Subdued colors are much more fitting to cover the body inhabited by the meek and quiet spirit of the Christian than are colors that shout and call attention to the wearer (1 Peter 3:4).

## No Jewelry or Ornamentation

Hosea connected the wearing of jewelry with idolatry, a desire to associate with idolatrous friends, and forgetting God (Hos. 2:13).

The Bible and the Holy Spirit direct us not to don the unnecessary for show or pride, such as bracelets, necklaces, rings (including the wedding band), neckties, etc. Some fashion historians say that in 1636, soldiers from Croatia visiting France wore neck-cloths as charms against sword cuts. The French, considering this quite attractive, acquired the practice. It then spread to England and the United States, becoming today's necktie. Many men do not consider themselves formally dressed without the tie. For the Christian, why not consider it an unnecessary "putting on of apparel" (1 Peter 3:3) and leave it off?

The Lord through both Paul and Peter speaks against ornamenting and displaying the hair (1 Timothy 2:9; 1 Peter 3:3). Paul says further, "her hair is given her for a covering" (1 Corinthians 11:15). This Greek word for *covering* means "something put around," or "a wrap-around," indicating the long hair is not to be displayed in a long flowing manner or in a puffed-up, prominent conspicuousness. It is nature's "covering"—not an uncovering. In society, it is well understood that certain hairstyles are designed for sex appeal.

Isaiah 47:1-5 pictures heathen Babylon as being lowered to the position of a half-naked slave girl grinding meal. Her description illustrates how ungodly women of that time sought to attract men. Note the

combination of uncovered (advertised) hair, uncovered leg, and uncovered thigh. The Lord calls it *shame* (verse 3) and commands her to get into darkness (verse 5).

## Sex Distinction

God created man and woman distinctly different and appointed them differing roles. “The head of the woman is the man” (1 Corinthians 11:3). God testifies to the importance of this headship *and to the difference between the sexes* by commanding the woman to cover her head.

Why did God (Deuteronomy 22:5) command women not to wear garments pertaining to men, and vice versa? The type of garment that properly covers and conceals one sex may immodestly reveal the body shape of the opposite sex. Benson’s commentary on this passage suggests this reason: “This is forbidden for decency’s sake, that men might not confound those sexes which God hath distinguished; that all appearance of evil might be avoided, such change of garments carrying a manifest sign of effeminacy in the man, of arrogance in the woman, of lightness and petulancy in both; and also to cut off all suspicions and occasions of evil, for which this practice would open a wide door.”

The New Testament speaks to the Christian woman about her appearance and *correlates it with the distinction of the sexes*. Read 1 Timothy 2:9-12. Woman is to be in subjection to, and not to usurp authority over, the man—a clear differentiation of the sexes, in the context of dress. Peter also referred to the headship of man and the subjection of woman in connection with teachings about outward appearance (1 Peter 3:5-7).

It is no coincidence that the present practice of male and female wearing nearly identical clothing accompanies an increase in sexual sins and perversions and the deterioration of marriages and homes. The phenomena naturally go together.

## Children Modestly Dressed

With no apology, the Bible declares, “Train up a child in the way he should go” (Proverbs 22:6)—not “in the way the world goes.” Likewise, Ephesians 6:4 commands fathers to bring up their children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”—rearing them *in* the way of the Lord, not just hoping they will espouse it later. The parent seeking to

thus bring up a child would never seek to express the pride in his own heart by adorning his child. We should dress our children with clothes that cover their bodies and unmistakably distinguish the sexes. If we dress our children in the fashions of the world, how can we expect them to want to appear like saints later? When Christians dress their children in worldly fashions, it will take only one or at most, two generations, to turn the church over to the world.

## Church Standards for Attire

Various church groups have taken different positions in attempting to hold godly dress standards. Not all have succeeded. Having a prescribed pattern of dress is the only method known to carry out Scriptural principles of simplicity with consistency and continuity. Such a practice does have some inherent dangers, but as one writer said, “Until we have something better, if we give up the form we give up the principle. Shall we do it? . . . It is our business as loyal members to stay by the church on this issue, and for the sake of the principle consider it a privilege to do so.”

