

4.26.21 - *All Flesh Is Grass*



Nudity and the Bible

By Jerry J. Trent

The Bible is a stunning compilation. It is 66 books written by 40 authors over thousands of years, yet it contains conceptual threads which develop throughout its length, unfolding to greater clarity between Genesis and Revelation, as if deliberately composed by one writer. The better one apprehends the Bible as a whole, the more amazing are these conceptual pathways. Unfortunately, the Bible is too often neglected lately and therefore far too little appreciated.

In any book, a point of information separated from material preceding and following can easily be misunderstood. This is especially true of the Bible, which is why parts taken separately from its larger context often result in error. The purpose here is to examine what the Word of Our Creator really says about nakedness, as well as to show a little of what a sublime document the Bible really is. Here no verse is cherry picked for illegitimate effect. The reader is encouraged to investigate context of all passages used. All texts are from the King James Version.

Absence of clothing is sometimes associated in the Bible with unpleasant circumstances, so it is understandable when hasty readers conclude that nakedness is inherently shameful. However, shame at merely being seen naked comes not from the Bible but from man's traditions and individuals' failure to overcome the world in that regard.

The Bible's first mention of nakedness is of course found in Genesis, in the Eden account. I believe for solid reasons that Adam and Eve are historical people. Eden is history. The value of history is not in memorizing past events having no functional bearing on the present. Rather, we learn history so that our future can be better. In addition to an historical account, the Eden story is also an astonishingly deep allegory which teaches us about ourselves. Every one of us lives out that story in our own lives. Eden's metaphor illustrates the core nature of mankind's fallenness and God's plan for recovering us from our fallible human condition. What the Eden account is not is a convoluted sermon against being seen without clothes on.

Often the first argument one gets from Christians preaching against unashamed nakedness is that it was okay at first for Adam and Eve to see each other naked because they didn't know any better. That is an unbiblical argument, as Jesus explains in Luke chapter 12:

47 And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many

stripes.

48 But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes.

So, ignorance of the law is no excuse. There is less punishment for sin committed in ignorance, but it is still punishable. Thus, if the Prime Couple were guiltless in their nakedness it was not because they hadn't noticed they were naked, which would have been no defense. The two were not naked together by accident of their own ignorance; they were placed naked together by God. The Eden story is deep and fascinating because something far more interesting than garden variety nakedness was going on.

The only way to grasp Eden's meaning is to grasp the metaphor, the allegorical side of the Eden account. To do that we need to widen our scope, including the Bible as a whole. Thereby we gain insight into the immediate subject, and more importantly we learn about ourselves and how Christian doctrine is embedded in the imagery of the Garden of Eden. So, let's pretend for a while that we don't live in a century characterized by one-line soundbites and read seriously to find out what the Bible wants us to know.

Someone will say the book of Leviticus tells us not to let others see us naked. Only it doesn't. The part erroneously referenced by such an assertion is in chapter 18:

6 None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the LORD.

Leviticus then proceeds to list those whose nakedness one is not to uncover, the nakedness of thy:

father

mother

sister

niece

aunt

daughter in law

sister in law

et cetera

Why so many proscriptions against seeing naked kin and none of unrelated people? Because literal nakedness is not what is being forbidden here.

“Uncovering nakedness” is a tactful way of referring to sex. What is being proscribed is incest. Two chapters later, Leviticus 20 states plainly what is meant by uncovering nakedness:

11 And the man that lieth with his father’s wife hath uncovered his father’s nakedness: both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.

Other such euphemisms are numerous. First Kings 7:50 refers to female parts by the word “hinge”(a hole into which a pin is inserted). First Samuel 24:3 tells us that Saul went to “cover his feet...”(Saul dropped his drawers, over his feet, to defecate). And of course, “Adam knew his wife” and begot Abel.

Leviticus 20:11 is also the key to understanding Genesis chapter 9. In that passage, Noah gets drunk and passes out. His son, Ham, sees his nakedness. When Noah finds out he curses Ham’s progeny. A hasty reading of this produces no clarity at all. How do Ham’s descendants catch the brunt of Noah’s anger at Ham’s action? The answer is that they don’t. Much racial theorizing has surrounded Chapter 9. Those are wrong.

The world had just been scoured of humanity in the Flood of Noah and was beginning anew. Ham was not the eldest son. By law, therefore, his authority was subordinate to that of his older brother. However, if he begot children by his mother, they would be first of a genealogical line in a restored humanity. Therefore, Ham stood to become co-patriarch of the entire world.

Noah's cursing of Ham's lineage was therefore a legal measure taken to block Ham's ambition, not an illogical aggression against the unborn.

