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Long Skirts and High Necklines:

Modest Fashion Bloggers Find Community and Femininity Online

Introduction

Contemporary society is divided over whether and, if so, how female dress should be policed. While some advocate dress codes as a means to maintain what they consider appropriate dress, others resist such codes as damaging to girls and women. Often, religious groups who practice modest dress – including portions of Muslim, Jewish, Mormon, Protestant, and Catholic communities, among others – are cited by the latter side as the worst offenders when it comes to repressive modesty codes. Yet this negative view ignores practitioners' beliefs that modest dress is not just about outward appearance. For them, it is also a vital part of how they live out their faith, since it is both a spiritual commitment and a physical representation of their brand of spirituality. In this paper, I examine modest fashion blogs created by conservative Christian women in order to view this lived faith as exhibited online. When they post modest outfits online, Christian bloggers are doing more than just sharing fashion advice. Through blogging, they not only find online communities of like-minded women but also create spaces in which they can engage with others in conversations about how they, as women, should live their lives according to biblical principles.

Women's Modesty Blogs

Through examining evidence from social media networks, I explore how conservative Christian women's modest fashion blogs create an online space for dialogue about how these

women live out their faith.¹ The bloggers on whom I focus regularly interact with each other online, most demonstrably through comments on blogs and other social media as well as by participating in weekly link lists and mentioning other bloggers in posts. A few have met each other in person, though only after having interacted on social media for a considerable time. The majority appear to be Protestant; published denominations include Assemblies of God, Missionary Methodist, Baptist, Covenant Presbyterian, and Presbyterian Church of America. Others include Old Testament-observant and nondenominational Christians, and at least one blogger is Roman Catholic.²



¹ I have intentionally excluded Mormon and Apostolic Pentecostal blogs because doctrinal rules of dress are followed by large portions of these churches and because fashion bloggers from these groups are not typically interacting with the blogs I selected.

² I will quote from only a small selection of the modest fashion blogs that are part of this network, which is centered on such blogs as The Modest Mom (www.themodestmomblog.com), Fresh Modesty (www.freshmodesty.com; formerly www.freshmodesty.blogspot.com), and Our Wood Home (www.ourwoodhome.com). Bloggers are typically homeschoolers, homeschool graduates, and/or homeschooling parents. Ages of bloggers span from early teens to middle age. The teens and young adults who are not yet married live at home with their parents and siblings, while most of the bloggers in their mid-twenties or older are married with children. Most bloggers are American (though there are some in Canada, Australia, and Great Britain) and live around the country, often in rural areas.

The bloggers I selected from this network primarily post outfit photographs. Occasionally they will post about other lifestyle topics, including hairstyles, healthy eating, sewing, crafting, and special events in their lives and their communities. Often included in these posts are scripture quotations and reflections on that Sunday's sermon. Appearing less frequently but still prominently are Q&A and other explanatory posts in which bloggers outline their beliefs on important topics, especially modesty and courtship, but also including anti-feminism, being stay-at-home-daughters or –moms, head covering, and other matters tied to their faith. In this way, the online community formed by modest fashion bloggers provides a platform for these women to discuss related areas of their faith, most especially living out what they view as God-granted biblical femininity rather than worldly alternatives.

Modesty and Biblical Femininity

Biblical femininity, also referred to variously as biblical womanhood, godly womanhood, or by a few bloggers as radical femininity, is based on what many conservative Christians interpret as biblical guidelines for women's roles and behavior. Liberal evangelical author Rachel Held Evans situates the roots of the biblical femininity movement in reactions among conservative Reformed Christians to second-wave feminism, beginning with writers such as Edith Schaeffer and Elisabeth Elliot, who published books advocating that women stay at home (under male authority) to raise children and maintain households. By the late 1980s, the “theological bulwark” of the movement could be found in the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which issued an influential statement and book on the subject.³ The bloggers discussed in this paper express that in addition to holding Christian beliefs, living out biblical womanhood includes, or is at least associated with, gender complementarianism, anti-feminism,

³ Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband “Master”* (Thomas Nelson, 2012), xix. Evans has since joined the Episcopal denomination.

being stay-at-home-daughters and then stay-at-home-moms, courtship, emotional and sexual purity, submission to male authority (fathers, then husbands), being a “helpmeet” to husbands, homeschooling, and modest dress.



