

Modesty in Apparel: Bringing a Believer's Attire into Subjection to the Word of God

Chapter 2: Is It a Sin for Women to Wear Pants?

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No discussion of modesty would be complete without a consideration of the debate over whether or not pants are forbidden for women. This issue is important because it will help us understand how the ethical principles of Scripture that define modesty, which are absolute and unchanging, are to be applied to styles of dress, which throughout history have been in flux and are frequently undergoing change. It will also help us deal with the application of biblical ethics to situations where concepts of what is proper or improper regarding dress in a society are essentially arbitrary or purely cultural. It is probably for this reason that there is so much misunderstanding and fallacious argumentation on this topic. As we study this issue, we will first examine the central passage in Scripture used to forbid cross dressing. Next, we will examine pants in different cultural and historical contexts. Then, we will interact with arguments that forbid pants on women in all circumstances. The central questions on this topic are: (1) the meaning of Deuteronomy 22:5; (2) are pants *always* an item of clothing that are masculine or only for men; (3) and, if pants can be a piece of clothing not solely restricted to men culturally or socially, are there kinds of pants that are modest for use with women?

Deuteronomy 22:5

The argument about whether it is sinful for a woman to wear pants is based primarily on Deuteronomy 22:5: "A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the LORD your God." Regarding this verse, there are a number of things that merit our attention.

First, the command regarding women is very broad and extends to much more than clothing. The expression "anything that pertains to a man" includes not only clothing, but ornaments, armor, weapons, etc. (i.e. anything that is normally associated with men). The expression "that which pertains" normally specifies ownership of something ("peace offerings that pertain to the LORD"; Lev. 7:20; cf. 21) or being peculiar to something (e.g., "breastfeeding pertains to motherhood"). Unfortunately, both the New American Standard Bible (e.g., "A woman shall not wear man's clothing") and the New International Version (e.g., "A woman must not wear men's clothing") paraphrase this passage [i.e. 5a] and narrow the meaning to attire or garments. They translate 5a as an exact parallel to 5b where, in the case of a man, female garments are specified. This mistranslation misses an important aspect of the prohibition.

It is also noteworthy that the inspired writer uses *geber* for "man" instead of the much more common Hebrew term *ish*. Although *geber* is often simply a synonym of *ish*, its root meaning "to be strong" makes it a more suitable term for expressing that which is male about a man as an antonym of a woman. It is the word one would use of a valiant man, a warrior or a

mighty man. It is the word that a Hebrew would use to describe what we call today “a man’s man.”

Second, given the broad nature of the command (“men’s things” or “anything that pertains to a man”) and the second clause where men are explicitly forbidden to wear women’s clothing, it is wrong to *limit* this prohibition (in 5a for women) to military armor and implements.¹ That is certainly included in the prohibition and may have even been the chief abuse by heathen women at that time, but a universal prohibition must not be limited without clear exegetical evidence from the immediate or broader context. Under no circumstances does the Bible sanction or allow cross dressing or transvestite behavior. It is a blatant transgression of the moral law.

Third, the practice of women wearing that which pertains to a man or a man wearing women’s clothing is so wicked and offensive to God that those who practice such things are described as an “abomination unto God.” This means that God regards such people as disgusting, abhorrent and repulsive. God who is holy and righteous detests such people. This same word (Hebrew, *towebah*) is used to describe homosexual behavior (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), idolatry (Deut. 7:25), premeditated fraud or theft in business (Prov. 11:1), habitual lying (Prov. 12:22), the worship of a rank hypocrite (Prov. 15:8; 21:27; Isa. 1:13) and the practice or lifestyle of wickedness in general (Prov. 15:9). Given this usage, those who attempt to connect the word “abomination” (*towebah*) only to cultic or ceremonial offenses are clearly off the mark. When Jehovah tells us that a certain practice or lifestyle makes a person an abomination before Him, it serves to emphasize the wickedness of that behavior. It is a strong warning to God’s people to studiously avoid or shun such activities.