To peoples of a modern representative republic, that will all seem a bit much. To those living under a monarchy it is far more understandable. In Britain, for example, it is treasonous and technically punishable by death to commit adultery with the sovereign's consort, with the sovereign's eldest unmarried daughter, or with the wife of the heir to the throne. Such are recognized as attempts to undermine lawful succession.

"Uncovering nakedness" refers not to mere removal of clothing, so the question occurs, Why, exactly would nakedness be a good euphemism for shame and sin? The answer seems to be that everyone can understand that usage.

Some phases of development are archetypal for human beings. Toddlers will run about naked as a matter of preference, to the distress of parents who have yet to potty train them. Later, children become sensitive about bodily privacy as they near puberty.

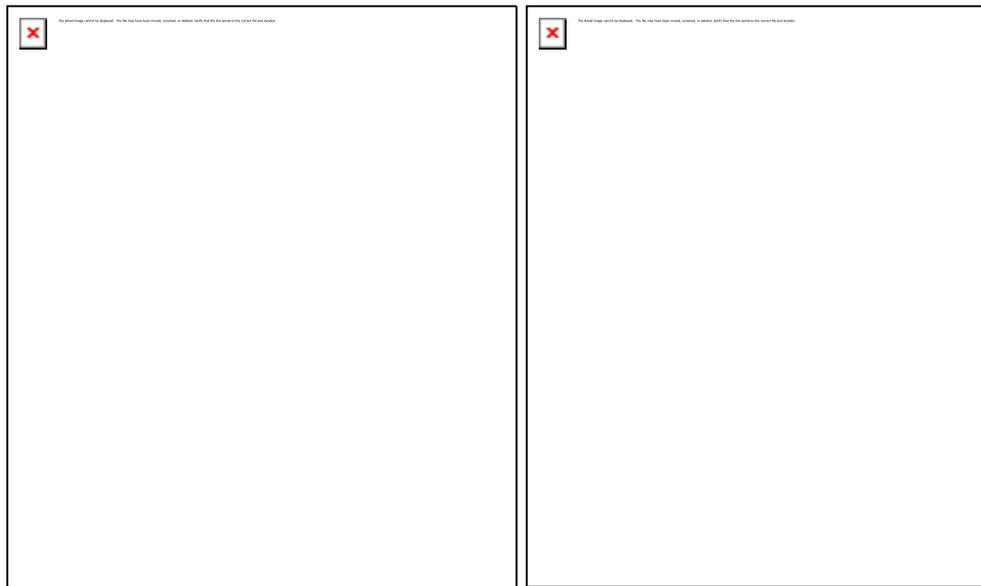
When children begin to develop a more sophisticated sense of themselves, they naturally wish to assert control over their persons. While as babies they ate whatever mom and dad spooned into their mouths, they at length start refusing asparagus. They begin associating with friends, unknown to their parents, and they begin to close the bedroom door. As people grow to maturity – to the degree we do so – we learn to love green vegetables, cease caring what anyone thinks of our friends, and become increasingly blasé about nakedness. Yet even for senior adults in whom adolescent body privacy issues are long gone they remain a visceral memory. There is variation in this from one individual to the next and from culture to culture, but such personal development is the normal, healthy trajectory. Therefore, nakedness is a remarkably universal symbol for representing angst and acute self-consciousness.

Another reason lack of attire is a handy symbol for shame owes to the

unfortunate human tendency to blame the poor for being poor. For example, Job's friends blamed him unfairly when he lost everything including his wardrobe to disaster.

Life was tough for folks in the biblical-era Levant. The region was largely wilderness. Farms were absurdly unproductive by today's standards. There was no assembly line manufacturing; every object one owned was made as a one-off product, by hand. Things as simple as a top-quality robe or a cloak were prized possessions. For the masses, falling into the most wretched poverty and finding oneself literally without ownership of anything, even a shirt, was a distinct possibility.

The indigent might sell themselves into servitude just to remain alive, and we see captured slaves depicted naked on ancient stela. Thus, unavoidable



nakedness was associated with the indentured or outright slaves, the lowest of the low. It was for this reason the Lord commanded nakedness Isaiah chapter 20:

2 At the same time spake the LORD by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, Go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from thy foot. And he did so, walking naked and barefoot.

