

divine nature and condescended to be a human being. It is enough that the disciple be as his master.

Hudson Taylor writes, "If we really desire to see the Chinese such as we have described, let us as far as possible set before them a correct example: let us in everything un sinful become Chinese, that by all things we may save some. Let us adopt their costume, acquire their language, study to imitate their habits, and approximate to their diet as far as health and constitution will allow..."

Hudson Taylor showed the true missionary spirit. Jesus showed the true missionary spirit. Our Lord had to be identified by a kiss on His cheek because He blended into the society where He lived and they could not identify Him by the way He dressed. Being God in the flesh, Jesus could have given us some specifics and started a new "trend" of what Christians ought to dress like, but He did no such thing. Jesus came as a Jewish baby, conformed to his middle-eastern culture of the day, dressed like them and lived like them.

Our mission field is not in Saudi Arabia, the Ukraine, Japan, or a tribe of naked indians in Brazil. It is the USA in 2011. Just as we would not go to Japan as missionaries wearing 200 year old kimonos but would honor the culture they have today, we must do the same for where we live.

In conclusion, the Biblical timeless principles on dress teaches us to blend with our world where it is not sinful. We are to dress ourselves modestly as to not draw attention to ourselves, either by lewdness or by excess in any way. Bible modesty is not sinful but is moderate, is gender sensitive, and is appropriate for the current day and society where we live.

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# Modern Modesty



*The Timeless Biblical Principle  
With A Modern Application*

by John and Ellen Duncan

"Modern Modesty" is a term not very talked about in our world today. Most articles dealing with Christian modesty try to persuade the modern Christian to live in a cultural time period prior to the 21st century. In this article we will attempt to defend the Biblical principle of modesty as taught in the Bible with a modern application relevant to our culture today.

First of all, the Bible gives us three principles on how a Christian ought to dress. We will expound on each one below:

- a. Wholesome Look – 1 Thess 5:22
- b. Gender Distinction – Det. 22:5
- c. Modesty – 1 Tim. 2:9

## a. Wholesome Look

1 Thess 5:22 "Abstain From All Appearance Of Evil."

Your inner walk with Christ and character will show in every area of your life: the friends you have, the music you listen to, the books you read, the places you frequent, the use of your time and money, and the way you dress. Paul admonishes us to do all things for the glory of God, even in the smallest and most ordinary things in life. As Christians, our attire should be to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31).

Christians should not wear clothing that promotes rebellion against God or arouse sinful passions and practices, but should "abstain from all appearance of evil." (1 Thess. 5:22). Before wearing any attire Christians should ask, "is it sinful? Does it promote lifestyle, practices, or ideology that are against God?"

A Christian is first a citizen of Heaven, and regardless of where he lives his first commitment in dress should be a commitment to purity and holiness. In a

culture where another religion is prevalent, a Christian should refrain from wearing apparel that promotes something other than Christian virtue.

#### b. Gender Distinction

Deut. 22:5 "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God."

The Bible admonishes gender distinction – in other words, a woman must dress like a woman and a man must dress like a man. Cross-dressing is offensive to the natural distinction between a man and a woman. Some believe that this verse forbids women from wearing pants because pants were traditionally worn by men until the early part of the 1900s in the USA. However, in light of the fact that both men and women wore robes or similar outfits and the fact that pants were not worn by anybody in Israel at the time when Moses wrote this commandment, that conclusion would be impossible to Biblically prove. The Bible mentions "breeches" as an attire that covered the priests' nakedness from the loins to the thighs - far from what we call "pants" today that go all the way to the ground. Breeches were merely a pair of boxer briefs (underwear) to be worn under their robes or "coats" (Ex. 28:39-40, 42).

#### c. Modesty

1 Timothy 2:9 "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array.."

Modesty is a timeless Biblical principle. It is taught in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and it pertains to both the inward attitude and the outward attire. Even though the principle of modesty was God's idea, man's (mis)application of this timeless principle has brought much confusion, wrong doctrine, and the loss of true faith in some cases.