Some Obvious Applications

Before we delve into the issue of women and pants let us consider some of the easiest applications of this verse. One thing that it certainly forbids is the modern pro-feminist practice of dressing and placing women into roles that biblically, historically and culturally have been the domain of men. Although virtually every Reformed denomination has sheepishly accepted the American practice of women serving in combat roles in the military, this passage is strongly against it. Implements of war are for men of valor, not daughters, mothers or grandmothers. The

¹ This is a common interpretation of both Christian (e.g., Adam Clark, John Gill [primarily], A. D. H. Mayes, Cyrus Gordon) and Jewish (Jon-Jay Tilsen, Abraham Malamet, Maimonides) scholars. It is now known that in the worship of Ashteroth by the Canaanites, and Astarte by the Greeks, women would appear in worship wearing men’s armor. Moreover, the Jewish Talmud cites Deuteronomy 22:5 as a proof text against women serving as warriors in the military. In Jewish Midrash literature, Jael kills Sisera with a tent peg (Jdg. 4:21), because it would have been inappropriate for her to use a sword which was a man’s tool for warfare. Archeology has also revealed that in the ancient Middle East male sodomite temple prostitutes deliberately dressed and acted like women in their pagan cultic rituals. Transvestite men also would appear in female clothing and dance like women in the cult of Ishtar. It is quite clear that homosexuality, cross dressing and transvestite behavior were an integral aspect of at least some of the fertility cults that were popular in the ancient world. Having said all that, it is still an exegetical and logical fallacy to attempt to restrict biblical prohibitions on homosexuality, cross dressing or transvestite activities to only a pagan ritualistic context. This is precisely how modernists or “Christian” liberals have attempted to circumvent the Scripture’s prohibitions against homosexuality, cross dressing and transvestite behavior. Biblical teaching is quite clear that such activities are an immoral abomination whether they are directly connected to idolatry or not. In addition, even if one holds the interpretation that Deuteronomy 22:5a is aimed directly at women wearing military implements, the application would certainly apply to every type of this behavior (e.g., women wearing men’s clothing, dressing like a Levite, putting on the uniform of clergy, etc.).

same thing could be said of police officers (at least the ones with guns and/or batons), firemen and ministers of the gospel. A woman wearing the collar of a minister is an abomination in God's sight.

Another obvious application that has already been mentioned is cross dressing, transvestite behavior and attempts to be transgendered. God has ordained a clear distinction between the sexes. Consequently, we must not do anything that would blur this distinction. For example, men should keep their hair cut short while women ought to let their hair grow long (1 Cor. 11:14). Men and women should never wear clothing that belongs to the opposite sex. Men's attire should reflect biblical concepts of masculinity while female clothing should reflect femininity. Believers should reject all attempts of the fashion industry and Hollywood to popularize unisex styles, transvestite or homosexual trends. Men should not wear makeup (e.g., David Bowie, Michael Jackson, rock stars of the 1970s and 80s, drag queens, etc.); put on women's blouses, underwear, skirts, shoes, etc.; wear feminine jewelry or earrings, etc.). It also certainly applies to so-called gender reassignment surgery where men and women go under the knife to have their genitalia mutilated in an attempt to mimic the opposite sex. God does not make exceptions in His holy law to satisfy the perverted lusts of sodomites, lesbians or the deluded, abominable body mutilators. You are to be what God created you to be and, therefore, you must never give in to a fallen, perverted imagination or wicked, unlawful desires.

Other Arguments against Pants on Women

Deuteronomy 22:5 is an important passage that merits serious thought. It, however, does not answer the question: "In modern day America are pants regarded as an item of clothing that belongs solely to men or have they become like the cloak or robe of biblical times that was worn by *both* men and women?" We will consider this question (which can only be answered from a historical, cultural and sociological perspective) in a moment. First, however, we would do well to briefly consider attempts at disproving the wearing of pants on women *directly* from Scripture (i.e. the attempt to find explicit proof texts and thus remove the issue from simply an *inference* or *application* of Deuteronomy 22:5 to modern culture). Obviously, if the Bible had an imperative such as: "women shall not wear pants" or "women must wear skirts or dresses" the debate over pants on females would not exist. The matter simply would be a question of submitting to the clear teaching of Scripture. But, as we shall see, the attempts at connecting dresses solely to women or pants solely to men from the *direct* teaching of God's Word is forced, inaccurate, arbitrary and fallacious. Note the following arguments.

One argument is based on the idea that the Greek word for "apparel" in 1 Timothy 2:9 (*katastole*) means "a long dress." If this word meaning is correct, then Paul is saying something very specific—that a woman's long dress must be modest. This is a major point of one long dress advocate who writes, "The Greek word for apparel in this text is *katastole*, meaning a long dress.... Therefore, women are instructed to wear modest long dresses (*kosmios katastole*). This *kosmios katastole* not only specifies that the article of clothing should be a dress, but also specifies that the dress should be a suitably long length" (J. Parnell McCarter, *Should Women Wear Long Dresses?*). This assertion raises the question: does *katasole* mean "a long dress"? The answer is, most certainly not. This argument confuses the word "dress" which means "attire," "clothing" or "garment," which is a *general term* that can be applied to many kinds of clothing, with the much more modern and *specific* term "dress," which refers to a *particular kind of clothing*. While one can certainly *apply* Paul's teaching to the rather modern kind of women's