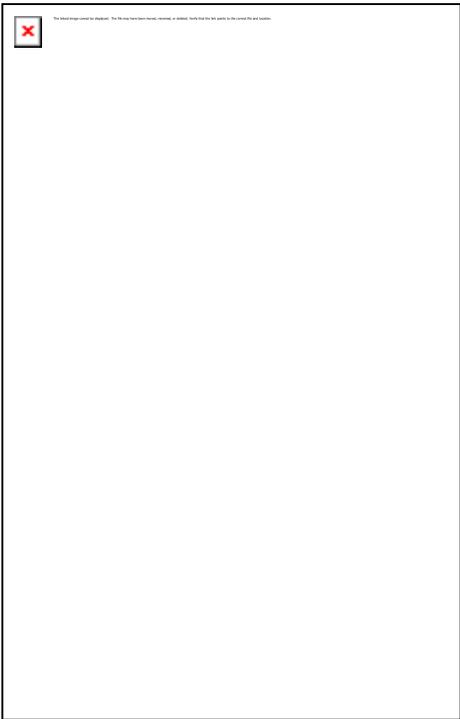
3 And the LORD said, Like as my servant Isaiah hath walked naked and

barefoot three years for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and upon Ethiopia;

4 So shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians prisoners, and the Ethiopians captives, young and old, naked and barefoot, even with their buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.

5 And they shall be afraid and ashamed of Ethiopia their expectation, and of Egypt their glory.

By commanding that people go about naked, the Lord is not in this passage commanding that people sin; he is inducing humility in arrogant people. This incident is one of several in which the Lord God causes people to live without clothing for the express purpose of changing their haughty attitudes.

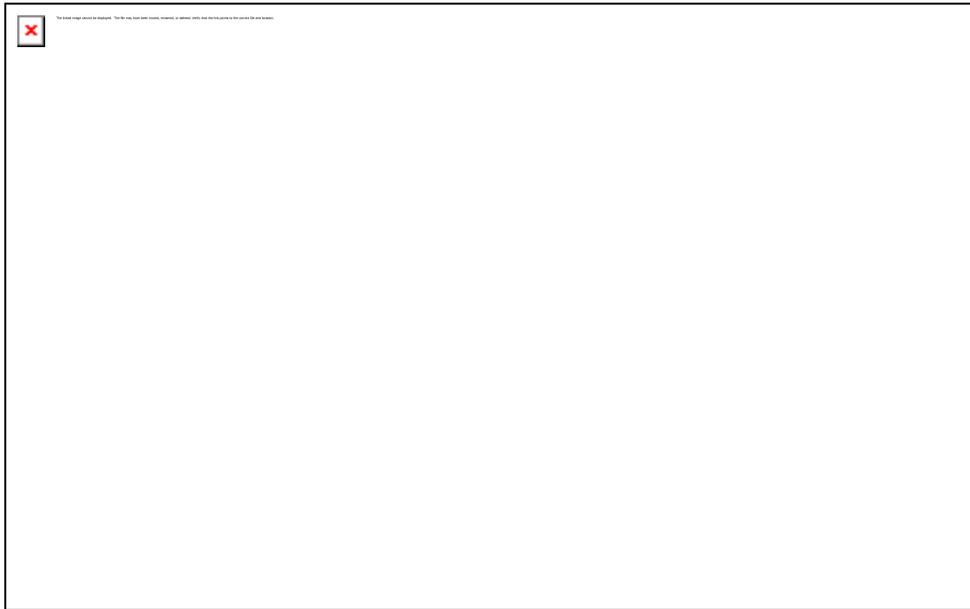


Note that it is the involuntary nature of nakedness that makes it undesirable. In 2 Samuel Chapter 10, we see King David sending emissaries to the Ammonites. Rather than receiving David's representatives with respect, the Ammonites abuse them:

4 Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away.

5 When they told it unto David, he sent to meet them, because the men were greatly ashamed: and the king said, Tarry at Jericho until your beards be grown, and then return.

Their disfigured beards were as much a problem as their exposed backsides. The emissaries were humiliated, yet it is clear they were embarrassed not because of nakedness itself but because they had been forced to appear ridiculous.



Voluntary nudity, however, is in the Bible a neutral condition. Sometimes ridding oneself of all possessions including clothes was admired as a renunciation of worldliness and dedication to God. This is illustrated in 1 Samuel 19, when the Spirit of God touched Saul, making him a prophet:

23 ...and the Spirit of God was upon him also, and he went on, and prophesied, until he came to Naioth in Ramah.

24 And he stripped off his clothes also, and prophesied before Samuel

in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night.
Wherefore they say, [Is] Saul also among the prophets?

Saul was seen as a prophet precisely because he went unclothed.

There are about two dozen Old Testament passages speaking at least obliquely of nakedness. Of those, precisely one instructs priests specifically to not expose their buttocks, while attending the Alter. Exodus 20:26 says, “Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.”

Thus, the one and only prohibition of physical nakedness in the entire OT is the proscription against priests making everyone stare up their robes while performing priestly duties.

