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“Keeping Our Beaches Bare”

## THE BIBLE AND NAKEDNESS

By Paul Bowman

(Legal Symposium Speech)

### PART ONE –THE OLD TESTAMENT

Twenty years ago, I heard about a natural hot spring in northern Idaho, called Jerry Johnson Hot Springs, that had been used by the local Indians for centuries. It sounded like an idyllic place to visit on a summer weekend, so my wife and I decided to try it. After we were set up at a nearby campground, I took my two-year-old daughter and started on the mile hike up to the hot springs.

To my surprise, when I arrived at the clearing in the forest, there were about forty-five to fifty people scattered over the hillside in small groups at the several hot pools – and almost all were naked! I decided to walk across the hillside to the top of the clearing to peruse this unexpected sight. As I carried my daughter by one of the pools, a college-age girl looked up at us and simply said, “Hi.” I guess I mumbled something appropriate, all the while thinking of the old saying, “What do you say to a naked lady?”

One feature of the scene I observed was that it looked much more like the Garden of Eden to me than the Den of Hedonistic Iniquity I had always been taught that open nakedness would bring. I could not see anything untoward; everybody was behaving just as they would if they had all been clothed at a church camp. Clearly, this challenged my Christian education related to nudity.

Being a long-time Evangelical Christian, I did not wish to do anything contrary to Scripture. On the other hand, I am 100% Swedish and I could recall, as a child, envying my cousins back in Sweden because they did not have to wear a cold, clammy

bathing suit when they went to the lake or beach. I didn’t think my cousins were hedonistic sexual sinners (and indeed, at least my Swedish relatives aren’t) so, clearly, I needed to study the Church doctrines regarding nakedness a bit more.