clothing called “a dress” (when Paul wrote 1 Timothy [c. A.D. 62-64] women wore cloaks or robe-like garments as did men, not dresses), it is exegetical malpractice to substitute a narrow, specific, rather modern meaning of a word for the broad or general meaning that Paul intended.² It is for this reason that not one English translation renders *katastole* as “a long dress” (e.g., “attire” (Berkeley); “apparel” (KJV, NKJV, ASV, Young’s Literal Translation, Wuest, RSV); “clothes” (NASB, NEB, Jerusalem, NIV).

That Paul has in mind clothing, attire or apparel is also supported by most Greek scholars. Rengstorf says that *katastole* refers to either “demeanor” or “‘clothing’ as in Is. 61:3” [LXX].³ Thayer writes, “in biblical Greek twice, *a garment let down, dress, attire*: 1 Timothy 2:9.”⁴ *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* defines *katastole* as “demeanor, bearing, appearance” and says regarding 1 Timothy 2:9: “The parallel statement in v. 8 suggests their total demeanor, which can be expressed in clothing is in view.”⁵ Abbot-Smith says that in the Septuagint and New Testament *katastole* means “a garment, dress, attire.”⁶ Arnt and Gingrich give this definition: “*Deportment*, outward, as it expresses itself in clothing...as well as inward...and probably both at the same time.”⁷ W. E. Vine writes, “connected with *katastello*, to send or let down, to lower (*kata*, down, *stello*, to send), was primarily a garment let down; hence, dress, attire, in general (ep. *stole*, a loose outer garment worn by kings and persons of rank,—Eng., *stole*); 1 Tim. 2:9, ‘apparel.’”⁸ Patrick Fairbairn says, “That *katastole* is properly taken in the sense of *apparel*, and not, as Ellicott would understand it, *deportment*,—including look and manner as well as dress,—there seems no just reason to doubt. It points by its etymology (from *katastello*) to the letting down of things about one’s person, adjusting or arranging them, then the apparel as so arranged (see Alford).”⁹ Hendriksen defines *katastole* as “becoming-attire.”¹⁰ Clearly, the idea that Paul is speaking of “a long dress” is forced and dishonest “scholarship.”

Another attempt to use passages that are more specific than Deuteronomy 22:5 is based on the word “breeches.” It is argued that the word “breeches,” which in English can be a synonym for “trousers” is only used to describe men’s clothing in the King James Version of the Bible. There are two serious problems with this line of reasoning. First, the Hebrew word translated “breeches” is not simply restricted to men in Scripture, but also to the special Aaronic priesthood (e.g., Ex. 28:42; 39:28; Lev. 6:10; 16:4; Ezek. 44:18). Therefore, if one wants to argue for a biblical restriction on “breeches,” the restriction would cover not only women, but

² The *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged* recognizes this distinction. It says, “(1) that which is used as the covering or ornament of the body; clothes; garments, apparel...syn.—apparel, raiment, clothing, clothes, vestments, garments. (2) the usual outer garment worn by women and girls consisting of a skirt and waist, generally in one garment” ([Collins World, 1978], 556). If Paul was talking about the narrow modern meaning, then not one person would have understood what he was saying for dresses were still centuries in the future.

³ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 7:596.

⁴ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 [1901]), 337.

⁵ Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 2:269.

⁶ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), 239.

⁷ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (translators, adaptors, augmenters of Walter Baur’s work), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 419.

⁸ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1940), 63.

⁹ Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956 [1874]), 124.

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [1955, 57]), 106.

also the vast majority of men in the Old Covenant era and all men in the New Covenant era for Christ's perfect work of redemption has forever put away the old Aaronic priesthood (cf. Heb. 9; Gal. 3:24-25).

Second, the Hebrew word translated "breeches" (*miknac*) does not refer to pants or trousers but to the special linen underwear, drawers, or loincloths worn by priests called to officiate at the high altar. The Hebrew word *miknac* is related to the word *mik-nawce* which refers to a hiding or concealing of something. While it is possible that this holy underwear was like our boxer shorts, we have no idea what it looked like. Blaiklock notes, "There is no reason to suppose that this covering had shaped trouser legs like a pair of shorts (Exod. 28:42; 39:28; Lev. 6:10; 16:4; Ezek. 44:18). Sewn 'breeches,' as distinct from this type of double loincloth, were the invention of riding nations, the Scythians and the Persians. The Romans later called the Gauls 'trouserers' (*Galli bracati*)."¹¹ Given the way sewn breeches developed in history, it is highly probable that the holy underwear was some kind of loincloth. Thus we see that the "breeches" argument is based on ignorance and must be rejected.

