

## It's All Legalism?

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When I tell people I come from a Pentecostal background with a “holiness” heritage that includes some emphasis on proper Christian dress and behavior, the reaction is one of incredulity and the inevitable statements about legalism and bondage to the rules of man. And I certainly understand what they are talking about. I have said the same myself. Some who adhere to such teaching can be little more than present day Pharisee’s insulating themselves from the rest of society and even the rest of Christendom, all the while feeling very good about themselves and very bad about everyone else. I do not deny that this problem exists. I don’t deny it because some (many?) of the “standards of holiness” have no foundation in the Word of God. Some of the standards were born in unique church cultures decades ago or more, and have become sacrosanct. For example, beards like mine are so far outside the norm as to be generally prohibited. I kid you not. Mind you, every church has its cultural eccentricities.

However, some of the reactions to the beliefs from my background make me wonder, has anyone read their Bible? Seriously! When I mention that our women were discouraged from cutting their hair I am usually met with an “Oh My God!” kind of horror. “How very medieval.” And no or very little wearing of makeup! “Dear Jesus, have mercy on those held in such religious bondage!” “You mean the women are encouraged to only wear dresses and skirts, and to avoid slacks and pants? How cultic!”

Sigh.

One would think that such beliefs came straight from the Koran and had absolutely no foundation in the Word of God. You would surmise that the Scriptures never at any time make mention of clothing, or hair, or makeup. You would think that this is all religious nonsense invented by dictatorial men trying to keep their women in place, preferable “barefoot and pregnant, and in the kitchen.”

### Scripture

But perhaps we should just pause for a moment and take a closer look. Does the Bible make *any* reference to these things, or is it all hokum? Without comment, interpretation, or application, here is some of what the Scriptures say:

*Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. 1Timothy 2:9-15 (NASB)*

*Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. 1 Peter 3:3-4 (ESV)*

And in the KJV, which is the Bible of choice for many Holiness Pentecostals it says “*Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.*”

*Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 1 Corinthians 11: 14-15 (NASB)*

*A woman shall not wear man's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God. Deuteronomy 22:5 (NASB)*

Do with them what you will, these statements are direct from the Word of God.

Permit me to share three observations.

### **1. God Looks at the Heart**

When speaking against those who adhere to a holiness standard for our attire some glibly quote 1 Samuel 16:7, "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart," as if that dismisses it all. Yes, God looks at the heart. The prophet Samuel thought David's elder brother Eliam looked like the perfect choice for king, but God said, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." This was about being qualified for leadership. All seven of David's older brothers, mighty warriors all, were rejected. David, who looked like the least eligible candidate, was God's choice. This verse does not negate the need to dress in a way that glorifies God.

### **2. Judging by Appearances**

Second, when we immediately dismiss Holiness Christians as "legalistic" because of their clothing standards *we ourselves are judging the intents of their hearts based on their appearance*. How very ironic. And of course, Holiness Christians must be careful not to dismiss other Believers who lack their values and beliefs, concluding they are "worldly, with no love for Jesus." That too is a judgment based on appearance.

The fashions and style of more conservative Pentecostals may seem outdated or peculiar to some but God sees their hearts. If they are doing it to be better than anyone else, to stand out in the crowd, to conform to an eccentric church culture, or to make themselves ok in the eyes of a difficult to please God, then yes, they are misguided. But if they are doing it as unto the Lord, with a heart full of love wanting only to please Him, then their sacrifice is a sweet-smelling fragrance before the Lord and absolutely delights His heart. He does not think they need to come into more "liberty"! Theirs is a heart set free by passion and love for the Lord.

### **3. Obedience to the Word of God**

And if Holiness Pentecostals are doing it because they take the Word of God very, very seriously and want to be extra careful to apply the ancient Scriptures to 21<sup>st</sup>-century life, this is to be honored, even emulated, and certainly not despised or scorned as legalism! As we have seen, the Word of God does talk about these things - hair, dress, and modesty - as well as proper attitudes and a right spirit. Those who fancy ourselves as being "set free" would do well to follow their intent, no matter what they think of their application.

So, it is *all* legalism? Perhaps not so much!