Does It Matter How We Dress for Worship?
*by Harry Osborne*

In all aspects of life, we must reflect godliness in our conduct, showing honor and respect for God. The Bible clearly states that our dress manifests either a godly manner of life that gives honor to God, or a conduct and character lacking such (1 Tim.2:8-10; Matt. 22:11-13; 1 Pet. 3:1-6; Ex. 19:10-13; etc.). Men and women are both responsible for dressing properly in daily life. This article will show that the Bible gives principles that further qualify our manner of dress in coming before God in worship. According to Scripture, ascribing unto the Lord the glory due unto His name is related to worshipping Him in "holy array" (1 Chron. 16:29; Psa. 29:1-2; 96:8-9). At least three principles help us understand the nature of that “holy array” related to showing the commanded respect for God:

**1. Worshipping the Lord “in holy array” demands modesty in our dress.** In 1 Timothy 2, the inspired writer exhorts all regarding acceptable prayer in worship to God. He ties with it an exhortation requiring men to lift up “holy hands” in prayer (v. 8). The point is not to mandate a posture or gesture for acceptable prayer, but to emphasize that it must be associated with proper conduct (represented by the word “hands”). The word “holy” defines the nature of that conduct. “Holy” (hosios) conduct is a pattern of action that is “religiously right, holy, as opposed to what is unrighteous or polluted; ...associated with righteousness” (W.E. Vine, Dictionary of NT Words). The very next verse begins to exhort women with the words, “in like manner” (v. 9). The like manner is obviously the manner of **holy conduct** that is equally incumbent on men and women who would worship God acceptably. In the case of women, the holiness specified is dressing in “modest apparel, with shamefastness and sobriety… professing godliness” (v. 9-10).

But what is required for one to be clothed in “modest apparel” exemplifying “shamefastness” and “sobriety”? Are there principles that lead us to identify such clothing and its opposite? Or are we left with no way to discern such, leaving each person to be a law to self in this realm? Careful consideration of New Testament instruction regarding proper dress when examined in light of the background given in Old Testament principles “written for our learning” will help the honest student seeking holiness to see that God has given sufficient instruction for us to identify the difference between acceptable and unacceptable clothing (Rom. 15:4 cf. 1 Pet. 3:1-6).

If proper dress demands “shamefastness,” it must obviously respect God’s statements and avoid the things He regards as shameful. So, what does God associate with “shame” as it relates to our dress? The “shame” of “nakedness” is seen as morally reprehensible from Genesis 3 through Revelation (3:17; 16:15; 17:16). But God repeatedly declares through Scripture that some are “naked” though wearing some clothes. For instance, the Bible tells us that Adam and Eve hid because they were “naked” though wearing “aprons” (Gen. 3:10). Those “aprons” were coverings for the loins and would have covered about the same amount as modern shorts or miniskirts. Yes, they had something on, but they were still “naked” as God viewed it. The priests were instructed to wear “linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs” (Ex. 28:42). Why are both the loins and thighs specified if both are not associated with “nakedness” as God views it? The inspired prophet portrays the shame to be brought on Babylon in figurative terms of the virgin daughter who is made to “uncover the thigh” with the results that “thy nakedness shall be uncovered, yea, thy shame shall be seen” (Isa. 47:1-3). Why so if uncovering the thigh is perfectly acceptable to God? As a parallel, note that the same prophet described the captivity of the Egyptians and Ethiopians in figurative terms as causing them to be “naked and barefoot, and with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt” (Isa. 20:4). If the figurative language is to have meaning, we must understand that the shame of being literally “naked” is present if one has the “buttocks uncovered.” If that is true of the uncovered buttocks in Isaiah 20:4, it is equally true of the uncovered thigh in Isaiah 47:2-3. Notice also that Ezekiel portrayed Jerusalem as having breasts “naked and bare” (Ezek. 16:7-8). Speaking for God, the prophet says how the condition was corrected: “I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness.” God did not put a flimsy top with a plunging neckline that left part of her breasts for public view, but fully covered her.