Pants and the Issue of Historical and Cultural Context

Having dispensed with some of the most common attempts to find specific prohibitions dealing with pants on women in Scripture, we now come to the difficult question of how to apply Deuteronomy 22:5 within one's cultural context. This question is difficult because various nations have different histories with radically different clothing styles. What may be deemed feminine or appropriate for women in one society may be regarded as completely taboo in another. Likewise, what men may regard as effeminate and even a form of cross dressing in one nation may be perfectly acceptable in a different culture (e.g., a man wearing a kilt in America in the 1970s would have been mocked).

As we consider this issue, we need to answer a few questions before we come to a solid conclusion. First, have pants *universally* been regarded as a garment solely for men? If the answer is no, then at a minimum one cannot argue that under all circumstances and in every geographical location, women are forbidden to wear modest, feminine pants. Second, given the fact that clothing styles have radically changed over the past two thousand years, one must ask whether pants are still regarded as clothing that is *for men only* in Western nations (i.e. those nations where until the 20th century only men wore pants and women wore dresses or skirts). Are pants seen as an item only for men in the society at large or are they viewed as only for men by a few small religious groups *that have been taught that pants are still only for men*? A few other questions that will be helpful are: Why did women start wearing pants in America? Was it so they could look like men? Was it part of a transvestite, transgendered or lesbian conspiracy? Did women in the 1930s, 40s and 50s set out to destroy God's created order for men and women? Or was it primarily for pragmatic reasons? After we examine these questions, we then need to consider whether it is possible for women to wear pants that are modest (i.e. are there styles of pants that are *loose-fitting*; that do not show off the women's thighs and buttocks) and feminine.

In Western culture pants or trousers were regarded as men's clothing. How and why this came to be one can only speculate. (Perhaps pants came into popular use with men because of their excellent qualities for movement and safety during labor.) In many parts of the world, however, pants were accepted for *both* men and women. In other words, they were not regarded

¹¹ E. M. Blaiklock, "Breeches" in Merrill C. Tenney, Gen. Ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 76), 1:652.

as intrinsically male or masculine in nature. For example, “In China, women also wore jackets and pants, either alone or under a skirt, depending on social class. In Japan, both farming men and women and the military elite wore pants, although of different styles.”¹² Pants were acceptable on women throughout Southeast Asia. Trousers were accepted on women in the early nomadic Eurasian cultures that were dependent on horses for survival. “Iranian Scythians, along with Achaemenid Persians were among the first to wear trousers, later introduced to modern Europe via either the Hungarians or Ottoman Turks.”¹³ Pants were worn by Armenian, Anatolian (Asia Minor or Modern Turkey) and Bulgarian women (i.e. the loose-fitting *salvar*). A skirt, however, would hide a good portion of these pants.¹⁴ After cotton was introduced to Africa (15th century), cotton pants were worn by women in Gabon.¹⁵ In the ancient Celtic tribes women wore trousers primarily because of the cold weather. The Romans called these pants *braccae*. “*Braccae* is the Latin term for trousers and in this context is today used to refer to style of pants, made from wool and apparently invented by the ancient Celts. *Braccae* were typically made with a drawstring, and tended to reach from just above the knee at the shortest, to the ankles at the longest, with lengths generally increasing in Celtic tribes living further north. When the Romans first encountered the *Braccae*, they thought them to be effeminate (Roman men typically wore tunics, which were one-piece outfits terminating at or above the knee—skirt-like). Therefore, the Roman soldier’s society considered trousers to be women’s clothes at first and the knee-length tunic to be masculine. However, *Braccae* eventually became popular among Roman legionaries stationed in cooler climates to the north of Italy.”¹⁶

¹² Melissa Leventon, Ed., *What People Wore When: A Complete Illustrated History of Costume from Ancient Times to the Nineteenth Century for Every Level of Society* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2008), 185.

¹³ http://www.lastgeneration.us/pants_question.htm, 1.

¹⁴ See *What Women Wore When*, 221, 255.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 262.