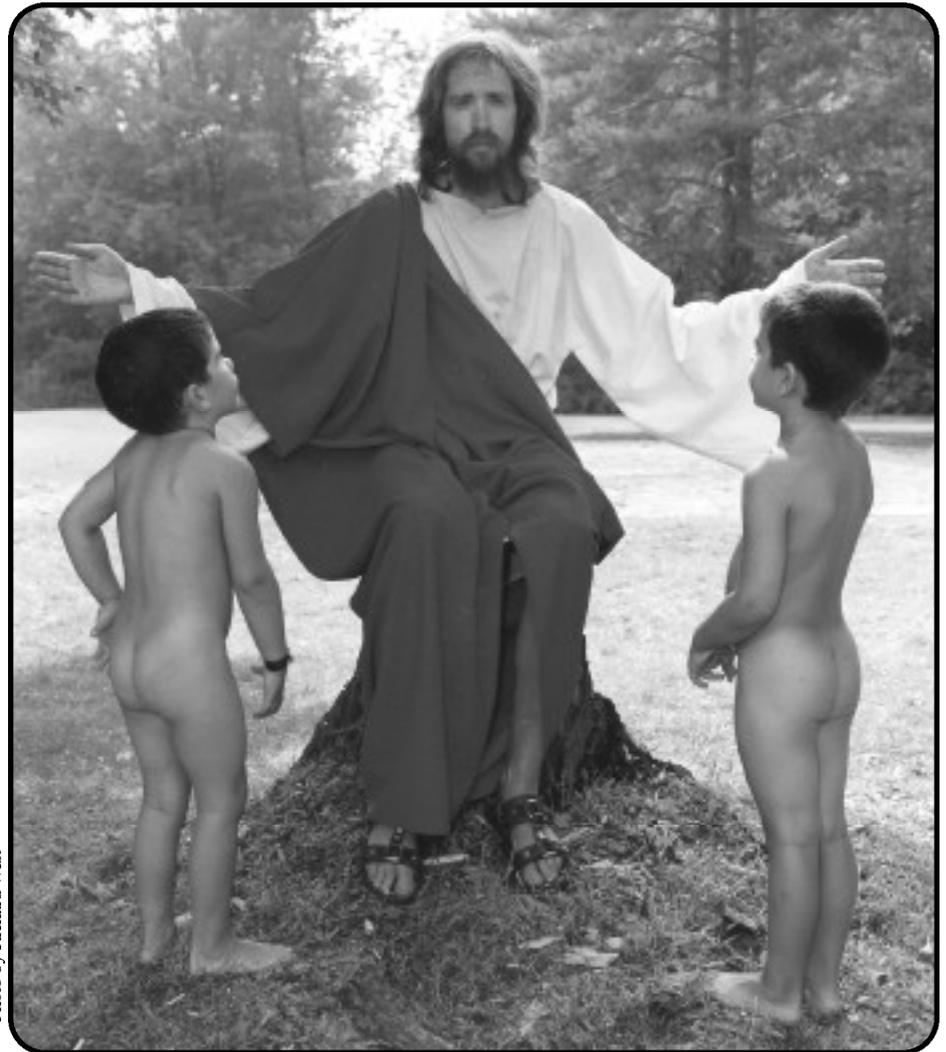


Photo by Richard West

His disciples said, “When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you?” Jesus said, “When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then will you see the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid.” – The Gospel of Thomas.



That weekend, we did not join the naturist because I needed to be absolutely sure, Biblically, that it was not inconsistent with Christian Scripture. When I got home to my personal library (now approaching 5,000 volumes), my initial study quickly showed that most of the Biblical arguments against nakedness are based on passages that did not directly mention nakedness. This seemed strange, since I believed that it made more sense, in determining a Biblical doctrine, to use first the verses that directly address the matter in question. I knew there were many such passages.

For example, one of the frequently used arguments against nudity is the comment that Jesus made that “Whoever looks upon a woman to lust commits adultery.” The argument they make is that since seeing a naked woman causes lust, and that’s as good as breaking the seventh Commandment, it is a sin to view a naked person of the opposite sex. This is often combined with St. Paul’s remark that a Christian should do nothing to cause a brother to stumble (from the faith). Since nakedness arouses lust, merely being naked (especially women) is a sin because it is likely to cause a brother to stray from the faith.

All of these seemed to me to be based on assumptions that, as a practical matter, were not true. The naked tribes of the South American jungles manage to maintain their society and culture in spite of their nakedness. They did not burn uncontrollably with lust or hedonism, although they may be more openly sexual than Americans. I knew that my Swedish cousins also managed to live reasonably moral lives. Therefore, I decided to begin my Biblical study of nakedness only with Scripture that directly addressed the question of nakedness.

The first mention of nakedness in

the Bible comes in the second chapter of Genesis, where it is reported that when God finished creating Man and Woman “the man and his wife were naked and not ashamed.” For a would-be naturist, that’s a pretty good start! One should note, also, that in this passage, “ashamed” is not synonymous with “embarrassed.” The Hebrew word translated as “ashamed” implies more than an internal emotion; it suggests that the feeling should be strong enough to prevent an action.

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***Adam replied, “I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked.” Finally, God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, clothed them, and then sent them out from the Garden of Eden.***

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However, right on the heels of creation we have the third chapter of Genesis. This is the chapter that relates what is generally known as The Fall of Man, or, simply, The Fall. We all know the story where the serpent comes and tempts Eve to eat the fruit of the tree; that by doing so she will be like God, knowing good from evil. Soon, Adam ate of the fruit as well, and when they did, “the eyes of both of the were opened and they knew they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.” Later, in the cool of the day, when they heard God moving in the Garden, they hid so He called to them, “Where are you?”

Adam replied, “I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked.” Finally, God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, clothed them, and then

sent them out from the Garden of Eden. It is often argued, not only in Judeo-Christian theology, but also in Muslim theology, that this shows that Man is obliged by God to wear clothes. There are a few problems with this interpretation, however.

First, the passage says plainly that God came to Adam and Eve in the “cool of the day.” This suggests that, once they left the paradise of the Garden, they would feel the chill if their bodies were naked. By making warm skin garments, God was probably showing His love for them because He knew they would need the garments for warmth.

Even more important, God did not simply kick Adam and Eve out into the cold world to fend for themselves. For their sin, He declared several consequences. He told the woman that because of their sin, He would “multiply your pain in childbirth,” yet her sexual “desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” For Adam, God mandated that “In toil you shall eat of your life – thorns and thistles shall grow” in his fields and it would be “by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.” Finally, they would die. These are the only consequences of their sin that God proclaimed. It seems reasonable that if God deemed clothes to be used as punishment or as a moral necessity, He would have stated that as well.

