

# Modesty in Apparel: Bringing a Believer's Attire into Subjection to the Word of God

## Chapter 1: Nakedness and Indecency Defined by Scripture

[Brian Schwertley](#)

“In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works” (1 Tim. 2:9-10).

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the biblical teaching on modesty and the moral, appropriate way for Christian men and women to dress. This is a neglected subject in our day because this topic is controversial and has engendered widely different views in the professing Christian community. On one end of the spectrum are those who generally ignore this question and who largely have imitated the clothing styles (whether modest or not) of our society. (This author has attended Reformed churches where women were wearing miniskirts, very short shorts, “sexy” tank tops and skin tight, thin, cotton pants. In many evangelical and some Reformed churches pool parties with skimpy bikinis are considered perfectly acceptable.) It is not the case that all such professing Christians have self-consciously and deliberately set out to dress immodestly. These current practices more reflect ignorance based on a failure to apply the Word of God to every area of life. Many people have not given the way they dress any serious thought. On the other end of the spectrum are those who have adopted a legalistic, neoplatonic, Anabaptist concept of dress because of unscriptural presuppositions, sloppy exegesis, fallacious reasoning and a love of human traditions. While it is certainly wrong for professing Christians to dress immodestly in imitation of the pagan world around us, it is also sinful and dangerous spiritually to add to or go beyond the teaching of God's Word. As we examine this difficult topic, there are a number of things to note by way of introduction.

First, we need to define the term “modest” according to Scripture. In classical Greek the word “modest” (*kosmios*) was used to describe a person who was self-controlled and thus lived a moral, respectable life. The usage of the word as a moral virtue grew out of the idea that what was ordered, controlled, measured or balanced is good or proper. Its closest *opposite* would be something chaotic, disorderly or in the ethical sphere something licentious. This term was derived from *kosmos* (i.e. universe, world, order, etc.) “in the sense of ‘order,’ then of ‘adornment,’ *kosmios* thus means ‘self-controlled,’ ‘disciplined,’ ‘well-mannered,’ ‘honourable.’”<sup>1</sup> In the New Testament this word is used to describe a qualification of an overseer

---

<sup>1</sup> Herman Sasse, “*Kosmios*” in Gerhard Kittel, Ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:896.

or elder in 1 Timothy 3:2. In this passage it has the sense of “honourable,” “modest,” “of good behavior” (NKJV), or “morally disciplined.” In English, when referring to dress or appearance, the term refers to the proper or fitting appearance (i.e. an adornment that is not lascivious or does not incite lust). A secondary meaning would refer to a lack of showiness or ostentation. In the Greek New Testament the meaning is essentially the same. Thus, in 1 Timothy 2:9 Paul is telling Christian women to wear apparel appropriate for a Christian; that is, clothing which covers the body decently and therefore does not give occasion for men to lust. In addition, he condemns clothing that is *excessively* showy, costly, luxurious or ostentatious. While he does not tell believers to look like slobs or poor persons, he also does not want them to imitate heathen women who worship clothing and adornments. The Christian’s dress ought to reflect the humility, modesty and priorities of the renewed heart.

In 1 Timothy 2:9 the word “modest” is accompanied by an adjectival preposition that is designed to reinforce Paul’s imperative and shed light on its meaning: “with propriety and moderation” (NKJV). The first word in Greek is *aidos* (which has been translated “shamefacedness” [KJV],<sup>2</sup> “shamefastness” [ASV], “modesty” [Wuest], “prudently” [Berkeley], “sensibly” [RSV], “modestly” [NEB, NASB], “quietly” [Moffet], “decency” [NIV]). This word refers to a proper state of mind which is the platform for modest behavior. It implies an attitude informed by biblical ethics which finds unseemly, lascivious behavior repugnant. It also indicates a certain amount of godly self-respect that restrains oneself from crossing the line of biblical propriety. Paul understands that the key to modesty in dress is a sanctified attitude that is happy to place limits on one’s behavior.