The Greek word for "modesty" (Kosmios) is used in 1 Tim 3:2 as "good behavior," and in 1 Pet. 3:1-5 the apostle used the word to describe both outward dress and inward attitude. It is useless for someone to be modest in dress and yet not have the Spirit of God in their hearts. Having said that, this article assumes a pure heart and its scope is to address modesty as it pertains to outward dress.

#### Modesty Defined

The teaching of "modesty" in itself can be broken down into three parts due to the definition of the word itself. "Modest" as it pertains to outward dress is defined in the World English Dictionary as: 1. not ostentatious or pretentious, 2. decorous or decent, 3. not extreme or excessive; moderate. Let's study each of these three principles for a comprehensive understanding of modesty:

a. **Not Ostentatious or Pretentious** – a Christian should not dress as to impress others, to be showy, vulgar in display, or gaudy. Modesty requires that we do not dress to make an outward show by assumption of dignity or importance. Most Christendom understands this principle well and frown at those who dress to be seen as important.

#### b. Phariseeism Is Based On The of Fear of Man

In searching for an article that defends Modern Modesty, we found several articles from those trapped in conservative religious Christian groups where one is seen as backslid or compromised for not holding to a dress standard from the last century. "I am in [denomination]. I come from a long line of preachers and was raised this way. Because of this I will withhold my name but below I will post my true feelings about these outward standards." There is a fear of being found and judged as "liberal" by others in the fellowship, while there is a desire to be seen as having "strong convictions" by others in the group, which brings respect and admiration. While there is nothing wrong with stating your opinions as you see them, the need to be recognized for our strong morals or the need to withhold our identify shows that this is motivated by the fear of man. "...their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments..." (Mat 23:5)

#### c. Phariseeism Is Hard to Leave

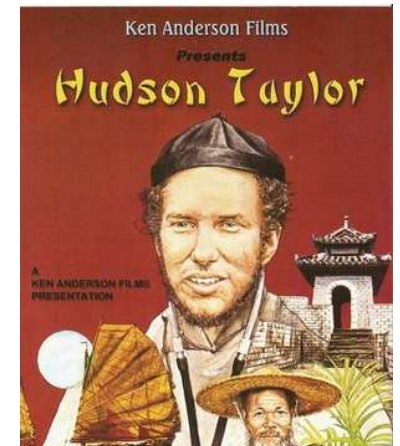
Some pastors have been preaching these dress standards as Heaven or Hell issues as it pertains to their congregations for years. They have carefully observed all of these traditions and passed them down to their children and grandchildren. All their friends and their Christian acquaintances believe the same things. Their wives and children have been taught (and sometimes made) to dress this way. Their finances have been invested in this way of living. They have written books, tracts, sold tapes, and taught all of these extra Biblical rules.

It would be very difficult for someone in this position to ever change. Changing would be viewed as hypocritical, backsliding, going liberal... They just have too much invested in this to ever stop now. It would take a whole lot of honesty and boldness to take a different stand.

#### d. Phariseeism Is Irrelevant To Our Culture

Hudson Taylor was an amazing man who broke many cultural barriers to reach the Chinese in the 1800s. Taylor spent 51 years in China and was responsible for starting 125 schools, resulting in 18,000 conversions. He was best known for his zeal for evangelism and for his sensitivity to the Chinese culture. Hudson Taylor was a pioneer in our modern day beliefs for reaching those in the foreign mission field respecting their culture: he ate Chinese food with chopsticks, observed their customs, spoke their language, and wore Chinese clothing.

Hudson Taylor's main motivation was his desire to imitate Jesus Christ, "who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself... (Phil 2:6-8) Jesus disrobed himself of His



woman to wear her hair up, a woman to wear her hair down, a woman to have a split in the front of her dress, in the side of her dress, or the back of her dress (even if it's small and the dress is long)... It's a sin for a man to have a split in the back of his sports coat, it is a sin to have the internet, a TV box (TV must be called a monitor), medicine, doctors, neck ties, chocolate, soft drinks, eating out, using electricity, or using the telephone on Sundays... I have heard some say yes to all these and more because they cracked the door to adding to God's Holy Word and little by little their list kept increasing!