That is a matter of decorum, a subject which unfortunately is not appreciated in the West as it once was. There are circumstances wherein clothing is desirable and nakedness inappropriate, as a matter of civility and protocol. Funerals, presidential addresses, and the performance of ceremonies would be among such solemn events. A trip to the skinny-dippin’ pond is not.

In the New Testament, we can ironically get a very good idea of how apostolic Christians regarded nudity by noting what is not written. The New Testament has no proscription against using Roman public facilities.

Common folk in first century Judea had access to a Roman aqueduct which fed water to public baths and toilets. None of the apostles denounce use of these by Christians or anyone else. They denounced plenty of bad behavior, by both Christians and heathens, but wrote not a word against the communal water works. Why not, when people were naked there? Because what folks were doing was bathing and eliminating. That is, ordinary, moral, unclothed activities.

Still it will be objected that in the New Testament Christians are told to be modest. That is correct. There is 1 Timothy 2:

9 In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel

with shamefacedness and sobriety...

Right there is where the some will stop, but let us use more of the text for a fuller understanding:

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;

10 But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.

So, first Timothy 2:9 and 10 is a denunciation fancy of clothes as a substitute for good works. This is the closest clothing-obsessed Christians can come to a proof text: A misused half passage which, taken in full, has nothing whatever to do with nudity.

Meanwhile, many who wear their “Sunday best” to church and abuse the Bible to condemn innocent, voluntary nakedness are in defiance of 1 Timothy. This glaring fact brings to mind another passage, from Revelation, chapter 3:

17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.

The speaker here, our risen Lord Jesus, is no more recommending actual, physical clothing than he is metallic gold or literal eyesalve. He is associating material obsession with spiritual impoverishment. This is real poverty in a meaningful sense. He advises instead acquiring true riches and finery, by laying up treasures in Heaven, doing good.

Lacking a single proof text in the entire 783,137 words of the Bible, nudity-averse Christians resort to imagining that ancient peoples were as squeamish as are modern westerners.

They conjecture use of clothing in the biblical Levant to have been just as today's. Therefore, such muddy thinking concludes, people have always been anxious about being seen naked – and that justifies local nudity ordinances.

Of course, projecting such onto folks of a more technologically primitive and therefore more practical culture is a mistake. Shucking off one's clothing, outside, in the presence of others, for practical reasons, was in Levantine cultures a normal thing to do.

For example, in John chapter 21, the disciples have gone fishing. It is mentioned in passing that Jesus' closest disciple is naked while doing this work. The reason is obvious: Fishing the Sea of Galilee, hauling wet rope nets repeatedly onto a boat was heavy, soaking-wet manual labor in high heat and humidity. Adding the weight and encumbrance of a sodden garment to that would have hindered productivity.

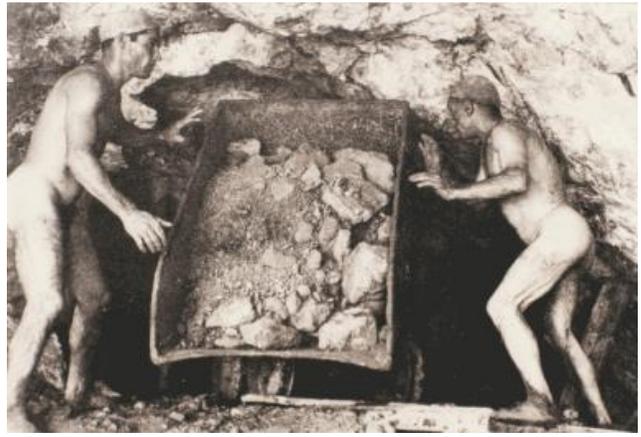
Being naked when such is reasonable is not exclusive to the ancient world. Until only a few decades ago, respectable Christians regarded nakedness very differently than they do in our modern kindergarten-culture. For example, before electric powered ventilation, coal miners everywhere typically worked naked. This was for the same reason Peter went fishing naked: It was hard work in a dreadfully a hot environment.

Of coal mining in Anglican Britain we read that:

Conditions in coal mines were terrible. Women and children were employed to pull the wagons of coal from the coal face to the shaft foot. These workers were smaller, and cheaper, than a properly trained horse. Underground work gets very hot, so often people worked more or less naked. – <https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item106978.html>

“More or less naked” indeed. It is a fact that men often worked utterly naked

in coal-fueled, steam-powered mining operations. Temperatures exceeded 110 degrees. Women generally worked topless, nearer a tunnel entrance.