The concept at the root of biblical femininity is the belief that God created two sexes, male and female, to complement each other. This belief runs counter to second-wave feminism, which strives to make men and women equal in all areas of society and sees patriarchal systems as inherently oppressive to women. Those who advocate biblical femininity, however, believe the biblical model places women in submission to men. Bloggers and other writers on the subject are quick to point out that this does not mean that women are *inferior* to men, but rather that God has created men and women to have separate roles. Men are stronger and are given the positions of authority and of working outside the home, whereas women are created to be their “helpmeets,” raising children in ways considered to be godly and maintaining the domestic sphere while submitting to male authority. The basis for this relationship comes primarily from the creation story recounted in Genesis 2, where God creates Adam and then creates Eve. In

Genesis 2:18, the King James Version refers to Eve as created to be Adam's "helpmeet." She is seen by complementarian interpreters as the secondary creation, made to aid her husband in his work.

With this biblical basis, advocates for biblical femininity view the movement as a countercultural reaction to what they consider to be the distortion of gender roles by a feminism that places women in the workplace and encourages them to take on roles and attributes that should belong only to men. They view the modern world as troubled and seek to restore to it the system by which they believe men and women should relate to each other. Catholic author and modesty advocate Colleen Hammond bemoans, "By trying to blur the divinely created differences between men and women, our culture has succeeded in destroying the integrity of both."⁴ Feminism is viewed by advocates of biblical femininity as an attempt by women to assume masculine roles rather than leaving those roles to the men. Feminism is thus perceived as damaging to both genders by seeking to challenge the positions assigned to each sex/gender by God since creation.⁵

One main reason these women have for modesty, then, is to glorify God through dressing as befits those whom God created as female, tying together concerns about gender complementarity, purity, and femininity. Hammond writes, "if we don't treat *ourselves* with respect by dressing modestly, how can we expect others to do so? By dressing immodestly, we betray our feminine mission and vocation as guardian of purity that is given to us by God

⁴ Colleen Hammond, *Dressing with Dignity*, Second ed. (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 2005), 75.

⁵ Posts about feminism include: Caroline Allen, "31 Days of Femininity: It all started in the garden," *The Modest Mom*, 1 October 2011, accessed 17 April 2016, <http://www.themodestmomblog.com/2011/10/31-days-of-femininity-it-all-started-in/> and Rebekah Shashaguay, "Outfit // Snazzy Jacket || Feminism, Good or Evil?," *Calico Sisters*, 7 January 2015, accessed 17 April 2016, <http://calicoclosthoppers.blogspot.com/2015/01/outfit-snazzy-jacket-feminism-good-or.html>; "Why The Name?," *Radical Femininity*, n.d., accessed 17 April 2016, <http://radicalfemininity.com/why-the-name/>.

Himself.”⁶ Women are to dress in ways that emphasize the roles they are granted by God as females: keepers of the home, submissive wives, mothers who raise pure and faithful children, beings who complement but are entirely different from the male sex.

Several scriptural references are cited by bloggers as the basis for their interpretations of biblical models of femininity. Perhaps the most famous is Deuteronomy 22:5, which reads, “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God.”⁷ Though some Christian denominations have taken this to indicate that women cannot wear pants (seen as distinctly masculine clothing), most of the bloggers in this network prefer interpretations that dictate simply that women should wear clothing that is considered feminine. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 (“women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire, but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion”⁸) has also been cited as a basic reference to modesty in the Bible.

More often, Bible verses given the most attention by bloggers provide models for women that include modesty among a host of other “feminine” attributes. Titus 2:3-5 is one such passage directed towards women: “Bid the older women likewise to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited.”⁹ Olivia Howard draws on this passage when she explains that her “heart” for her blog is “to provide young ladies (in the spirit of Titus 2) with a really human example of how to take dominion over our wardrobes for Christ,”

⁶ Hammond, *Dressing with Dignity*, 8.

⁷ Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁸ RSV.

⁹ Ibid.