¹⁶ http://www.lastgeneration.us/pants_question.htm, 1. In the middle ages there was some use of trousers while “hose” or “hosiery” dominated men’s and women’s leg coverings. The *Encyclopedia Americana* says, “Early History.—Hose was the term used to designate a leg covering adopted by Roman soldiers from the barbarians of northern Europe, and worn by both men and women after the establishment of the Byzantine Empire. It was used synonymously with *braccae* (AS. broc or brec) meaning breeches or trousers, by some commentators, thus creating confusion in regard to the fit and length of the leg covering worn in Europe from the 4th to the 14th century. The earliest works of art to depict leg coverings are (1) an ivory diptych of the 5th or 6th century recording the life of St. Paul, which shows some men in long loose leg garments with knee-length tunics, (2) a miniature of the 9th century showing Charles the Bald (Charles I, k. of France) with tight leg coverings, cross-gartered, and beside him two men with tight leg coverings banded at the knee, and (3) a miniature, c. 1000 A.D., of the legend of John the Baptist, showing a man in loose trousers that reach well below the knee, tucked into tight socks. The words *breeches* (AS. brec) and *trousers* (Celtic) mean a covering for the buttocks, while the French word *chausses*, indicating ‘close fitting,’ means both hose and breeches; the word *hose* is Anglo-Saxon and Danish. The earliest form of breeches, said to have been universally worn in northern Europe until 1300 A.D. was a piece of cloth put on like a baby’s diaper, a kind of loin cloth such as was worn by Mahatma Gandhi. It is probable, especially in the southern part of Europe, only hose were worn with *long* tunics, while with *short* tunics both trousers and hose were worn from the 4th to the end of the 14th century. Hose, tailored to fit the leg, were at first knee length and held up by a garter. When plate armor (c. 1390) demanded a close-fitting undergarment, hose were lengthened to cover thighs and buttocks and were tied to the waist or doublet. They were separate stockings, not joined at the crotch until after 1400, and were again separate stockings after 1500 when worn with trunks and called *nether stocks*. Although hose were invented for men, women soon adopted knee-length hose. There is a manuscript drawing (c. 1307-1327) of a woman holding hose in her hand ready to put on, and Chaucer, in his late 14th century *Canterbury Tales*, wrote, ‘her hosen were of fine scarlet red, ful strait y-tyed.’” ([New York: Americana Corporation, 1953]14:425). It is noteworthy that although hose were first developed and worn by men, they became accepted and popular among women. Today “hose” are (under normal circumstances) exclusively a female form of attire.

From this brief survey we can conclude that pants on women are not something intrinsically immoral or against “natural law”; but rather their appropriateness for women has been an issue determined by tradition and culture. Thus, we even encounter the very masculine Roman soldiers in their *skirts* refusing to consider pants at first because they regarded them as a female style of dress. In addition, we see that pants on women were never an attempt to appear as men, blur the distinction between the sexes, or foster a transvestite worldview. Instead, it is apparent that trousers were viewed as a practical tool for living. They were better for riding horses, working and enduring cold climates (Eskimo women have never worn skirts or dresses. If they did they would not survive their bitter environment). Pants were better suited or more useful than dresses for movement, work, safety and protection from the elements. Given this information, at a minimum one should avoid absolutizing 19th and early 20th century western concepts of pants on women and imposing them on other non-western nations and cultures.

As we look to pants in the west we will see that they did not become predominate over “hosiery” with tunics, shirts or gowns until after the 16th century. Early pants or breeches tended to be fairly tight and were usually tucked into long socks or boots. In the neo-classical period (the early 19th century) they came to more resemble our modern pants because the colonial style of pants tucked into hose or socks began to go out of fashion. By the 1830s pants are virtually identical to what we wear today. Sailors wore baggy pants in the 17th and 18th centuries and the practice of wearing baggy pants continued in the U.S. Navy well into the twentieth century.¹⁷ In 1873 blue jeans were invented by Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss. Jeans rapidly became the pants of choice for miners and cowboys throughout the American West.

Throughout this period women did not wear pants and, therefore, in Europe and America pants came to be defined as men’s clothing. This view, however, has changed over the last one hundred years or so and now pants are regarded as appropriate for both sexes. What is important to know is that this historical change of attitude was based primarily on pragmatic considerations (i.e. safety, freedom of movement) and not because of feminism or a desire to look like men. This assertion is supported by following historical considerations.