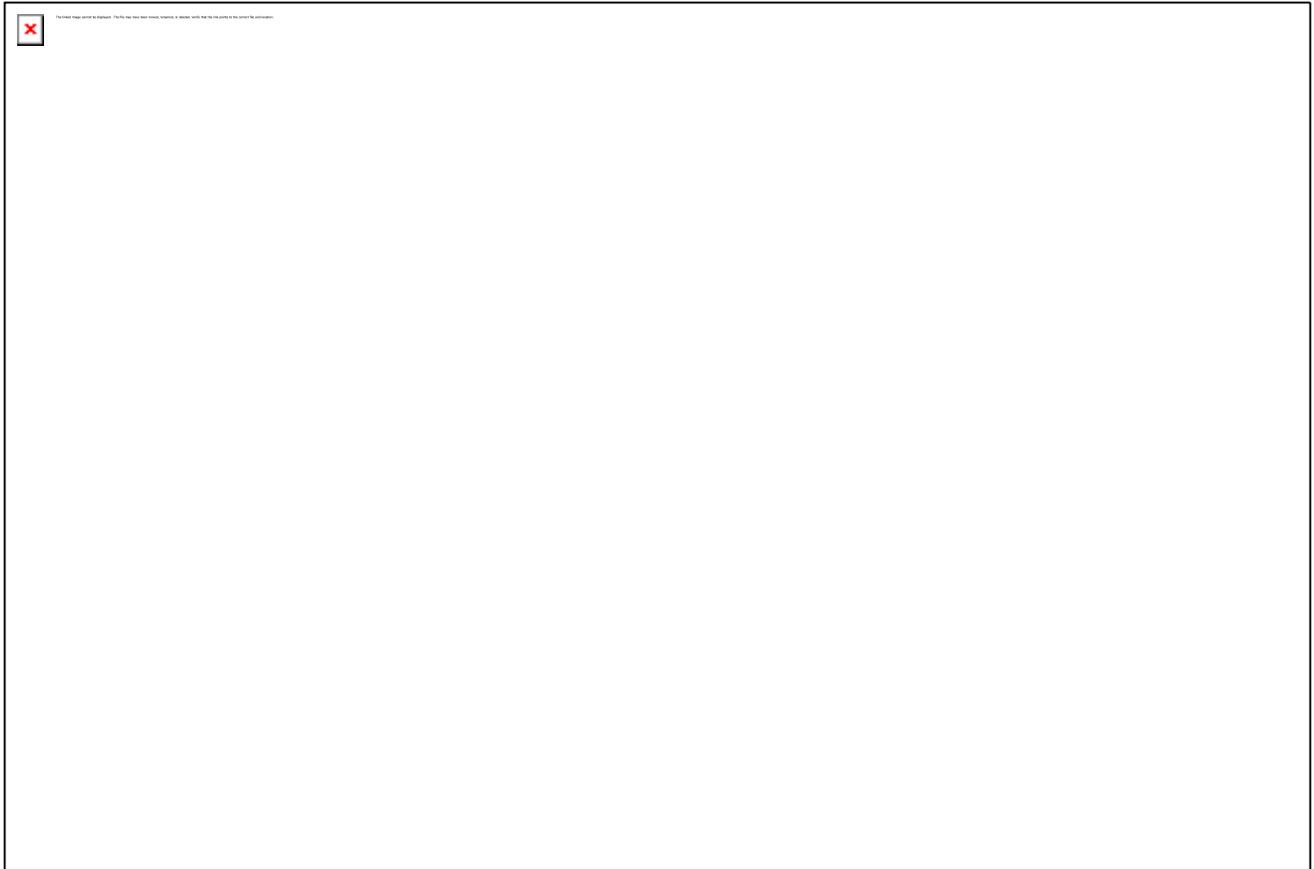
The Modern History Sourcebook informs us:

In many of the collieries in this district, as far as relates to the underground employment, there is no distinction of sex... there are numerous instances in which [women] regularly perform even this work. In great numbers of the coalpits in this district the men work in a state of perfect nakedness, and are in this state assisted in their labour by females of all ages, from girls of six years old to women of twenty-one, these females being themselves quite naked down to the waist. –
Women Miners in the English Coal Pits