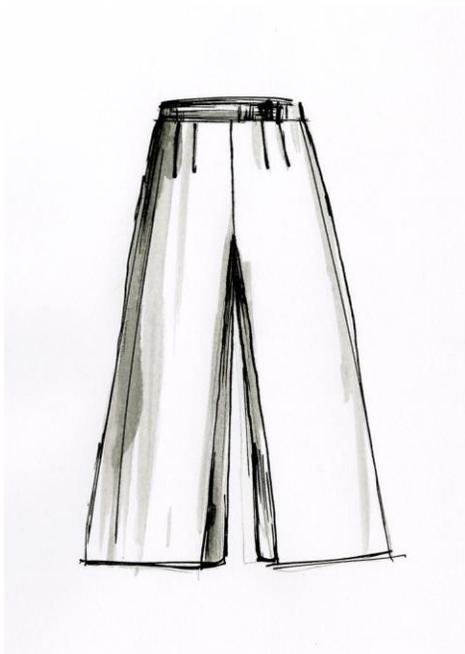
including as a way to represent God to others.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Caroline Allen describes the Titus 2 model as counter to that of the feminist movement. She writes that the latter emphasizes a “self seeking career outside the home,” whereas Titus 2 urges women to take care of their families first and foremost. Allen believes that it is possible for wives to work from home to help support their families, but this decision should be based on what is best for the family rather than on the woman trying to create a separate sphere of life from them.¹¹ For the five Washburn sisters of *Radical Femininity*, having a female figure to look up to in the home is seen as a great blessing. As Hannah Washburn writes, “In a world where so many young women experience frustration and disillusionment over what they’re supposed to do with their lives, my sisters and I are beyond blessed to have a Titus 2 example right here in our home. I have met so many young wives and mothers whose hearts are crying ‘where are the older women from whom we can learn?’”¹² Washburn expresses her pride in having a mother as her role model and teacher who is a strong believer in God, loving and submissive to her husband, serving towards others, and a homemaker – all Titus 2 traits.¹³

¹⁰ Olivia Howard, “Purpose + Me,” *Fresh Modesty*, 29 August 2013, accessed 17 April 2016, <http://freshmodesty.blogspot.com/2013/08/purpose-me.html>.

¹¹ Allen, “31 Days of Femininity: Being feminine versus feminist,” *The Modest Mom*, 3 October 2011, accessed 17 April 2016, <http://www.themodestmomblog.com/2011/10/31-days-of-femininity-being-feminine/>.

¹² Hannah Washburn, “Happy Birthday To My Mama!” *Radical Femininity*, 13 April 2016, accessed 17 April 2016, <http://radicalfemininity.com/2016/04/13/happy-birthday-mama/>.

¹³ The Proverbs 31 Woman is another oft-cited example, with attributes similar to those described in Titus 2. See, for example, Allen, “31 Days of Femininity: The Proverbs 31 Woman,” *The Modest Mom*, 7 October 2011, accessed 17 April 2016, <http://www.themodestmomblog.com/2011/10/31-days-of-femininity-proverbs-31-woman/>; and “Are You a Real Woman?,” *The Modest Mom*, 6 November 2014, accessed 17 April 2016, <http://www.themodestmomblog.com/2014/11/are-you-a-real-woman/>; Rebekah Shashaguay, “Outfit // Snazzy Jacket,” 7 January 2015, accessed 13 December 2016, <http://calicoclohdhoppers.blogspot.com/2015/01/outfit-snazzy-jacket-feminism-good-or.html>.



In addition to modest dress, submissiveness towards one's husband, and raising a godly family, the model for biblical femininity often includes the expectation that young women will remain at home, under their fathers' authority, until marriage. Under this authority, girls may enter courtship. A courtship is entered very deliberately, with permission of the girl's father, as it is intended to lead to marriage. There is much focus on maintaining emotional and sexual purity before marriage, and typically those in a courtship are chaperoned and have minimal physical contact before the wedding. Part of keeping God central to relationships and to maintaining purity, the Shashaguay sisters explain, is how they present themselves through modest dress, as they "value their beauty" and are "keeping it for their 'one and only.'"¹⁴ Meanwhile, though few bloggers have discussed exactly *why* they should remain under their fathers' authority until marriage, some scriptural references for this do exist. Hannah Washburn cites Numbers 30 as giving fathers spiritual authority over their daughters, and she lists several Old Testament examples of unmarried women remaining at home. She returns to Titus 2:3-5, however, as the

¹⁴ Cassie Shashaguay, "Top Reasons Why I Blog," *Calico Sisters*, 12 May 2014, accessed 18 April 2016, <http://calicoclothhoppers.blogspot.com/2014/05/top-reasons-why-i-blog-summer-plaid-and.html>.

key passage for her conviction. If the old women are supposed to teach the younger how to be good wives and homemakers, the best place to learn this is not at college or working a job, but at home.¹⁵