The shame Adam and Eve felt was not specifically for their nakedness; it was that once they ate of the fruit, their perfect spiritual relationship with God was broken. Sin of any kind always interferes with Man’s spiritual relationship with God. It was because their sin broke their spiritual relationship with God, therefore, that they were ashamed. When that spiritual perfection was broken, Adam and Eve then became aware of their physical dimension and how it conflicted with their spiritual natures. In their failed attempt to conceal the



breach in their spiritual relationship with God, they tried to hide their physical dimension. Indeed, one could argue that to insist that people cover their bodies, they are continuing to try to hide an enduring breach of Man's spiritual relationship with God!

Before continuing, I should comment a little bit on the relationship of shame to nakedness. We have just seen that when Adam and Eve sinned, they became ashamed by their nakedness. Many times in Scripture, nakedness is associated with shame, and this seems to have caused a lot of confusion among Christian and Jewish theologians. Modern theologians seize on the shame aspect to link it to nakedness to bolster their notion that nakedness is shameful.

What they fail to notice – or at least to emphasize – is that in every Biblical incidence where shame is associated with nakedness, a sin against God has already been committed. The shame is for their sin, not their nakedness. It seems to be human nature, starting with Adam and Eve, to try to cover one's body to hide the "evidence" of sin. Therefore, God says that He will expose later people's nakedness to expose the shame of their sin; they cannot hide their bodies to hide their sin any more than Adam and Eve could.

After Adam and Eve, probably the most commonly used Biblical argument to condemn nakedness is the story of Noah. In this story, Noah planted a vineyard and eventually he got drunk. While he was drunk in his tent, he was undressed. Ham, one of Noah's sons saw him and told his two brothers. The brothers took a garment and, walking backwards into Noah's tent, they covered their father. The Bible plainly says that they did not see their father's nakedness.

The simplistic explanation of this situation is that this shows we are not to be naked nor look upon another's

nakedness. Our example is Shem and Japheth, Noah's sons, because they refused to look at their father's naked body. If one takes the time to look at the whole story, this makes no sense at all!

In the first place, Noah was naked inside his tent. If one is to take this story as a condemnation of nakedness, they would have to argue that it is

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even a wrongdoing to be naked within the walls of one's own home! Some might try to argue that, at least, children should not see their parents naked by following this example. This, too, would be a misinterpretation.

To understand this narration of Noah, his sons and his grandson, Canaan, one must take a close look at the original Hebrew meanings of the word we translate as "naked." If either the words "arom" or "erom" were used, a case could be made that mere nakedness should not be seen, at least by a person's children. Arom is the Hebrew word used to describe Adam and Eve's innocent nakedness while in the Garden of Eden. Erom is the

Hebrew word the prophet Ezekiel used in an allegory centuries later to describe the adolescent nakedness portrayed as God's chosen people.

In the passage describing Noah's nakedness, however, the Hebrew word used is "ervah." This word carries the connotation of nakedness connected with indecency or something shameful. Clearly, by the author's choice of the word ervah, more than simple, innocent nakedness is portrayed in this story of Noah.

Let me take a few moments here to make a few observations on the relationship of drunkenness to nakedness. Centuries after Noah, the prophet Habakkuk proclaimed:

Woe to you who make your neighbors drunk,  
Who mix in your venom even to make them drunk  
So as to look on their nakedness! You will be filled with disgrace rather than honor  
Now you yourself drink and expose your own nakedness . . .  
and utter disgrace will come upon your glory.

In this passage, the word translated as nakedness comes from the Hebrew word "maor", which refers to the pudendum, or the visible sexual organs. This would suggest that getting someone drunk to get them to remove their clothes is shameful. Jeremiah, in his Lamentation, also connected being bare in relation to drunkenness is something shameful. Therefore, one could argue that Noah's drunkenness in relationship to his being naked was something reprehensible.