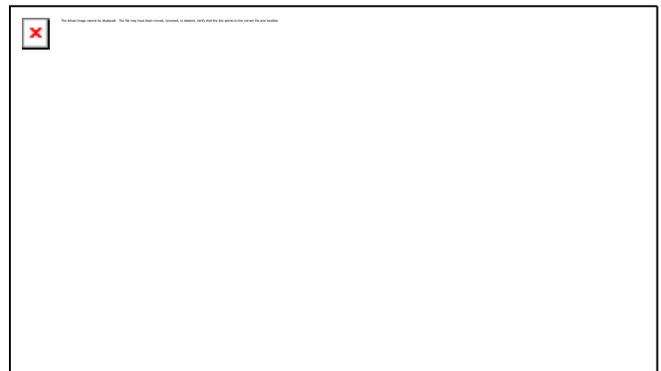
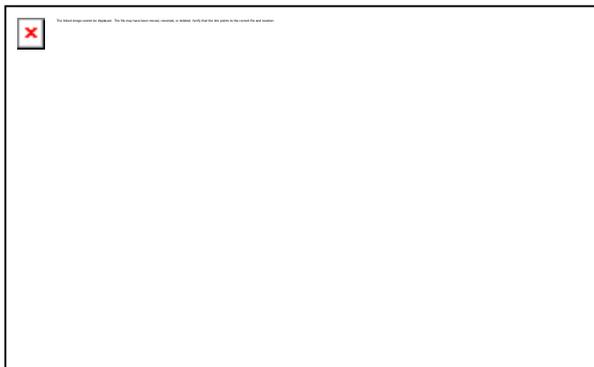
That necessity was the known motive for nakedness in mine work did not stop wealthier Christians condemning their blue collar brethren. There were newspaper articles unfairly denouncing supposedly depraved coal miners. One imagines a journalist typing in his office, window open to a pleasant breeze. It is very tempting for the well heeled to look down their noses at the less-well-off.

Nakedness, when reasonably called for by circumstances, is not even worth noticing for people with better things to do, like earning a subsistence a living. In the more practical – and fairly recent – past there were widely understood to be situations where nakedness was appropriate because it is the

best way. Extremely hard, hot work and some recreational activities, for example swimming, were among these.



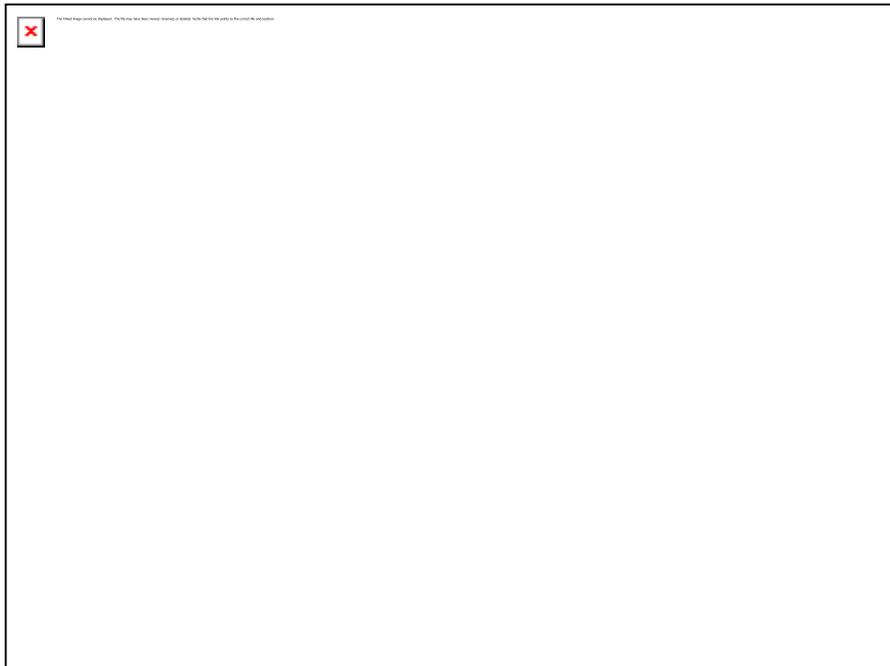
There was a time when the majority of westerners did not sexualize every possible thing. Note the comedy actors Laurel and Hardy. They were two unmarried, middle aged men who slept in the same bed. No one glanced twice at them because in the 1930s people were not absurdly over-sexualized by media. We therefore have records of of men, women, and children



swimming innocently together in widely varying states of dress.

Skinny dipping, in mixed company, was practiced in the Christian west because it was practical. Females more often wore clothing of some sort to swim because swimming, being an athletic endeavor, was more to be pursued by males. Females tended to just wade a bit. Also, males were rightly expected by society to be tougher than females, and so more disdainful of the protection afforded by clothing. By the 1960s, athleticism was more socially acceptable for females, so they became more likely to exercise the prerogative of males at the swimmin' hole.

