

What shall I wear to worship? (G. Kappas)

1. Study 1 Timothy 2:8-9. What did Paul's letter mean within the context of the 1st century and the prevailing culture?

Timothy was left with the responsibility of caring for the church of Ephesus in Turkey. What a challenge! This port city for East and West trade was one of the richest cities in the world, in part because this city was the location of the Asiatic goddess Artemis. Worshipped for hundreds of years since approximately 800 BC by many cultures in Asia Minor, she was known by many names. In later years, she was confused with and mistaken for the Greek mythology goddess Artemis (and later adopted and renamed by the Romans as Diana) the daughter of Zeus and twin of Apollo.

The temple to the Asiatic goddess Artemis had been destroyed and rebuilt several times, but its 6th temple was regarded as one of the Seven Greatest Wonders of the Ancient World. Pliny recorded the dimensions of this temple as 425 feet in length, 225 feet in width, and the roof supported by 127 columns with a height of 60 feet. In comparison, the Parthenon whose ruins are found in Athens Greece today was only 230 feet in length, 100 feet in width, and had a roof supported by only 58 columns.

The Ephesian Asiatic goddess Artemis, whose patrons were prostitutes, was represented by a garland consisting of three rows of bulbous shaped objects which have been interpreted as nipple less breasts, eggs, or grapes which symbolized fertility and sexuality. Many ancient writers recorded the rampant immorality of the time. Imagine what type of tourism that attracted!

2. Against this cultural context, what does 1 Timothy 2:8-9 mean?

“Likewise.” Just as men are to conduct themselves in an organized and godly manner in the assembly, women also have specific guidelines to follow.

“Modestly.” The term here means to “be reserved in sexual matters.” Given what the Christians faced in Ephesus, this was in specific reference to clothing that was sexually enticing. Godly women do not dress like those who worship the Ephesian goddess Artemis and they should not be confused with prostitutes.

“Discretely.” This too was in reference to a sexual perspective. The term means “self-control or sobriety.” In other words, it's not just the clothes you wear but how you wear them.

“Braided hair.” Fritz Rienecker (*1) informs us, “Both Jewish and Gentile women were noted for their elaborate hairstyles. In Philo's description of pleasure coming in the guise of a prostitute, he describes such a woman as having her hair dressed in curious and elaborate plaits, her eyes with pencil lines, her eyebrows smothered with paint, and her costly raiment broided lavishly with flowers, and with bracelets, necklaces of gold and jewels hanging around her.”

“Pearls.” Pearls (1), at that time, were three times the value of gold. The pearls were used to dress up the hair, fingers, earrings, garments, and sandals.

“Costly garments.” Paul grew up in Tarsus, which was one of the finest centers for woven garments in the ancient world. Some garments could cost as much as 7000 denarii; lower quality garments cost 500-800 denarii. All this while the average wage was 1 denarii / day. Only the wealthy could afford such luxuries, clothes that cost, at minimum, 2 years salary. Consider what the “cost” of dressing down meant especially in a city with many beautiful people! Wealth, then and now, remains a stumbling block for many Christians.

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Paul discouraged expensive and fancy attire for 2 reasons: 1) at this time in Ephesus, this type of apparel was associated with pagan worship and prostitution; a potential distraction in worship, and 2) the clothes may garner favoritism at the expense of poorer members of the assembly and / or be a source of jealousy or resentment to believers (see James 2: 1-4).

3. Study 1 Timothy 2:10. What are the best adornments for worship?

“Good works.” Paul is referring to good deeds placed in the direction of serving God. Adornment “by means” of “good works” was the only outward appearance Paul emphasized as a reflection of the woman’s beauty.

“Making a claim.” This phrase was made in the present tense indicating a continual action. Genuine Christianity makes a claim on godliness. This points to a continual process of character development as a witness for and in service of God. “A Christian woman’s beauty is found in her godly character and her love for the Lord as demonstrated in all types of good works.” (2)

Therefore, the real question is not so much “What shall I (or you) wear to worship?”! The question that looms for us today, and believers in Jesus 2000 years ago, is and was, “What spirit of worship are we wearing?”!

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are regarded as Paul’s pastoral epistles, written from one pastor to another. Unlike his other epistles, these were personal letters to evangelists responsible for the care of churches. Its focus was on church organization and culture. Within the context of today, the words of these verses, in the above example, are often cast aside as irrelevant and can fuel the perception that the Bible is not relevant to today. Understanding the historical and cultural context of the times, as this case demonstrates, helps us understand more clearly what the Bible was saying especially in reference to conduct occurring then so that we may learn how to appropriately apply the lesson today.

References:

1. Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company (1990), 620-621.
2. Earl Radmacher, Ronald Allen, H. W. House, eds, *The Nelson Study Bible*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers (1997), p. 2044.

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