When Noah sobered up, and realized what his youngest son had done to him, he cursed Ham's son, Canaan. It's possible that Noah cursed Canaan for getting him drunk and exposing his nakedness, but a lifetime, generational curse for such a transgression seems overly harsh. Even more important, the Hebrew



word, *ervah*, used to describe Noah's nakedness is the same word used repeatedly throughout the Old Testament to describe sexual intercourse or sexual activity.

Of course, the story says Noah was so drunk that he must have fallen asleep – “he awoke from his wine.” This makes it unlikely that he was engaging in sexual intercourse when his two sons walked backwards into his tent to cover him. Still, the words clearly suggest that there was some sexual component to Noah's nakedness. One Rabbi comments that the word applied in this situation was “used for ‘to take to wife’ in alliances that can never be regarded as ‘marriage’.” However, no woman is mentioned in the account, so it is doubtful that the sexual conduct was heterosexual.

Whatever actually happened to Noah has long been forgotten today. It does seem reasonable to infer, however, that whatever it was happened between Noah and his grandson, Canaan. Perhaps, Noah's youngest son (Canaan's father) saw what was happening and reported it to his older brothers. Two possibilities have been suggested to have happened to cause Noah to curse Canaan. They may be sodomy and castration. Both, of course, were soundly condemned in later Israelite Law.

At any rate, it should be clear that whatever occurred in this story of Noah, it was strongly tinged with a sexual component. It, clearly, was not innocent, non-erotic nakedness. Therefore, it cannot be used to condemn nakedness *per se*.

One of my favorite Biblical passages that I like to “spring” on so-called Scriptural opponents of nakedness is the story of Isaiah. When a Fundamentalist tries to convince me that God condemns nakedness, I like to set them up for a little surprise. I first ask them if their God ever asks or instructs His people to sin. Of course,

they always emphatically say He doesn't.

If that is true, I inquire of them, why did God command Isaiah to sin? After the King of Assyria had captured a place called Ashdod, God told Isaiah to “go naked and barefoot” for three years! This was to be a sign that even those who fled to Egypt would be led away captive, naked and barefoot, by the Assyrian king.

Therefore, as a faithful servant of God, Isaiah went naked and barefoot a full three years. When it is no longer possible to deny that God said Isaiah

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should go naked, the fundamentalists typically seize on the last part that says “the king of Assyria will lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Cush, young and old, naked and barefoot with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. . .” This, they say, shows that nakedness is shameful.

Again, we find two different Hebrew words used in this short passage. Yes, the word translated as shame is *ervah* – the Hebrew word that depicts a shameful or sexual nakedness. All the references to merely being naked come from the word *arom*. This, we have already seen, describes the nakedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Thus, both Isaiah and the captive's nakedness are equated with the nakedness Adam and Eve experienced when they were not ashamed.

The most that could be argued from this passage is that it is shameful to be forcibly stripped naked and led away

as captives. However, that has nothing to do with the nakedness within families or as naturists. Also, even if we accept the premise that it is shameful to be forcibly stripped naked, it does not follow that it is also shameful to voluntarily strip naked.

One of the most common arguments against social nakedness is that it is somehow offensive to others who do not wish to see someone else naked. While naturists, as well as anyone else, should always be considerate of other people's sensibilities, the story of Isaiah shows that there is no Scriptural basis to argue that such consideration is paramount.

God certainly would have known that many people would encounter the naked Isaiah; he was to not even wear shoes! Since he was to be naked for three years, surely scores of people would have been faced with his nudity. God would have to be a strange and imperfect deity to order His servant to expose his naked body if it was somehow sinful or immoral. Neither did God offer any provision for those who would somehow be offended.

I'm reminded of a situation I once observed in Vancouver, Canada when I was driving down Marine Drive, one of the main streets in Vancouver. There was a man doing his lunch-hour jog on the sidewalk – totally naked (except, I believe, he did wear running shoes). I don't know if this was a daily jog or not, but the people along the way merely glanced at him as he ran along. If there was any reaction from the observers, it was an embarrassed smile. The total scene reminded me of Isaiah going naked in his land many centuries ago.