Some people develop a personal conviction and then try to find Biblical justification for it, drawing a responsibility on others to keep the same standard. A woman may feel that the Lord wants her to be separated by giving up wearing pants. That is commendable, but no different than to be separated by only wearing the color "yellow." Dresses are not holier than pants if they are both modest. However, if this woman now misuses Deut. 22:5 and tries to impose it on others, not only would this be a grave error in misusing the Scriptures but she would be enforcing a law on others not given by God. Prov. 17:15 says that "He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD."

#### a. Phariseism Robs People Of True Faith In Jesus Christ, Not In Dress Standards

I heard a sermon being preached one time about Nehemiah's walls. Outward standards of dress were equated to the "wall" that fortified and protected the city which was equated to our inner life in Christ. That may be a good analogy as long as the wall is kept in its place of importance and the "city" is tended for carefully. However, many end up making the "walls" (their dress standards) the most important thing in their lives. This results in the destruction of the "city" from within.

One of the goals in writing this article is to help those who have been robbed of a simple faith in Jesus Christ by the misplacing their faith in extra-Biblical outward standards. Many people who are raised believing that an outward dress standard from the 1800's will always follow true faith today find themselves with no confidence once those outward standards are gone.

I have talked to several Christians who have left such movements and now struggle to find victory in Christ without keeping these dress codes. A woman just cannot find confidence in her relationship with God because she now trims her hair or wears modest, feminine pants. A man struggles and no longer feels accepted by God because he now wears sandals (open-toed shoes). These people have burned their bridges and have been maligned, talked against, and gossiped about in their old circles so they cannot go back to them. Yet they cannot find freedom because the confidence they once "knew" was not in Jesus Christ Himself, but in a dress code that was not necessary for salvation in the first place! Some of these people fall headlong into sin being discouraged with the situation. What a shame! "...they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders... ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in." (Mat 23:4, 13)

b. **Decorous or Decent** – a Christian should dress with dignified propriety in conduct, manners, appearance, conforming to the recognized standard of propriety and good taste. "Decent" means respectable; worthy, adequate; suitable; appropriate, wearing enough clothing to appear in public. A wise man has said that "clothes are meant to conceal, not reveal." Most articles on Biblical modesty sufficiently explore the aspect of modesty that deals with lewdness and rightly point out that our modern society has fallen into much lasciviousness in behavior and dress. Clothes should not be form fitting or sensual. Modesty certainly requires us to dress as not to cause the opposite sex to stumble and fall into sexual temptation but this is not ALL that modesty teaches as we shall soon observe.

c. **Moderate, Not Extreme or Excessive** – a Christian should dress moderately and not draw attention to him / herself. Modesty is not excessive or extreme, but it is moderate. This aspect of modesty is the most obvious and perhaps for this reason a defense has been deemed unnecessary in the past. However, the lack of a defense for "modern modesty" has left some in the church without a firm understanding of this principle and how we as Christians ought to dress in our society in modern times. We focus our studies on this aspect of modesty because of the lack of materials on this subject.

### Modern Modesty

*"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth. [Do what helps your fellow man]... Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved." (1 Cor. 10:23-24, 31-33)*

As discussed earlier, the Biblical principle of modesty remains unchanged through time. However, the application of this principle does evolve and changes according to situation, location, time, and culture. Here we provide 3 questions that will help you decide how to dress: 1. Is it sinful? 2. Is it gender sensitive? 3. Is it decent, adequate, suitable, appropriate, and moderate?

#### a. Modesty Varies According to Situation:

A preacher in the Midwest praised a man who realized that "people ought to dress the same way everywhere they went at all times." While mowing the grass in his own privacy fenced-in backyard in a hot summer day, alone and without a shirt on, he believed that God asked him, "why do you not have your shirt on?" To this he replied, "Lord, because I'm alone and I'm in a fenced-in backyard and no one will see me." The Lord then answered, "Well, I can see you." As a response, this man never again was without a shirt.

This testimony goes to show the simplicity of thinking in some religious circles. While they may have pure hearts, many questions remain... Since the Lord is everywhere, has all-seeing eyes, and never sleeps, does the Lord see you in the shower? Should you shower fully clothed? How should a Christian then change clothing since the process requires bareness for a few seconds?