The second word is “sobriety” (KJV) or “moderation” (NKJV). This Greek word (*sophrosune*) refers to an inner self-government or strong control over one’s illicit passions and desires so that they are kept in check and thus one’s behavior remains within the path of God’s moral precepts. For Paul, self-control or mastery over one’s autonomous desires or sinful passions is necessary for women to dress modestly. Because of the fall and our sinful natures, women often have an unlawful desire to be lusted after. They want to draw attention to themselves and one, easy and popular way to do so is by accentuating one’s sexuality or wealth or both. In modern society this sinful tendency is on full display at Hollywood award ceremonies where women dress immodestly in every sense of the word and parade themselves on the red carpet. Christian women, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, are to control themselves in this area to glorify God and nurture their progressive sanctification.

Second, the Bible does not lay out an explicit guide with regard to clothing. In fact, the only dress code in Scripture is the one God instituted for the priests who ministered in the tabernacle or temple (e.g., Ex. 28:3-4). Therefore, when it comes to ascertaining the proper mode

---

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the KJV translation, “shamefacedness,” Ralph Earle writes, “This unfortunate translation leaves the implication that Christian women should go around in public with heads bowed and eyes averted, as if they were ashamed of themselves. Not so. Actually this rendering appears to be an error. *The Oxford English Dictionary* says that the adjective ‘shamefacedness’ was ‘originally an etymological misinterpretation of *shamefast*’ (9:620) which carries the idea of discreetness. Wycliff’s earliest English version of the Bible (1382) has the correct term here, ‘shamefastness.’ This is used in the ASV (1901), but, of course, even this word is obsolete today” (*Word Meanings in the New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 1974], 388).

of dress for believers we will need to carefully study God's Word and make *logical inferences* regarding modesty. A study of the law and the prophets will be especially helpful in determining the biblical definition of "nakedness" or what parts of the body are deemed inappropriate for public display. In addition, we would do well to compare the godly Jewish mode of dress with immodest forms in the ancient world.

Third, we need to consider the somewhat difficult task of applying what we have learned about modesty within different cultural contexts. Although the Bible has a very objective standard with regard to what should not be exposed and the fact that clothing should not be sexually stimulating or ostentatious, there are cultural matters that must be considered when applying the seventh commandment<sup>3</sup> to issues such as determining proper attire that pertains to a man or woman. For example, in the twenty first century, is it wrong for a woman to wear pants? There is a large body of writing on the internet devoted to the idea that women wearing pants is a violation of Deuteronomy 22:5. We will consider this question at length because it will help us to avoid turning an older cultural practice or human tradition into a supposed ethical absolute. Society's definition of what is proper attire for men and women is in flux and has radically changed over time. Therefore, what was considered normal dress in Gaul in A.D. 65 might be considered effeminate or a sign of homosexuality in 1965 (men used to wear skirts or kilt-like garments). The important thing is that we use God's Word as our final, sufficient, sole standard on these issues and let it determine what is appropriate within our culture. If we do not, we could easily fall into a culturally conditioned legalism like the Amish or strict Mennonites.

Fourth, no discussion of modesty would be complete without an examination of makeup and jewelry. Does the Bible (in passages such as 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:3-4) give Christians an absolute prohibition on the wearing of jewelry (gold, pearls, gemstones, silver) or are Paul and Peter concerned with an abuse, an excess, an ostentatious or immodest use of such things? This point will teach us the importance of interpreting individual passages according to the analogy of Scripture or the broader context of Scripture.

May God enable us to understand His inspired Word and give us wisdom in this important, yet neglected, matter. A biblical understanding and application of this issue is crucial, given the fact that we live in a sex-obsessed culture. Believers ought to set an example of godliness by their chaste behavior and modest appearance.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Puritans placed all matters relating to sexual immorality under the seventh commandment. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* deals with modesty under its exposition of the seventh commandment in questions 138 and 139: Q. 138: What are the duties required in the seventh commandment? A. The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, *modesty in apparel*...shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations thereunto. Q. 139: What are the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment? A. The sins forbidden in the seventh commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts; all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections; all corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto; wanton looks, impudent or light behavior, *immodest apparel*...unchaste company, lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others (*emphasis added*).