Online Community

By maintaining modest fashion blogs, these Christian bloggers are carving out their own online space in which they can explore their beliefs and find a community of like-minded women. This is particularly important to them given the generally negative views of biblical femininity in mainstream society: ideas that women must dress modestly, appear and behave “feminine,” submit to male authority, and not pursue further education or careers are often perceived by others in Western culture as patriarchal oppression. As mentioned above, these bloggers see themselves as counter-cultural, living according to godly models in a world where women are typically expected to have much different roles. Annie Washburn of *Radical Femininity* invites readers, “Please join us in celebrating beautiful womanhood in the midst of a culture where women are pursuing masculinity,” whereas Hammond makes the direct call, “Ladies, it’s time for us to be counter-cultural – *counter to our misguided contemporary culture, that is!*”¹⁶ Allen writes that feminine women are “not exactly valued” in current society, with the ideal being businesswomen breaking the molds of traditional corporate and social structures. She reminds her readers that the *biblical* model for women comes from characters like the Proverbs 31 Woman, who focuses on her home and family instead.¹⁷ Bloggers encourage women to reject

¹⁵ Hannah Washburn, “Biblical Reasons for Being at Home,” *Radical Femininity*, 22 December 2013, accessed 23 April 2016, <http://radicalfemininity.com/2013/12/22/biblical-reasons-for-being-at-home/>.

¹⁶ Annie Washburn, “Welcome!” *Radical Femininity*, 18 November 2013, accessed 23 April 2016, <http://radicalfemininity.com/2013/11/18/welcome-2/>. Hammond 76, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Allen, “Are You a Real Woman?”

current worldly ways in favor of biblical guidance, to embrace, in Howard's words, "living by design, not by default."¹⁸

Though in many cases it is not clear whether bloggers' church communities encourage the same beliefs regarding modesty and women's roles, a few of the women express that they enjoy the online community because they do not find the same support within their usual social spheres. Blogger Jessica Boyer commented to the Shashaguay sisters,

even though we now have found our beloved Church home [after "Church hopping" for years], there are still not too many girls there who understand our girls' way of life. It is sad. We feel very much alone and left out; even suppressed in a way, and almost shy to express ourselves as to who we truly are. But...we have found our truly like-minded (wether [sic] it be fashion, conservativeness, desiring to live an honorable life all for Christ, or reclaiming History) friends via the web and blogging.¹⁹

In turn, Rebekah and Cassie Shashaguay began blogging when they encountered other modest fashion blogs, particularly *Fresh Modesty*, at a time when most of the other families of their church community were leaving that church. During this lonely period when their usual social networks were disintegrating, they were encouraged by finding other teenagers and young women who hold the same values and beliefs that they do.²⁰

Bloggers find encouragement in their hobby and online network in other ways beyond simply finding others who share their beliefs and extending their faith community. By posting about their daily lives while tying in discussions of scriptural quotations and explanations of religious beliefs, these women also provide support for each other in matters beyond modest dress. They discuss topics such as homeschooling, supporting and submitting to one's husband, running home-based businesses, and building relationships with God. Living in a society they

¹⁸ Howard, "The Story of FM," *Fresh Modesty*, 31 August 2014, accessed 15 March 2016, <http://freshmodesty.blogspot.com/p/the-story.html>.

¹⁹ Comment from Jessica Boyer, 13 May 2014, on "Top Reasons Why I Blog."

²⁰ Cassie Shashaguay, "Top Reasons Why I Blog."

perceive as largely rejecting traditional models of femininity and women's domesticity, these blogs give conservative Christian women a space to explore through writing the biblical basis for their beliefs and how they are actually able to live out the tenets they believe. At the same time, interactions with other bloggers and blog readers confirm that they are not the only women to believe this way and are a means by which they can encourage one another in their everyday and spiritual lives. In this confirmation and support as they explore their biblical interpretations, bloggers reinforce each other's beliefs regarding models of femininity. They use social media not to explore the broad range of other worldviews the Internet makes available for consumption, but rather to form, in Robert Glenn Howard's words, "like-minded enclaves of belief" where they can "construct their worlds in connection with others" who have similar religious paradigms.²¹

Perhaps the most important support for these bloggers, however, comes for the transitional period between schooling and marriage. Many of the women in this network are young and unmarried, and most of the more popular and long-running blogs were started by women when they were teenagers. This time of transition is one in which many bloggers, like other young adults, are trying to find their place in the world. Most discuss why they have chosen to remain under their parents' authority as stay-at-home-daughters, providing household support for their families while preparing to be good wives and mothers. Even though bloggers express contentment at having made this choice, they still find it encouraging to see others who are following the same path or who are already married and raising happy families in what they consider to be a godly manner.