Obviously what is appropriate dress for church is not appropriate for sleep, and what is appropriate for sports is not appropriate for school or business. Modern Biblical Modesty requires us to simply ask a few questions in light of the activity performed and situation. We should ask the key questions: 1. Is it sinful? 2. Is it gender sensitive? 3. Is it decent, adequate, suitable, appropriate, and moderate?

#### b. Modesty Varies According to Location: Saudi Arabia, Scotland, and Brazil

Most of the church seems to understand this aspect of modesty well. The dress standard in the USA is not the same as the dress standard in other countries. Wearing a head covering is a custom in dress for women in certain Middle Eastern and Slavic countries but it is offensive to the women in the USA in general. When ministering to these cultures, missionaries should be mindful of the general culture in that society and avoid offending someone unduly. When visiting a different country, a Christian should ask: does my attire promote sin? Is it gender sensitive, decent, adequate, suitable, appropriate, and moderate? Will I attract attention to myself by wearing (or not wearing) a certain outfit in this country? My advice to the women is to wear the head covering on when visiting a place like small towns in the Ukraine.



Likewise a man from Scotland should obviously not expect to be considered modest in the USA by wearing a kilt. In this country, men wearing "skirts" are breaking the modesty principle of being gender sensitive. A man wearing a kilt would not be adequate, suitable, appropriate or moderate in the USA. A modest Scottish man would not want to draw attention to himself when visiting the USA and a kilt would definitely turn heads. I recall seeing a handful of Christian men posing for a picture wearing men's skirts from another country. These men were very masculine street preachers who understood that in that culture, men's skirts were the acceptable dress code. I do not believe that these men will be preaching on the streets in the USA wearing those skirts.

Some Christians will ask, "what if the local cultural dress is nakedness, such as in some indigenous tribes in Brazil? Should missionaries bare all?" Of course not. There is more than one aspect of modesty as we have already discussed. The first one is that it must not be sinful, and the second is that it must be decent. In this article we are attempting to have a comprehensive study on modesty and as such we are not focusing only on the lewdness aspect, but by no means are we excluding it. However, we want to bring attention to the fact that modesty covers more things than just the sensuality aspect.

Should a Christian missionary visiting Japan blend in with society as they are in 2011 (westernized / pants and shirts), or should we buy kimonos to blend in with the way the Japanese looked 200 years ago, figuring that they were more modest then than now? The answer is obvious as we will answer in the next section.

There must be an understanding that some people will be offended with your vow of separation and if you are willing to follow God in this matter even if it makes you stand out from the rest, by all means follow God's direction in your separation. Also we must remember that a personal conviction does not make one holier than someone else as we are all made holy at the cross by the blood of Jesus.

#### b. A Personal Conviction Will Humble You

A personal conviction will humble you for being "different," not exalt you. It is usually something that you want to do as an act of love and devotion unto the Lord and therefore too private to shout from the housetops. Other people may think that you are weird for having that conviction so it is humbling to have it, but rewarding in your devotional life.

Back at the turn of the century in London, it was normal for respectable men to wear a hat. Bro. Howells developed a conviction that the Lord did not want him to wear his hat to be set free from the fear of man. This made him look and feel foolish to his peers and he was scoffed by his acquaintances. This went on for several months and Howells prayed for 3 hours every night, and he ended his time of separation with a 15 day fast. People began to sense the presence of God in his life, and many former scoffers would now touch their hats to him as he passed.

#### c. A Personal Conviction Cannot Be Imposed On Others

A personal conviction is just that: personal. Let Jesus be Lord over others as He is Lord over you. Chances are that other Christians around you will develop personal convictions different from yours. The Lord may give others a conviction for praying a certain amount of hours every day, fasting often, evangelizing the lost, giving up something they love, or spending a certain amount of time in daily Bible study. If God deals with them, let them obey God. A personal conviction is an individual dealing with the Lord and we should not expect God to deal with everyone in the same way that He deals with us.

### Phariseeism

Deuteronomy 4:2 "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you."

For the sake of this article, I define Phariseeism as an error where people turn personal convictions into laws and then justify or condemn self or others for either keeping or breaking those extra-Biblical laws.