## Chapter 1: Nakedness and Indecency Defined by Scripture

Although the Bible does not spell out a dress code or give explicit instructions as to what to wear in everyday public life, it does tell us what parts of the body should not be exposed to the general public. By examining what the Bible regards as indecent exposure, we can arrive at an objective standard for modesty in the sphere of sexuality. Therefore, we will briefly survey the biblical teaching on nakedness.

### Before the Fall

In Genesis 2:25 we read, “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” At the climax of the creation narrative, Moses notes that Adam and Eve were nude yet felt no shame before God or each other. At this time sin had not yet entered the world and thus their sexuality was pure and innocent. Because they were without sin and guilt they were also without shame. From the fall narrative in chapter 3 we see that a sense of shame is a direct consequence of a consciousness of guilt resulting from a transgression against God’s revealed will. “Shame destroys a person’s inner harmony and supplants it with a sense of disgrace and fearfulness. It is the loss of God’s favor, and a loss of esteem before one’s fellow men.”<sup>4</sup> Adam and Eve’s sense of shame, unworthiness, disgrace, failure and fearfulness was before God, who they knew was holy and righteous. (Interestingly, nakedness will often be associated with humiliation, shame and guilt throughout the prophets [cf. Ezek. 16:22, 37, 39; Hos. 2:3; Amos 2:16; Mic. 1:8]. In the ancient world the abbreviated dress of prisoners of war and slaves was a deliberate policy to shame and humiliate them.)

The fact that Adam and Eve were naked before the fall does not mean that nudism would have been the practice of the human race if the fall had never occurred. We can infer that clothes would have been invented and used from the following observations. First, Adam and Eve were husband and wife and thus their nakedness was not a sin either pre-fall or post-fall. In the narrative the focus is on their sense of shame, not on their nudity. When Adam and Eve had grown children and a society of people had come into existence, they would have covered their nakedness appropriately. In the new heavens and earth where sin and guilt has been abolished and men and women have glorified bodies that cannot lust or sin, people will still wear clothing (Rev. 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14). Second, the creation ordinance of monogamous heterosexual marriage and the moral law’s regulations regarding the exposing of the nakedness of non-spouses, etc., presupposes the necessity of clothing in public areas. Third, the dominion mandate with its command to subdue the earth would require clothing at a minimum as protective gear or a tool for productive labor. One would not be expected to ride a horse, do welding or scuba dive in northern waters naked. Clothing not only is designed to protect the sanctity of marriage, but is a necessary tool for godly dominion.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *Genesis* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2002), 30.

## The Invention of Clothing

The first mention of clothing in Scripture comes as an immediate consequence of the fall. Genesis 3:7-11 reads,

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. 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. And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, "Where art thou?" And he said, "I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." And he said, "Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?"

Satan had promised Eve that if she ate of the forbidden fruit she would be like God, knowing good and evil. In verse 7 Adam and Eve's eyes were opened, but only to the shocking realization that they were naked. The consciousness of their nakedness that strongly disturbed them was not a simply a knowledge of the fact that they were not wearing any clothes and it was *not* a consciousness of their sexuality; but it was connected to their spiritual, inner sense of guilt before God. They not only sewed fig trees together to cover themselves, but also hid themselves among the trees when they heard God walking toward them (v. 8). Because they felt shame and guilt, they could not bear to stand naked before the gaze of a holy and just God. They now understood that they were stained with sin and were no longer what they were intended to be. The shame associated with their nakedness does not teach that husbands and wives must wear clothes *when alone*, for our first parents' dread was only an outward manifestation of their inner sense of guilt before God. This point is supported by verse 10 where Adam's excuse for hiding, "because I was naked," is taken as evidence by God of Adam's sin in verse 11.

The main point of the narrative is that Adam and Eve's guilt led them to seek a covering. But the covering that they made for themselves was definitely inadequate or non-efficacious. They concealed themselves in the lush vegetation the moment God drew near. Only Jehovah could provide an acceptable covering for them by blood atonement. God slew an animal and clothed Adam and Eve with coats of skin to cover their sense of shame (cf. Gen. 3:21). This narrative clearly points to Jesus Christ and His vicarious death. Our first parents could do nothing to alleviate their guilt since the penalty for sin is death. God taught them that the only remedy for sin and guilt is blood atonement. (The Cain and Abel narrative in chapter 4 assumes that Adam's children had knowledge of blood sacrifice.)