We must apply the principles or we will lose them. As God’s commandments benefited Israel, Christian applications encourage holy living, remembering God, and remembering and doing all of His commandments. Read Numbers 15:39, 40; Romans 12:2; and 1 Peter 1:14-16 and consider God’s instruction.

Shall we keep these commandments? What contributes to their loss? Let us lift up our eyes and look! When churches accept the world’s standard of appearance, they lose! They lose Scriptural doctrines, practices, and testimony. Among other things, they lose women’s veiling, footwashing, and the holy kiss. They lose separation of church and state, marriage only in the Lord, and Biblical nonresistance; and they surely lose their testimony of God-fearing lives!

Some will object, “But having specific standards leads to ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing.’” That’s to be expected. Satan deceives by counterfeiting. Shall we discard a Christian standard of dress because a hypocrite hides behind it? Do we reject baptism because there are some baptized sinners?

However, a warning is in order to churches that have prescribed forms of attire. They must guard against letting appearance define a member’s spirituality. In other words, just because a person appears as he should

does not mean he is born again or that he is holy inside. The member of such a church who loves the Lord and the church will appear as he should, but outward appearance is only one of many evidences of spiritual life.

The Mennonite church has for many years had modest standards of dress for her members. Already in 1568, the Swiss Brethren (later called Mennonites), in a conference held in Switzerland decreed that “brethren and sisters shall stay by the present form of our regulation concerning apparel, and make nothing for pride’s sake.”

The standard of some churches that have not surrendered to worldly fashion is very valid and Biblical. This includes the regulation coat (often called the *plain coat*) minus the necktie for brethren, and the decent-length, modestly-made cape dress for the sisters. Of course, the other necessary articles of clothing are also to be in harmony with the transformed life.

Adam Clarke, the Methodist commentator, enlightens us further concerning the word *apparel* in 1 Timothy 2:9. In the Greek it is the compound word, *katastola*. According to Clarke, the *stola* was a Greek dress—a long piece of cloth that hung down to the feet in front and behind, girded with a belt. The *katastola* was an additional piece of cloth that hung down to the waist loosely over the *stola*. Commenting on the *katastola*, Clarke says, “A more modest and becoming dress than the Grecian was never invented; it was, in a great measure, revived in England about the year 1805, and in its simplicity, decency, and elegance were united; but it soon gave place to another mode, in which frippery and nonsense once more prevailed. It was too rational to last long, and too much like religious simplicity to be suffered in a land of shadows, and a world of painted outsides.” The additional piece of cloth, which corresponds to the *cape* today, serves to conceal more adequately the contour of the body that corrupt women desire to display.

This is not to say that these patterns are the only good ones. But unless and until we Mennonites have a design that is more Biblical and modest, we want to, we *must*, stay by what we have. For, *when we drop the church’s design, we will take up the design of the world.*

Man, being the head of woman, is duty-bound to take the lead in modesty and plainness of attire, by example and encouragement to the “weaker vessel.” Not only will he be modestly attired, but will gladly champion the church’s standard of nonconformity to the world.

## A Consistent Witness

While modest and distinct church-prescribed attire supports the Christian in holy living, it also conveys a consistent witness to the world. The ungodly desperately need this testimony as a reminder of God and holy living, as well as a rebuke and an example. If we want others to see the image of God in our faces, we will need to keep our bodies covered.

Christian simplicity and modesty in outward appearance enhance true evangelism, and add clarity rather than confusion to the seeking heart.

## In Conclusion

What chance has a person today for purity of thought and life in the midst of a suggestively attired society? If he wants to flee from the constant exposure of the human body in society, can he find a holy refuge in your home and in your church?

“Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:17, 18).

—Lloyd Hartzler

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