The danger here is in the fact that when the door is opened for extra-Biblical rules to be enforced, man-made laws come in as an avalanche. The same door that dictates that a woman can not wear pants also dictates that she can only wear dark colors. Where does this avalanche stop?

A few extra Biblical rules that we have personally heard preached or talked about: It is a sin to have a beard, wear short sleeves, wear sandals with open toed shoes, non-black cars, red dress, drink from a bottle, wear a wristwatch, wear eye glasses, wear tennis shoes at church, a woman to trim her hair, a

standard” of dress: the fellowship they receive and the feeling of belonging to a family. We have observed that many pastors will freely open up their pulpit to preachers who hold a theological stand diametrically different from theirs but because they “look” the same, they are welcomed in. People who have a strong conviction about the head covering on women tend to seek to fellowship in churches where all the women wear head coverings, regardless of whether they are Calvinists, Armenians, Pentecostals, or Open Theists. They are able to overlook issues such as racism, the gifts of the spirit, or the Godhead because they have placed such an importance upon the outward appearance.

Many people who leave such religious groups are ostracized, shunned, and considered backslidden for breaking these rules of dress.



When I go to foreign lands and fellowship with other Christians, I truly feel at home. However, this fellowship I enjoy with them is not a result of their outward appearance but a common love for God and Christian principles. It is what is on the inside of the person that makes us alike, not the fact that we dress the same.

Am I saying that the Amish are going to Hell for the way they dress? NO! Am I saying that they are less spiritual than the average Christian? Again, assuming they are born again, absolutely NOT! I am just pointing out that they have erred in some aspects of modesty and in their separation have failed in reaching our society for Christ. They can be very spiritual individuals and deeply love the Lord. There is also the issue of personal conviction to consider which we address next.

### Exception: Personal Conviction

Christians in their walk with the Lord may develop personal convictions. These personal convictions may last for a while or may be lifelong commitments.

In the Bible there was an allowance for the Nazarite vow (Num. 6) where men or women voluntarily separated themselves for personal reasons. This vow had a specific time frame and had specific requirements and restrictions: Nazarites could not eat or drink grape products, could not cut their hair for the length of the vow, and could not get near a dead body. Some believe that Paul took this vow in Acts 18:18 and Acts 21:23-26.

#### a. A Personal Conviction Will Make You Different

A personal conviction will separate you from the rest of Christians and may make you, in some cases, “immodest” such as with Sampson’s long uncut hair or Isaiah’s lack of clothing for a time. These men were outside of the norm for a specific reason of separation. Other men who were life-long Nazarites were Samuel (1 Sam 1:11) and John the Baptist... by implication they probably did not have short hair.

#### c. Modesty Varies According to Time

John Wesley said, “As to matters of dress, I would recommend one never to be first in the fashion nor the last out of it.” Most teachings on Christian modesty fail to make the principle applicable to our modern days and seem to defend a dress standard that pertained to a time period from the 1800s to early 1900s in the USA. In light of the fact that the place of origin of our Christian faith was Israel in the year 33 AD, it is very difficult for such teachers to be Biblically consistent with this particular modern application of the principle of modesty. For one their fashion is off by about 1850 years from NT Biblical customs, and second they are wearing attire that was not named in the Scriptures.

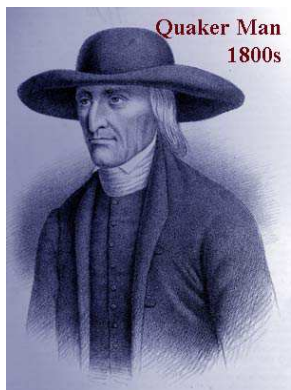
In Korea trousers were worn by women since the 15th century. In the USA, pants were viewed as man’s attire for the most part before World War 2 (there were exceptions). But this view of feminine pants has changed over time. A modern American woman can wear a pair of pants today that is both decent (not seductive, clingy, or form fitting) and feminine. In fact, a pair of pants is much more appropriate than a long dress when engaging in several activities. Some dresses are also more lewd than many models of pants. The saying that “pants are (exclusively) men’s clothing” no longer applies to 2011 in the USA. The principle of modesty remains the same; clothing must be gender sensitive, decent, and not draw attention. But the application of this principle does change according to time, depending on culture and what is the (un)sinful “norm” in that society.