The first women to wear pants in America (who were not Indians) were young women who lived and worked on ranches in the 19th century. They had to ride horses and this could only be done safely and comfortably in pants. “The Wigan pit brow girls scandalized Victorian society by wearing trousers, rolled up to the waist to keep them out of the way.”¹⁸ During World War I many women were asked to work in factories because of the great surge of men into the military. For safety reasons, they wore their hair pulled back and put on loose-fitting pants instead of dresses and skirts. Around the same time women began to wear pant-style pajamas for sleeping. In 1913 a French designer attempted to capitalize on a popular opera (*Scheherazade*) by designing wide-leg trousers for women called “harem pants.” He apparently believed what was acceptable for women in Eastern cultures may become popular in the West. During the 1930s it may have been feminism or simply a desire to be stylish and different that led some famous actresses (e.g., Katherine Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich) to wear tailored slacks in their movies. During the 1930s advertisements for feminine styled “women’s pants” began appearing

¹⁷ Denim trousers were invented in Italy during the Renaissance and grew in popularity throughout the 16th century. They were marketed in the harbor of Genoa and were adopted by the Genoese navy. The pants were durable, comfortable and good in wet conditions. They were deliberately worn baggy so they could easily be rolled up when swabbing the deck. Denim eventually became popular with sailors throughout the world. Interestingly, the men on Columbus’ voyage that discovered America wore denim pants.

¹⁸ http://www.lastgeneration.us/pants_question.htm.

in women's fashion magazines. In 1935 Levi's jeans, designed solely for women, were first featured in Vogue Magazine. It was during the 1930s that pants began to be accepted for sporting activities (e.g., golf, tennis, horseback riding, bicycling, hiking). From World War 1 through the late 1930s there was only a gradual acceptance of pants on women. This gradual acceptance was accelerated with World War 2 and the massive influx of young women into defense industries. It was not safe to wear skirts around heavy machinery or when welding metal plate to a battle ship. After the war pants were widely accepted for women as casual wear (working around the house, going to the park or beach or doing a little shopping). In the 1960s and beyond as society became less formal, the pattern of men in suits and ties and women in dresses became more and more replaced by casual wear for both sexes. By the twenty-first century women in the United States wear pants far more often than dresses or skirts. While some women during this period probably wore pants to make a feminist statement (e.g., Katherine Hepburn and Emilia Earhart were notable feminists) most simply accepted the change of styles without much thought.

A brief history of how pants came to be the common dress for both men and women reveals that their gradual acceptance in the west, first for men and then much later for women, was never an attempt to blur the sexes or promote transvestite behavior. The Roman soldiers were slow to adopt pants because they considered trousers to be for women since Celtic females wore them. In their cultural context or robe, skirt or cloak was associated with masculinity *when worn by men*. In the twentieth century women were slow to accept trousers because, in their cultural context, pants were by and large considered clothing for men. Now that pants are no longer associated solely with men, it is no more biblical or logical to condemn a modest, feminine use of pants by women than it is to condemn Romans soldiers for switching from skirts to pants in ancient Briton.

In the *modern* Western world pants are not something "that pertains to a man." They are a kind of clothing style that evolved and changed over time just like all other styles. They are not like armor and implements of war that *always* pertain to a man. At one time their use on women was inappropriate in the same manner that man in our modern culture would be considered out of line if they wore Jewish dress-like robes or skirts. We must be careful to never compromise biblical principles of modesty and propriety, while rejecting traditions or changing cultural conventions as ethical absolutes. In fact, if one absolutizes the social convention or tradition of women *never* wearing pants but *always* wearing dresses, then if consistent, he would have to argue that all men and women are required to wear the same attire of the patriarchs, holy prophets, Jesus Christ and his apostles (i.e. dress-like cloaks, not pants). If one is going to absolutize the socially acceptable styles of one era in history (e.g., the Renaissance, or Victorian or early 20th century), then why not choose the biblical era? Why focus on the 19th century? While we commend our Reformed brothers who are dress-only advocates for their rejection of feminism and promotion of covenant headship, we do not think they have carefully thought through their position. Pastors and elders cannot be expected to discipline women who have refused to uphold a cultural tradition from the past.¹⁹ While we can certainly praise and emulate

¹⁹ This issue of church discipline and pants raises another thorny question. What does a denomination do on the mission field in far-off lands where women have been wearing pants for thousands of years? Does one force them to apply biblical modesty to their cultural styles of dress; or, does one impose 19th century European concepts of appropriate clothing styles on their culture? In other words, does one force women to get rid of their pants in favor of long prairie-style dresses? This second option raises other questions relating to practicality. What about the problem of insects (e.g., mosquitoes); or, a frigid climate? There are areas of this planet where dresses are simply not practical. Does the church impose dresses on these cultures? Does it force natives to move to a more moderate climate to avoid insect bites or freezing to death? Those who absolutize the old Western cultural concept that pants

the modesty of a former era, that does not mean that we must dress in the exact same attire as a former century.