Hannah Washburn, for example, began the *Shining Stars* magazine specifically to encourage young women in this in-between stage. She writes, "I found that the biggest struggle

²¹ Robert Glenn Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 17-21. Howard is here referring to online (Christian) religious communities and interactions in general.

most young ladies were facing was not that of pining away for their Prince Charming, but rather trying to figure out what to do during this in-between time, after school and before marriage.”²² Finding support for biblical femininity in other magazines for women who were already married but not for those who were still preparing for marriage, with her mother and sisters she created her own print space, later extended online to the *Radical Femininity* blog, for encouraging unmarried women like herself.

Much of this encouragement relates to “waiting,” to being in a period of life that many of these bloggers find frustrating because it falls between other, more exciting stages. These bloggers’ posts reveal that this period comes with its own spiritual questions, including how God’s plans for their lives will be revealed and how they will remain happy with their current situations. Cassie Shashaguay, for example, writes about learning to be content in every “season” of life and relying on God’s timing rather her own. For support, she quotes Ecclesiastes 3:1: “To every *thing there is* a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”²³ Meanwhile, older bloggers such as Allen encourage unmarried women by telling them that waiting for what they want out of life is ultimately worth it. Reflecting on her strong relationship with her husband, the happy marriage of her 32-year-old sister, and the complaints she has heard from college-aged girls about their boyfriends, Allen calls single women to “wait for Prince Charming – because such men really do exist. Don’t wait for Barbie’s Ken to come along, the dashing prince with all the physical charms and looks. Patiently rest in the Lord, and wait for a man who has godly charm, and who has desires to lead a family unto the Lord.”²⁴ Young women may not want to

²² Hannah Washburn, “Why Would I Want to Leave Home?” *Radical Femininity*, 15 December 2013, accessed 24 April 2016, <http://radicalfemininity.com/2013/12/15/why-would-i-want-to-leave-home/>.

²³ Cassie Shashaguay, “Outfit // Jewel Fall,” *Calico Sisters*, 10 October 2015, accessed 24 April 2016, <http://calicoclosthoppers.blogspot.com/2015/10/outfit-jewel-fall.html>, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Allen, “Is there such a thing as true love?” *The Modest Mom*, 22 February 2013, accessed 24 April 2016, <http://www.themodestmomblog.com/2013/02/is-there-such-a-thing-as-true-love/>.

wait to fulfill their dreams of getting married and raising families, but these bloggers claim that they should be content in all periods of their lives, and they encourage each other to wait for God's perfect timing.

At the same time, they stress that this period should not be one of *passive* waiting. Abigail Washburn, a younger sister of Hannah, reminds readers of *Radical Femininity* that "There ARE times to wait for the our Creator's instructions and leading...But we should remember to ask ourselves, 'am I waiting on Him to reveal His plans to me or am I just passing time without any ultimate motive or reason for what I'm doing right now?'"²⁵ She encourages other unmarried women to take their time as stay-at-home-daughters seriously, to use it to prepare for their futures as wives and mothers, and to strive to glorify God in all they do. She argues that this transitional period is not for women to lazily sit at home and dream of "happily ever after," but rather a time to mature, grow in their faith, and learn the skills they will need for the next stage of their lives. The comments on her post demonstrate that Abigail's thoughts on the subject are widely supported and echoed by her online community. Blog readers who commented thanked her for the encouraging post, commended her for showing such wisdom as a teenager, and shared their own personal stories or those of their children as they went through similar experiences.

Conclusion

The modest fashion blogs that have grown out of the grassroots Christian movement for modesty are avenues for women to express and explore their faith, both in matters of dress and in other aspects of spirituality. For these bloggers, modesty is not simply covering their bodies, but rather dressing in a feminine manner that is pleasing to God and visibly marks them as Christian

²⁵ Abigail Washburn, "I Am Not Waiting for My Prince Charming," *Radical Femininity*, 6 April 2016, accessed 24 April 2016, <http://radicalfemininity.com/2016/04/06/i-am-not-waiting-for-my-prince-charming/>.

women. Furthermore, modesty is only one part of living out biblical femininity. As women explore their convictions regarding modesty and womanhood on their blogs, they connect with other like-minded women, forming online social networks that support and encourage them in their faith. Such a network is particularly important for the many young, unmarried modest fashion bloggers, who may lack a community at home who shares their beliefs and who are trying to navigate the transitional phase between childhood and marriage. For these women, finding a strong online community of similar people helps confirm their beliefs and encourages them to continue on the paths they have chosen and to make the most of this “waiting” period, understanding that they are preparing for the next stage of life that they believe God intends for them.

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