We moderns have eliminated almost all nudity but the obscene, which now sadly flourishes. So, when folks today see nudity, they think they are seeing the obscene. That is the dumbed-down level to which we have fallen. Such is the modern degree of disconnect from reality. Saint Peter's reasonable nakedness at work would today get him arrested in many places. He was doing absolutely nothing wrong, as neither were miners of past eras or

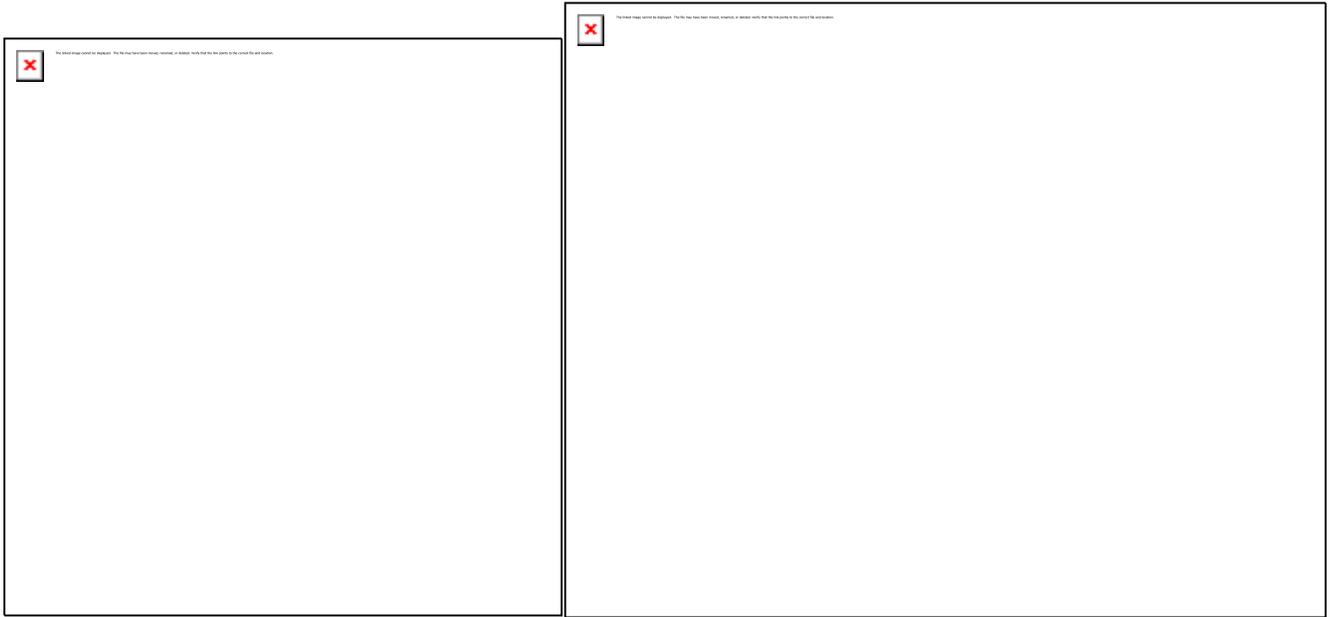


innocent skinny dippers of any decade.

Thus, Christians who cite a Bible-times culture that was horrified by nudity refer only to their own imaginations. In practical times and places, among

reasonable people, simple nakedness has never been horrible or illegal.

It is a fact that no one likes wearing clothes while swimming. More importantly, there is no scriptural reason to do so, which is why the Christian West has capriciously shifting local customs on the subject, instead of a



stable tradition.

Three centuries after Masaccio's *The Expulsion Of Adam and Eve from Eden* was painted, Cosimo III de' Medici ordered fig leaves be added. These were removed in the 1980s



Christmas is a tradition. It is perennial and all but universal in the West, even in households that reject the gospel. Stores close on Christmas, government reduces activity to a blessed minimum, and observance begins everywhere. In the USA, Independence Day is a tradition. In Latin America *Dia do Trabalhador* is celebrated. Traditions are willingly participated in for good reasons by all levels of society over great stretches of time. Swimming with clothes on is not like that.

Anyone who examines the history of skinny dipping will find that frenzy over absence of clothing, far from being a Christian tradition, is merely a sporadically trendy invention. It comes and goes over the decades and is regionally variable. The reason for this is the same as for any fad: Nakedness terror is founded neither in reason nor in the Western canon.

If the Bible doesn't say to hide our bodies and Christendom has no consistent history of fearing nakedness, the question will occur, Where did we get our funny ideas about skin?

We in the West have an amazing and marvelous heritage – and we are big

enough to admit we are not perfect. Humility requires we concede that we sometimes take wrong historical turns. One of these was caused by a mental seed, planted long ago in Europe, which has resulted in intermittent bouts of anxiety at absence of clothing. Responsibility for the West's sometimes nutty ideation about human skin lies just about entirely with the Romish clergy.

