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"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"

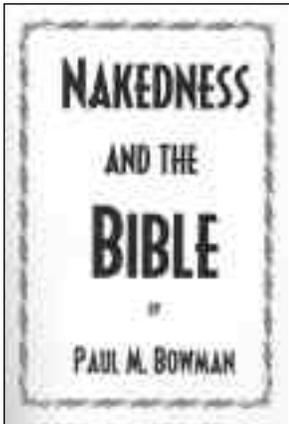
The Bible And Nakedness

By Paul Bowman

(Legal Symposium Speech)

PART TWO

In the earlier session, we saw that the Holy Bible clearly accepts nakedness in a variety of situations. Still, from Scripture we can conclude



that there are times when God ordained clothes or that the naked body should be covered. There is also one specific incidence when the genitals must be covered, which I will get to a little later.

One such passage relating to the body being covered is in the book of Ezekiel. This text says, "Then you grew up, became tall, and reached the age for fine ornaments; your breasts were formed and your (pubic) hair had grown. Yet you were naked and bare. Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold you were at the time for love; so I spread my skirt over you and covered your nakedness."

For an allegory to be effective as a social example, the basic elements must be familiar to the listeners; at least, they must not be so unfamiliar

that the lesson loses its effectiveness because of the circumstances described. In this situation, it is clear that the young girl described was naked and bare. Even as an adolescent, the subject of this allegory was naked. Child, and even adolescent, nakedness could not have been too uncommon at that time, then, because if it had been the nakedness of the heroine would have distracted from the lesson of the parable.

This is probably the best Biblical indication that childhood and early adolescent nakedness is not the shocking, dangerous condition we make of it in our society. [I might add that I have written a small book on this subject. What it attempts to do is show how our American obsession with keeping children from being naked or exposed to other's nakedness may be the etiology of all manner of adult sexual perversions and compulsions. Cases can certainly be made that such sexual anomalies as promiscuity, voyeurism, pedophilia and others may be an outgrowth of our society's hysterical fear of childhood nakedness.] In Ezekiel, the nakedness of the growing maiden is translated from the Hebrew *erom* which means simply "without clothes." There is no sexual or negative connotation.

However, when the maiden reaches "the time for love" we find the word describing that nakedness comes from the Hebrew word *ervah*. This, we have seen, is a Hebrew word for nakedness with a sexual



Risen Christ by Michelangelo, 1521



connotation. For that nakedness, the maiden is covered with a blanket or skirt.

The lesson related to nakedness from Ezekiel is clear. The innocent, non-erotic nakedness of a young child or maiden is of no concern from a Biblical point of view. However, when one is ready for love, the sexual nakedness should be covered. I doubt this means that only sex under blankets is morally acceptable; it probably means that sexual activity should be private, behind closed doors.

It may be appropriate to note here that I have also written an extensive history of nakedness in the West. [I've additionally written a complete study of nakedness in other cultures before much exposure to Western values.] Probably the single biggest factor in any society outlawing public or social nakedness is that it tends to degenerate into public sex acts. This was true from the German public baths during the Middle Ages to the English "living statue" exhibitions late in the Nineteenth Century and in many other instances.

This is one area where naturists probably should be able to join forces with our society's Evangelical religious elements. It may not be that many Christian fundamentalist are not afraid of innocent nakedness per se; I would submit that what they really fear is that it will lead to lasciviousness and sexual immorality. From historical experience, they have good reason for their fear. Naturists, it seems, would do well to make it absolutely clear in the public mind that naturism is social nakedness and not erotic nakedness. They should make it categorically clear that they want laws prohibiting, and serious enforcement prosecuting public sex acts. Live erotica, such as nude barroom dancing, which is clearly intended to sexually arouse the viewers probably could be discouraged since it is much more likely to lead to sexual activity than, say, nudists playing volley ball on the



beach.

It seems reasonable for one to conclude from this allegory that sexual activity should be covered. Reading further in this passage, we see how God adorned His partner with fine silks, linens, jewelry and a crown. This enhanced her beauty and increased her status to that of royalty. From this, we can deduce that clothes are Biblically legitimate to enhance one's beauty and to indicate social status. Recalling the story of Adam and Eve, where God gave them skins to cover themselves when He cast them out of the Garden into the cool of the evening, we know that clothes are legitimate for protection from the weather as well.

While we can infer from Ezekial that clothes should cover sexual activity, there is no question about the Israelite priests. In the book of Exodus, God commands that the priests must wear certain vestments. Included in these priestly instructions is the specific statement that "you shall make for them linen breeches to cover their bare flesh; they shall reach from the loins even to the thighs. And they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they enter the tent of meeting, or when they approach the alter to minister in the Holy Place. . ."