All of this raises the question: “Are there modest forms of pants for women or modest ways that pants can be worn by women?” Yes, indeed there are. Previously, in our discussion of nakedness and modesty as defined by Scripture we learned that it is inappropriate for women (or men) to reveal their buttocks and thighs to a person of the opposite sex who is not a spouse. With this teaching in mind one can safely conclude that *tight* or *form-fitting pants* should not be worn by women (or men). Pants that reveal the shape of the buttocks and/or thighs are forbidden by implication. Therefore, women have a choice. They can either wear loose fitting or baggy pants that will not cause lust, or they can wear form fitting pants with a long sweater, or shirt, or coat that completely covers their buttocks and upper thighs to conceal them. Given these biblical restrictions, pants may not be as popular among professing Christians as they were when modesty in dress was largely ignored. But in any case, Christian modesty minus legalistic restrictions allows believing women to wear pants for activities where dresses and skirts are most inconvenient (horseback riding, working around the house, gardening, riding a bike, snow skiing, hiking, etc.). In addition, this position of modesty without legalism will enable missionaries and foreign presbyteries to do their job without an unreasonable imposition of Western culture.²⁰

Other Common Objections against Pants on Women

In order to fine tune our goal of Christian modesty in dress that is not legalistic and can be defended by Scripture, we will interact with some other common arguments against pants on women.

The first argument is that male and female clothing must be distinct. Therefore, we should wear clothing that makes our gender distinctions *as clear as possible*. Consequently, the logical way to carry out this principal in our culture is for women only to wear skirts and dresses while men stick to the practice of wearing pants or trousers. No one will ever be confused if we all go back to the practices of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, the distinction

are only for men must come to grips with these kinds of questions. Such questions reveal the wisdom of Scripture and the pitfalls of legalism.

²⁰ The position that modest forms of pants are acceptable to Christian women in the 21st century will no doubt be viewed as a sinful compromise with our degenerate culture by some. Others may view this position as simply an excuse for an existing practice popular with churches today. The truth of the matter is that this author is mainly interested in this topic for three reasons: First, is there enough biblical evidence to warrant church discipline when women wear pants? If pants on women are a form of cross-dressing or transvestite behavior, then their use would be a very serious, scandalous sin worthy of censure and even excommunication if necessary. Those who hold to the position that pants on women are a violation of Deuteronomy 22:5 must (in order to be consistent) forbid their use in *all circumstances and cultures*. They must treat pants on women the same way as a man wearing a dress, nylons, high heels and makeup. After a careful examination of the Bible and the history of pants, we believe that such a position is untenable. Second, virtually any conservative Reformed pastor or elder who has served for many years will run into families that argue vehemently against pants on women in all circumstances. Therefore, this issue cannot be ignored or swept under the table, but must be examined carefully under the light of Scripture. Either the people who argue against pants are right and we must repent and thank them for bringing this matter to our attention; or, they are wrong and thus must be corrected for seeking to impose their legalistic views on the church. There can be no middle ground on this issue. Third, immodest dress among professing Christians in our nation is a serious, widespread problem. Therefore, we must study the Scriptures and draw out biblical principles on modesty and apply them sensibly within our churches. If we focus on issues that do not have biblical warrant and that cannot be proved, we are not only guilty of legalism, but actually may hurt the biblical case for modesty by looking irrational, petty and foolish on this important issue.

between dresses for women and pants for men is so clear, that in America separate bathrooms for men and women are designated by a sign with a stick figure with a dress for one and a stick figure wearing pants for the other. Think of the great confusion that would occur if all bathrooms had stick figures with pants.

This kind of reasoning which we call, “the not different enough” argument, sounds pretty good, but suffers from two serious problems. First, it makes a clever, subtle jump from the biblical principle that there ought to be a distinction between men and women’s clothing to the human addition, “it must be *as clear as possible*.”²¹

One may not think there is much difference between the two positions, but actually there is a great difference. If we hold the position, “as clear as possible,” then why stop with dresses and pants? Why not make matters even clearer by insisting on certain colors for men only that are often associated with masculinity (e.g., blue, black, dark green) while restricting women’s clothing to colors associated with femininity (e.g., pink, yellow, lavender)? Why not put blue top hats on all men and pink scarves on all women? These suggestions are absurd and unnecessary and that is the point.

