

David L. Hatton's "Meeting at the River"

David L. Hatton's "Meeting at the River" is a sort of parable-like fictional narrative with opportunities to present ideas throughout. I liken it to William P. Young's *The Shack*, in that regard, although a completely different subject matter. Here is Hatton's own description of the book:

"In this semi-autobiographical, fictional tale and intellectual treatise, my divided view of the body is challenged by an encounter with the past. As a bivocational pastor and nurse, I'm shocked when some from a religious crowd in ancient dress disrobe at my favorite swimming hole to be baptized totally naked! Antiquity offers a fatal blow to the old wall in my mind that keeps my experiences of hospital nudity from confronting the taboos of my upbringing. When that wall topples, I gain a new perspective on life in Bible times, a deeper theological appreciation of human embodiment, and a pricked conscience about the root cause of our culture's obsession with pornography. Join me in unlearning deceptions as old as Eden, in relearning truths as relevant as our children's future, and in facing the test of my transformed thinking by the further challenge of four skinny-dipping Bible college students."

With that backdrop, I'd like to share some of my favorite selections from my reading of the book and what it means to me.

"When certain portions of the body are concealed and considered evil to look upon, the normal curiosity of youth about what is hidden leads to temptation. Then, upon exposure, the sight of those forbidden areas can wound the conscience. Even worse, these conditions empower the wicked to make a show of those hidden parts for truly corrupt purposes, even to enslave young souls in lustful thoughts."

This is the elder speaking at the river to explain what a healthy and godly view of the body is. His words certainly resonate with me. This was my experience growing up. From the first time I saw "certain portions of the body" at an early age and was taught to avoid it, temptation abounded. I was a young soul enslaved in lustful thoughts, and grew into a man who was equally enslaved. After embracing a renewed view of the body, I was elated that these problems vanished. As Hatton so eloquently put it, "Prudery lays the groundwork for a pornographic mindset."

"When sermons teach that [Bathsheba's] beauty caused King David's lust, they expound not the words of Scripture but the minds of preachers."

I had been conditioned to only react one way (sexually) to any sight of nudity. This nagging issue stunted my spiritual growth, strained my marriage, and affected how I saw members of the opposite sex (even fully clothed). I hated myself for how I would objectify women and wanted to rid myself of this bondage once for all. But common methods afforded by the church world didn't

work. The problem was never in the dress or undress of women around me or on screens. The problem was my own mind.

“When people teach that the human body is dirty or obscene, it creates fertile ground for pornography. This is why porn addiction is so strong in our society, even among Christians. Our culture is inundated with a sexualized view of the body. I’m sorry to say that the church has been a key player in spreading that idea.”

I’m sorry to say that so have I. But that will be no more. As a Christian leader, I used to think I was a pretty good guy with a bad secret. But now I know that in reality, I’m a pretty bad guy with a great secret. The great secret is that God forgives and renews, and lustful thinking does not have to be a lifelong struggle. I used to think I’d never kick my bad habits. I’d hear older men speak of ongoing issues with their thought life. I didn’t want to be that, and by God’s grace I won’t be.

Then comes the issue of prudery for the sake of modesty. As if there’s not enough guilt and shame going on without adding a bunch on top. Hatton addresses what modesty actually is and should be understood as being:

“Holy humility is the divine modesty humans need. When fully embraced, it brings death to shame. By humbly and gratefully accepting what we really are, we never feel less than we are when naked, nor more than we are when finely dressed. This bathing at the river, where nothing is hidden, quickly unravels the immodesty of pride. At the same time, being accepted in your humble nakedness, by friends and family and others, is healing. It breaks the bondage to ungodly shame over the size or shape or blemishes of the body that God has given you.”

Some of the modern attempts at modesty actually fly in the face of what Paul was instructing Timothy and the church in the New Testament. They are a source of pride, and not humility, which is the point. Simply covering certain body parts may actually incite more lust, drawing attention to it and stimulating the imagination, than if the mystery were revealed and the humble unclad body were seen in its entirety.

It’s sad how much of an effect our culture has on us. Without a renewed mind, we could be tempted to think that anyone who does not look like a model is less beautiful. I reject that notion outright. Body shame is shameful. All humans are God’s image bearers and deserve respect as such.

“Christians will never have a radical reformation in how they view the naked body, until they can distinguish their devotion to culture from their understanding of Scripture.”

The twisted part of Christian thought when it comes to the body is that a girl in a bikini in a suggestive pose is somehow more decent and less obscene than a woman wearing no clothes

just going about her day as normal. Which is natural and which is unnatural? The thinking is backwards. I've been complicit in both spreading that idea and falling victim to its deceitful outcomes. I used to always repent of my secret sin. Now I must repent of having taught the dangerous ideas that once entrapped me and enslave so many today. As Hatton summarizes:

“God cannot bless the deception of body shame. Nor does He ever cease to bless our naked flesh as a sanctuary for His presence. He never calls what is good evil. Nor will He sanction errors about His incarnated image, even if His own children preach them. Such lies are a great stumbling block, leading multitudes to trip and fall into the very pit they warn against. And because church leaders have adopted and spread this as though it were part of the Gospel itself, then it is their duty to repent and make restitution.”