When we sum up what these passages teach regarding shameful nakedness, it is the result of having either the loins, buttocks, breasts or thighs uncovered. If we respect God’s teaching through the word, we will not dress in shorts, midriff-bearing tops, plunging necklines and sleeveless garments that leave easy view of parts of the body which should be fully covered. The same is true of tank tops, miniskirts, skirts with high slits, shirts unbuttoned to reveal the chest or skin-tight garments that merely put a thin veneer on the bodily form – whether male or female. Since such clothing should never be worn by Christians that respect God’s will, they should obviously not be worn to approach God in worship.

**2. Worshipping the Lord “in holy array” demands refraining from a materialistic show in our dress.** In the midst of the inspired warnings about “modest” and “chaste” clothing, the inspired writers condemn the “costly raiment” of opulence (1 Tim. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). Why? No doubt, part of the reason is that the costly apparel of the first century was the silk fashions which Pliny said “render women naked” and others called clothes “made of glass” (Robert Collen, East to Cathay: The Silk Road, 44-46). Such fashions were not only a problem with women, for Tacitus says in the reign of Tiberius a law was passed against “men disgracing themselves with silken garments” (Annals, ii., 33). Yet, their revealing nature is not the only thing wrong with such clothes. Even to worldly Roman writers, the waste and extravagance of such clothing was seen as an exhibition of self-indulgence. The many warnings of our Lord concerning the tendency of wealth to corrupt and take our minds off of spiritual things gives the divine basis for all to take heed of the same problem (Matt. 19:16-24; 6:19-33; Mk. 10:17-31; Lk. 18:18-30; 12:13-21; 16:14-15; 1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19; etc.).

From this writer’s perspective, the pull of materialism will lead to the loss of as many souls in hell as any sin we face. Yet, it is seen as acceptable in the sight of far too many. In fact, it is too often justified by brethren today just as it was by the Pharisees of Jesus’ day (Lk. 16:14-15). As one makes a grand entrance in costly suits, mink stoles and other extravagant fashions of our time, where is the focus drawn? Is it to the meek and lowly spirit of a godly servant or the worldly fashion? You be the judge.

**3. Worshipping the Lord “in holy array” demands showing proper honor and respect in our dress.** While some suggest a meek and lowly spirit in worship can best be shown by wearing the casual dress of daily life, Matthew 22:11-13 shows otherwise. The one who came to the wedding in everyday wear, without a “wedding-garment,” was condemned by the king. If the spiritual principle of the parable is to have any meaning, we must understand the physical truth that there is a difference between everyday clothing and clothing that shows a special respect or honor. Coming before God’s throne in worship should cause saints to show special honor to God (Isa. 6; Rev. 4-5). The psalmist’s plea to “ascribe unto Jehovah the glory due unto His name” is immediately followed by the instruction, “Worship Jehovah in holy array” (Psa. 29:2). Reading Exodus 28 and Exodus 39 should cause us to see that the “holy garments” in which the Levitical priests approached God in worship were not the casual clothes of everyday life. They were special garments showing respect and devotion to God. Sectarians wrongly use such passages to justify special garments for the clergy. But who are the priests in the gospel age? All Christians are (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6). Our service in conduct and dress should exemplify our honor and respect for God today as well. Does this suggest we bind the exact garments that the Levitical priests wore? No, not any more than modest clothing binds the exact styles of those in Bible times to cover nakedness. But the principle taught must be respected.

When a man approaches the Lord’s table in tattered blue jeans and a rumpled T-shirt, does it exemplify the honor due God? When a woman approaches God in worship wearing the same casual dress she might wear at Wal-Mart, does it suggest a high degree of respect for God? Would either wear such to a wedding or to meet the President? While we should not write a dress code for worship, binding where God did not, neither should we justify laxness in dress that fails to show the honor and respect due God as we ascribe glory to Him. Respectful clothing need not be expensive to distinguish it from daily wear. Old farmers had their “Sunday-go-to-meeting” overalls that differed in cleanliness and wear from their everyday ones. They rightly understood and applied the principle taught – so should we.