The very fact that God ordered Isaiah to go naked, and that he obeyed God by walking about naked in public for three years should convince even the most anti-nakedness Bible student that public nudity is neither shameful



nor offensive. It certainly should convince them at it is not a sin or any kind of immorality. To deny that Isaiah's nakedness was innocent is to declare that God himself can and will command His servants to sin. Such a notion is preposterous!

Anyone who tries to argue that Isaiah was an exception, and therefore cannot be used to accept public nakedness, needs to be reminded of the other prophets. It was, apparently, somewhat common for God's prophets to go naked. Saul was the first King of Israel and he temporarily took on the "mantle" of prophet in the first book of Samuel.

Saul was traveling to Naioth in Rama when the Spirit of God came upon him. So, as a prophet, he stripped off his clothes and prophesied in front of Samuel. He was naked all that day and night. When the people saw him, they wondered if King Saul was also one of the prophets.

I probably should point out that the Hebrew word used to describe King Saul's nakedness is the word *arom*, the word for innocent, shameless nakedness. It is often argued that after the Fall of Man, the connotation of nakedness changed from one of innocence to one of indecency. If so, the author of this story must have not gotten the message because they used the word for King Saul's nakedness that refers to innocence, not the other Hebrew words available to depict indecency.

It seems from the passage that King Saul was not the only one in that scene who was naked. The text says that King Saul "also" stripped off his clothes, suggesting that there were other prophets present. Since the nakedness of the group of prophets did not seem to be a problem to the spectators, one would suppose that nakedness in that time was rather common. At least, the people paid more attention to the fact that the king was a prophet than to the fact that

he had no clothes!

Next, we have a story of King David dancing naked in the "town square." In this situation, the Ark of the Covenant had been held by one of Israel's enemies and now was being returned to Jerusalem. David was so happy that he met the caravan carrying the ark and as it entered the city, Michael, David's wife looked out of the palace window to see her husband dancing before the Lord wearing only a linen ephod.

Michael, like many wives today, was scandalized by the sight so when David returned to the palace, she lit into him. "How the King of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself in the eyes of his servant's maids as one of the foolish ones shamelessly uncovers himself!" David rebuked her, saying he would be more lightly esteemed and humble in his own eyes, but that with the maidens of whom Michael spoke he would be distinguished.

There can be no mistake in this passage because the Hebrew word translated as "uncovered" is "*galah*." This word specifically refers to a genital uncovering. [Often it has a sexual connotation, as well. However, we can assume that David wasn't having sex since it says he was dancing, although there may have been an erotic overtone to his dance.] The text says he was wearing a linen ephod, one of the priests garments that probably could best be described as the bib or top part of a jumper (without the skirt attached).

Again, from this passage we see that no Scriptural credence is given to those who may be offended by one's nakedness. Michael's offense was sternly rebuked. Doesn't it seem reasonable that if nakedness in a public situation – especially the town square – was against Biblical values that David would have been rebuked, not his wife who claimed to be offended? If we are to take the Bible

as our example, it is not the naked one but the one who protested who is going contrary to Scripture.

The last verse in this passage also raises an interesting question. It says that Michal had no child to the day of her death. This suggests to me that this verse is inferring that those who cannot cope with nakedness have some kind of sexual hang-up that often prevents pregnancy.

It is no secret that to older children and young adolescents the Sunday sermon is often very boring. Not a few schoolboys – and girls – have taken that opportunity to spice up that time by reading passages from the Song of Solomon! At least, I know that is how it was with my friends – we could look to the congregation like we were following the sermon's references while being titillated right from the Bible.

You can read the wonderful description of the female body given in The Song of Solomon and of the human male body in the same book. These texts include such female descriptions as "your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a Gazelle" and "your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts like its clusters (of fruit)." The male is equally well treated: "his abdomen is carved ivory inlaid with sapphires. . ." I cannot add anything to these descriptions that would be more positive of the naked human body.

In the next session, I will continue with some more Old Testament references to nakedness. This will include several mandates where clothes must be worn. Also, I will discuss some of the New Testament accounts of nakedness. ✨

*NOTE: Part 2 of The Bible and Nakedness will run in the next issue of Beach Buzz.*