This is the only case in Biblical Scripture where clothes are commanded to be worn. Let me repeat: there is only one place in the Holy Bible where clothes of any sort are required to be worn. This was specifically for the priests, and then only when they were in the meeting place or temple or when they approached the altar. There is nothing that prevents them – or anybody else – from nakedness in other non-erotic situations or elsewhere.

In a very real way, this helps to complete the Biblical perspective on nakedness. By giving many, many instances of nakedness throughout the whole Bible, it is clear that there is no wholesale Biblical prohibition of nakedness. By giving some instances where the body is to be covered, limits to nakedness are set by God. From this, we can know the parameters of where the Bible's God stands on the issue; we are not left to create our own theology.

From several references in the Bible, death may also have been a time for nakedness. Job, noted for his many tribulations, said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there." Everyone, of course, is born naked. This verse

suggests that it may have been a common practice to be stripped naked in preparation for impending death. The book of Ecclesiastes, which is traditionally ascribed to Solomon, agrees.

We have seen that the Bible seems to accept childhood nakedness – that is, before the age of sexual reproduction, children were probably permitted to go naked. From my studies of the ethnography of nakedness, it is certain that many cultures also sanctioned nakedness in people too old for sexual reproduction. It is likely that this practice occurred in ancient cultures, as well. If so, it is possible that Biblical Israel condoned the same practice for elderly people.

We certainly know that it is common practice in many cultures to tear one's clothes in mourning the death of a relative. This also was a custom in ancient Israel. Frequently, throughout the Bible, people in great stress tore their clothes.

Indeed, for the ancient Israelites, more than tearing of the clothes was needed. Micah said, speaking about a judgment about to fall on his nation, "Because of this I must lament and wail, I must go barefoot and naked; I must make a lament like the jackals and a mourning like the ostriches."

Notice that Micah said he must go naked and barefoot. It would seem that it was socially expected to go naked during times of great stress or mourning. At any rate, there is no biblical condemnation for nakedness in these situations.

There is one last Biblical passage that may touch on nakedness. God told Abraham, "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you." It would seem curious that the very sign of the acceptance of God's covenant with His people would be expected to be fastidiously covered. It is possible that circumcision was to be a concealed sign to oneself, but there is

no Biblical indication that it was and no reason to expect so.

The New Testament

While there are many references to nakedness in the Old Testament, there are only three specific circumstances in the New Testament. There are also a few instances when nakedness is suggested but not directly stated. Finally, there is indication that keeping the body covered is not as high a priority in the Biblical Christian's life as one would expect from today's theology.

***"Who is so barbarous
as not to understand
that the foot of a man
is nobler than his shoe,
and his skin nobler than
that of the sheep with
which he is clothed?"***

– Michelangelo

The first reference to nakedness is found in the Book of Mark. "And a certain young man was following Him [Jesus], wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he left the linen sheet behind, and escaped naked." Another mention of nakedness comes in the Acts of the Apostles, where some Jewish exorcists were trying to cast out a demon and "the evil spirit leaped on them and subdued both of them and overpowered them so they fled out of the house naked and wounded." The final example of nakedness is found in the book of John where some of the disciples had been out fishing and Jesus showed up on shore. ". . . And so when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea [to swim to shore]."

One needs to look at all three of these references together to discern an accurate picture of New Testament

nakedness. In the first two instances, the nakedness was unexpected. The three people were caught by surprise and fled naked. It should be obvious to the readers that it must not have been the custom to wear an undergarment under their outer robes. Even today, in many Middle Eastern countries, it is often the custom to not wear a second garment under the outer robes.

That they did not customarily wear underclothes does not condone nakedness, of course. The fact that they were surprised and their clothes were removed, leaving them naked, has no bearing on the validity of nakedness in public or in a social situation. We are left, then, with the story of Peter fishing to try to determine the New Testament position on nakedness.

Some theologians have argued that Peter was wearing a loin cloth when he removed his garment for fishing. However, if we have two random incidences of his contemporaries having lost their outer robes to be left naked, it is reasonable that this was the custom. Peter, being a part of his culture, undoubtedly did the same. Therefore, when the Bible says that he removed his robe, it is very likely that he was naked. As further evidence, contemporary pictures of Egyptian fisherman show them in complete nakedness as they fished.

Even more important are the words used. The New Testament was translated into English from ancient Greek. The word translated as Peter being "stripped" for work comes from the Greek word "gymnos." This is exactly the same Greek word translated as naked in the previous two examples. Thus, when one goes back to the original, there is compelling evidence that Peter was completely naked when he fished.

I might add that those who try to argue that he was modestly wearing a loin cloth don't make sense for another reason. The loin cloth would get wet while he was fishing and then he

would have had to put on his dry robe over the wet loin cloth. Also, what would be the point of keeping his body covered on a fishing boat with only other men on board?