Again, through the study of the word “modesty” we see that Christians must be moderate, adequate, suitable, appropriate, and decent. While Christian women wearing clothing pertaining to the 1800s would certainly meet the Biblical requirement for decency (as to cover their nakedness), it fails to be moderate, adequate, suitable or appropriate for 2011 in the USA. Modest dress must meet all of these requirements, not only the one pertaining to decency.

Many good Christians tend to look at our lewd society and swing the pendulum to the other extreme. They see that so many wear very little clothing so they wear as much clothing and cover as much skin as possible. Again, this style of dress covers plenteously, but is it adequate, suitable, appropriate, and moderate? When asked, they testify that “this is better than to walk around naked.” They fail to recognize the existence of anything but the two extremes; to them it is either naked or covered as much as possible. However, there is a happy medium that is decent, gender sensitive, modern, and modest for our culture and time.

When visiting Pennsylvania we were fascinated with the lifestyle of the Amish. We were careful to observe them without being too obvious as to not make them uncomfortable. We saw others snapping pictures of the Amish as they mingled in town. The Amish are certainly an attraction in Pennsylvania, however not necessarily for their Christian godliness but for their dress and outward customs.

There are religious groups in the USA such as the Amish who promote and wear apparel that is obsolete. But one aspect of modesty is that it should be moderate: not excessive in any way to attract attention. Antiquated means: “continued from, resembling, or adhering to the past; old-fashioned.”



A website attempts to explain why the Amish dress the way they do: "[Three] hundred years ago, the Amish didn't dress that differently from other American farmers. Society in general dressed more modestly than they do today. Amish dress reflects the standards of Christian modesty from an era long ago. Since the Bible hasn't changed, the Amish believe that standards of modesty shouldn't change either.

So although Amish dress seems so different from modern society, if this were the 1700s, Amish dress would blend in nicely with the dress of rural Presbyterians, Baptists, or Methodists. In other words, it isn't the Amish who have changed; it's the society around them."

Many conservative Christians are immodest because they draw attention to themselves by holding on to a time period instead of a principle. I find that such groups tend to observe the customs and attire of the time period when they were last in revival. Certain Pentecostal groups hold on to a dress standard from the late 1800's to the early 1900's when they experienced an outpouring of the Holy Ghost.

The Amish modestly blended in with society in the 1700s but as time progressed, they failed to progress with society and thus failed to remain moderate in their dress standard. Three hundred years later it is easy to see that while their attire is certainly not lewd and provides gender distinction, it does not meet other aspects of modesty such as being adequate, suitable, appropriate, and moderate. I am confident that if my wife walked in the typical non-Amish church in the USA today wearing the full Amish garb she would turn heads and it would not be for her godliness, but for the way she dressed!

"Modesty is not the only reason why the Amish dress differently. They have purposefully decided to be distinct from the world around them. They want their dress to reflect their Christian values. They want to dress "plain," rather than fancy or stylish. They want to wear home-sewn clothes rather than clothes sold by the clothing industry. Amish values are unchanging, and they want their clothes to reflect that."

There are several problems with this way of thinking. First, the Amish were not different from society members in the 1700s. Since they blended in with society then, does that mean that they did not reflect Christian values since they failed to be visually distinct from those around them in that era?

Another fallacy is the fact that their dress standard reflects a time period (the 1700s), not Christian values. Back then society in general dressed similarly and we know that everyone in that society was not born-again. So did they dress "like the world" back in then 1700s but gradually became more modest as time went on and society changed? A more consistent argument could be given if the Amish dressed as in Bible days, wearing robes and sandals.

"Another reason why the Amish dress differently is that their distinctive dress immediately identifies others who share their same values. As one Amish man said, 'Seeing a fellow plain person when far from home is like hearing your own language spoken while traveling in a foreign land. There is an immediate bond of fellowship even though the person might be a total stranger.'"

I believe that this is probably one of the strongest reasons why certain individuals in conservative religious groups fear leaving their "outward