Second, the idea that “it must be as clear as possible” explicitly contradicts the clear testimony of Scripture. When God made coverings for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21), did He make Eve a dress while fashioning a pair of pants for Adam? No, He made them tunics or cloaks (*ketonet*). The Hebrew word is the *same* for both Adam and Eve and this word indicates a robe or long shirt-like garment. They were modestly dressed by God; but they were obviously not made as distinct as possible. In addition, in our study of the dress of godly Jews in biblical times we saw that both men and women wore a tunic (Heb. *ketonet*, Gk. *chiton*) as an under garment next to the skin and a robe or cloak (Heb. *kesut*, Gk. *himaton*) over the tunic. From Scripture and

²¹ This is essentially the main argument of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. In *The Young People’s Magazine* one of their ministers writes, “Of course, as children of the Reformation, we know that it is not good to follow traditions blindly, and this is where it is important to remember that wearing skirts is only a cultural practice which preserves the biblical principle. But if we take the biblical principle seriously, and are determined to make the gender distinction as clear as possible through what we wear, then we have few other options left to us in our culture for putting the principle into practice, other than by continuing to resort to skirts for women and trousers for men (May 2007; vol. 72; no. 5, p. 13). Note that this statement does acknowledge that the wearing of skirts “is only a cultural practice.” The author makes the assumption that taking this principle seriously entails making gender distinction *as clear as possible*. But, as we noted above, both God in Genesis 3:21 and Jesus Christ (the Son of God incarnate) did not make it *as clear as possible* by abandoning the cloak for men in favor of pants or trousers. While we reject unisex styles of dress (e.g., the “butch” lesbian or cross-dressing sodomite), we do not reject modest, feminine style pants for women.

Another main argument of *The Young People’s Magazine* is that women want to wear pants because they want to be worldly; they want to adopt the world’s the world’s fashions. It reads, “The other main point is the reasoning behind our questioning the skirts/trousers tradition. Harsh as it may sound, if the biggest source of difficulty with wearing skirts comes either from a disrespectful challenge to our parents’ authority, or from a preference for getting as close as possible to worldly fashions, then it should be clear enough that our reasons for disliking skirts are very misguided” (Ibid). This reasoning is simply a case of *assuming* that women who wear pants want to get “as close as possible to worldly fashions.” To prove this statement is true, the author first would have to demonstrate that pants on women are a deliberate attempt to look like men and subvert God’s ordained separation of the sexes at creation. This has not been done and contradicts the long history of pants in the world and even the West. Second, the author would have to know the heart and motives of all women who have worn pants. Does the female Christian who wears dresses most of the time, but puts on a pair of old sweat pants to go into the garden to harvest potatoes do this because she wants to look like heathen women who wear “worldly fashions”? The author could respond that he was only presenting a few unbiblical reasons for wearing pants. But, that fact that the Free Presbyterians do not believe pants on women is permissible under any circumstances indicates he apparently believes that evil motives *always* lie behind the wearing of pants.

pictures on pottery and monuments, one cannot see any major difference between the male and female cloak. Perhaps women decorated or wore their cloaks in a different manner. It seems, however, that men and women were primarily distinguished by their hair, head coverings and adornments. In any case, the “as different as possible” argument contradicts the inspired Word of God and must be rejected.

Another common argument against pants on women is what we call guilt by association. It is argued that the acceptance of pants on women coincides with the acceptance of women into the work force and the feminist desire among women to be more and more like men. Thus, it is argued that if we allow women to wear pants, then we implicitly are approving of feminism and women rejecting their biblical duty of being “keepers at home” (Tit. 2:5). This argument is clever but must be rejected for two reasons. First, it is guilty of projecting the feminist mindset that was not widespread among women in the United States until at least the 1960s and 70s back into women’s minds throughout the whole twentieth century. While feminism in America goes all the way back at least to the 1850s, the vast majority of women accepted the role of a stay-at-home mother until the 1960s. Women in the workforce throughout the late 19th century and much of the 20th had virtually nothing to do with feminism. It arose because of the advance of industrialization at the same time the number of people involved in agriculture greatly diminished. Throughout this period, pants on women were rare and were generally speaking only used in industries where safety made them a necessity. The guilt by association argument assumes that most women adopted them as an anti-family, anti-Christian social statement and that is simply not true. Women moved into the workforce because churches were not teaching the whole counsel of God, in particular covenant headship.

Second, for the guilt by association argument to be valid or sound one would have to demonstrate that pants on women was a direct or at least indirect cause or effect of feminism and the destruction of the biblical concept of the family. The feminists of the 19th century and early 20th century all wore dresses down to their ankles and would have (as far as outward appearance goes) fit into any conservative church gathering. (In fact, many early feminists were professing Christians.) If one automatically or even generally associates pants on women to a feminist motive or sinful desire to be like the world, then he could also argue that the use of boats is evil or worldly because of their association with pirates.

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