Because there are no more instances of nakedness in the New Testament, we have to depart from considering direct references to other texts. To continue with Peter, some would wonder why he grabbed his clothes and put them on when he swam to meet Jesus. If he wanted his clothes on shore, which would seem reasonable, it would be a lot easier to swim with them on his body rather than carrying them in one arm. It also could be that Peter, who probably perceived Jesus as divine, would feel that he needed his clothes to approach Jesus, just as the priests needed to be properly covered when they approached God in the holy places of the Temple.

Some light may be shed on this event by another instance during the Last Supper. In this case, “[Jesus] rose from the supper, laid aside his garments; and taking a towel, girded Himself about.” The word translated here as “girded” comes from the Greek word “diazonnumi.” This is the same word used to describe Peter as he put on his garment when he was ready to swim to meet Jesus. The word actually means to tie something around oneself like a belt or a girdle. Therefore, it is likely that both Peter while fishing and Jesus during part of the Last supper were both naked except for a garment or towel tied around their waists.

In neither case does it seem to cause any concern that they were naked except for something tied around their waist. Certainly neither Jesus nor Peter were embarrassed or self-conscious since they put themselves in that situation willingly. Also, it seems that it did not arouse any concern among other people who were present in those situations – at least nothing is mentioned of it.

The New Testament mentions

several instances where people removed their clothes, but it doesn't specifically say they were naked. This may mean, however, that nudity was simply understood just as if, today, one wrote that a person removed their undershorts or panties it would be assumed that they would be naked. To discern if this may have been true, we need to take a few moments to consider the clothes worn by New Testament figures.

There are several garments mentioned in the New Testament, but there are only two main items. One is an “outer garment” which is a translation from the Greek word “himation” and the other is an “inner garment,” usually translated as coat or tunic, which comes from the Greek “chiton.” The himation is mentioned six times more often in the New Testament than the chiton, suggesting that the himation was much more important.

The chiton was not even owned by everyone. Jesus said, “Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none.” Also, it was the less important garment worn by those who did have one. We can see this because Jesus told his disciples not to own two of them. Even those who did own one did not wear it most of the year in that desert-like Mediterranean land.

Jesus gave a hint of His attitude toward the necessity of clothing to cover the naked body when he said, “if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.” In this version, “shirt” is translated from chiton and “coat” is translated from himation. Obviously, if a person in Jesus' time gave away both his chiton and his himation (that is, both his shirt and coat), he would have been left naked.

I should point out that this passage is really concerned with how people deal with each other, not with nakedness. By saying that it is better to be left without one's clothes than to treat someone unfairly, Jesus certainly

placed human relations far above the need to cover their body. In other words, righteousness is more important than covering the naked body.

We can take a look at a few more Biblical reports of people removing their clothes. Probably the best known was when a young man named Saul, who later became known as St. Paul, witnessed the stoning death of the apostle Stephen. Those who stoned Stephen “laid aside their robes (himation) at the feet” of Saul.

Another instance was when a blind beggar, Bartimaeus, was healed by Jesus. He, “casting aside his cloak (himation),” jumped up and came to the Lord to be healed. If the himation was the only garment worn by most people at that time, it is very likely that when they removed their cloaks they were left naked. That being true, it is interesting that their nakedness was not mentioned. It must have been fairly common.

The Biblical account of what we now call Palm Sunday presents another interesting sight. It left a pastor-friend at a church I used to attend scratching his head and sighing, “This is not how I ever envisioned Jesus' entry into Jerusalem!” The disciples, when they secured a donkey for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem, placed their garments on the back of the donkey as a sort of saddle.

Then, when Jesus rode through the city, most of the people spread their garments on the road before Him. In both cases, the garments are translated from the word himation. Since many of the people did not own an undergarment (the chiton), and those who did wouldn't wear them unless it was cold, it is very likely that most of the people watching Jesus ride through the city were naked. It should be noted, also, that the people then viewed Jesus as a sort of king entering the city; they may have specifically removed their clothes to show their subservience to Him.

There are several other incidents we



could cover. Jesus told his disciples to not be worried about having enough food or clothes. St. Paul asked if nakedness, among other things, could remove the believer from the love of Christ. He also “boasted” about his suffering and nakedness for Christ's sake. In a third incidence, St. Paul described the Church as a human body, saying that one part (even the unseemly parts) was no more

honorable than any other – all are needed to make up a complete human or Church body.

What can we conclude, then? When a careful study of actual, or even allegorically illustrated, nakedness in the Holy Bible is completed, the notion that the state of being naked in a public situation is unscriptural is simply unfounded. It may be argued that such nakedness is unchristian (at

least, as Christianity is defined today), but such an argument can be made only to the extent that objective Biblical accounts of nakedness are either ignored or distorted. If nakedness is unchristian, it is only because the Church has developed a theology apart from the Bible truthfully teaches. ✨