Catholic clergy are the classic example of pent up lust and the subsequent projection of their own volcanic inner lives onto everyone else. This is because Catholicism disregards the straightforward commands of 1 Timothy 3:

2 A bishop then must be blameless, **the husband of one wife**, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach;

3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;

4 One that ruleth well his own house, **having his children in subjection** with all gravity;

5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)

and Titus 1:

5 For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:

6 If any be blameless, **the husband of one wife, having faithful children** not accused of riot or unruly.

Catholic priests do not actually take a sacred vow of celibacy. They promise their bishop that they won't marry, then some do it anyway. They are, however, forbidden to have sex with their wives. Then they do that anyway. (See the article "39 Popes Were Married!" by Father John Shuster, johnshuster.com.)

That kind of institutionalized suppression cannot be healthful, which is why we have seen centuries of dangerous sexual obsession among Romish clergy. That is also why we have endured a parade of perplexing, come-and-go rules, for example the bizarre requirement of married couples to wear clothing during sex.

Loonie, manifestly unscriptural rules made up by unstable elitists and Christians who don't read the Bible cannot attain consistent compliance. Practical considerations always make a comeback. That is why at this very moment someone is skinny dipping in an Arkansas lake, despite state prohibition.

Summed up, what textile-bound Christians have going for their side of the debate is:

1. Dismembered, misapplied scriptures
2. Fantasies about life in ancient cultures
3. Transient local customs
4. Rules made up by crazy people

That's all they've got. So, they are wrong. But it is actually much worse than being wrong. There are numerous instances in the Bible where God commands people to go about naked. **To denounce a command of God as sin is blasphemy.** Consider carefully, brothers and sisters.

Now that we have an inkling about the Bible's usage of nakedness as a symbol and the historical circumstances under which that understanding was lost, let's take a look at Eden's sublime message. Genesis chapter 3 reads:

1 Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

2 And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the

trees of the garden:

3 But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

4 And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:

5 For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

6 And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

7 And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

8 And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.

9 And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?

10 And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

Initially, the Couple were without distress of any kind. God had assigned Adam enjoyable tasks. Eve was his helpmate. Then they chose to disbelieve God and believe the Serpent instead. Where before they were dealing only with good, they opted to know evil as well.

Throughout the Bible the word “evil” is used synonymously with “harm.” (See Genesis 44:34; Exodus 32:14; Leviticus 26:6; Deuteronomy 30:15; Joshua 23:15; Amos 3:6; et al.) When God is recorded doing evil, it doesn’t

mean He was being wicked; it means He was punishing the wicked by sending harm their way, inhibiting their ability to thrive.

Adam and Eve disbelieved God and in so doing bumbled into experiencing for the first time that which was harmful as well as what was good. Adam would end up having to get a real job. Eve would be ruled over by her husband. Life would be different for the very logical reason that people had become different, capable now of knowing harm.

By taking the word of the Serpent over God's, they were in effect calling the Omnipotent Creator and Ruler of the Universe a liar. Given such jaw-dropping impudence, how can anyone think their guilt was because God had not given them clothes? Obviously, their guilty feelings resulted from what they had done, not what God had done.

As with the rest of the Eden account, the couples' reaction to their Fall is simultaneously literal and symbolic. Literally, it was a textbook case of displacement, redirecting blame in order to avoid the truth. Figuratively, their focus on physical nakedness shows that they realized how vulnerable they were, how unprotected they were from the harm they had introduced into their own existence.

They were in one hell of a jam. Among the evils they would know would be death, just as the Almighty had told them. So, it wasn't from each other that Adam and Eve were hiding when they made crummy aprons and dove into the bushes. It was God from whom they hid. Their hopeless effort to hide was not the Couple's attempt to do right; it was an attempt to hide their wrong.

Of course, that didn't work at all. God had promised death in consequence of sin. However, God had a plan for salvaging people who turn from disbelief. He stepped in and shed other blood instead of the Couple's, making animal skin coats to replace their poor attempt at covering themselves (Genesis 3:21). This scenario will be recognized by Christians. Animal sacrifice prevailed as a simile until Christ's sacrifice on Golgotha, which pays for, covers, sin on behalf of the sinner.

Thus, the shame experienced by the Primordial Couple, their failed attempt to cover themselves, and God's provision of skins to wear is a profound foreshadowing of salvation doctrine, not some trivial denunciation of physical nudity.

Isaiah 40:6 says "All flesh is grass...." If we leave off there, we might get the wrong idea. Better to read some more:

6 The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field:

7 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.

8 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Our ephemeral bodies sometimes command inordinately our attention. So also, our man-made commandments may seem to carry great importance. Really, though, both are just puny little humanity, whose shouting into the atmosphere is carried away thereby, while the Word remains, unchanging.

Where, finally, does the Bible forbid ordinary nudity? It doesn't, anywhere. To read the Bible and not be confused one must be attentive to allegory. Also, it helps if one does not try to shoehorn quirky local ordinances into the Word of God.



End