In verse 21 we are told that God made "tunics of skins." The word "tunics" (*kethoneth*) is used later of a robe-like garment worn next to one's skin. It was worn by both men and women (2 Sam. 13:18, 19; 15:32). A fine linen version of this garment was worn by the priests (Ex. 28:39; 39:27). Whether this "tunic" resembled the tunics worn by Jews for centuries we do not know. (Jewish tunics went to the knees or ankles). The important thing to know is that God provided them with proper clothing.

## Modest Dress in the Bible

Although clothing styles have changed several times over the past five thousand years, an examination of Hebrew dress will be helpful in determining how godly Jews dressed. Generally speaking Jews, both men and women, wore five pieces of clothing. First, there was the undergarment (i.e. our equivalent to underwear; Hebrew-*ketonet*, *kuttonet*, Greek-*chiton*). People are often confused about this item when reading their Bibles because it has been translated as: “tunic,” “garment,” “coat” and “robe.” This piece of clothing was worn next to the skin and was usually made of linen, which was soft and did not itch like wool. It resembled our tee shirts except it was much longer, looser, but not as soft as cotton. This garment could have long sleeves or no sleeves at all. Jesus wore a seamless tunic which would have been of little use to the Roman soldiers if cut into four pieces, so they decided to cast lots for it (cf. Jn. 19:23f). It is mentioned in 2 Samuel 13:18 (Tamar’s robe of many colors), Song of Solomon 5:3 (the sleeping attire of the Shulamite), Exodus 29:8 (the undergarment of the priests) and Leviticus 16:4 (the holy linen tunic of the high priest).

Second, there was an outer garment called a robe, long robe, cloak, wrapper, mantle or vesture (Hebrew-*kesut*, *salma*, *begeg*, *mitpahat*; Greek, *himation*). This was a large cloth with arm holes used by men and women. It was wrapped around the body like a blanket. The girdle or belt helped hold it in place. At night it would be used as a blanket for sleeping (cf. Gen. 9:23; Ex. 22:26ff; Dt. 22:17). Ruth’s mantle or robe was large enough to carry “six measures of barley” (3:15). In the gospel accounts we are told that the robe or cloak (*himation*) was worn over the tunic (*chiton*) (cf. Mt. 5:40; Lk. 6:29). When working in the hot sun or when fishing, men would set the cloak aside for comfort and for safety (cf. Mt. 24:18; Mk. 10:50).

From ancient monuments we know that the cloak was worn anywhere from slightly below the knee (e.g., Egyptian monuments showing Semites [possibly the Hapiru or Hebrews]), to the ankles. This is how several attendants of Jehu are pictured on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser. Some scholars have suggested that the cloaks of the wealthy and cloaks worn on formal occasions were generally longer than the average everyday peasant’s robe.

The long flowing robes worn by Jews could be an impediment when walking fast, running, working or fighting and thus we frequently encounter Jews “girding up their loins” for such activities. This involved taking the loose, flowing robe and pulling it up and around the upper legs and fastening it to a leather or linen strap, belt or “girdle” so the robe was made like pants.

The outer garment worn by Jews does not appear to have any large differences between the men and the women. The sexes were likely distinguished by their head gear, jewelry and possibly stylistic differences (e.g., perhaps the women’s cloak was more decorative or stylish). What is significant for the purpose of this study is that men and women did not expose their thighs or cleavage in mixed company. When we study the biblical concept of nakedness we will see that this extensive coverage was not arbitrary or merely cultural.

Third, men often wore head gear (a turban, Hebrew-*misnepet*, *sanip*, *peer*, *tebulim*), especially in the hot sun. The high priest was required to wear a turban (*misnepet*) of linen (Ex. 28:39; 39:28; Lev. 16:4). It is generally recognized by scholars that Jewish women wore a veil when out in public (cf. Gen. 24:65). Head coverings (i.e. a cloth placed over a woman’s long hair) are required in *public worship* by the apostle Paul writing under divine inspiration (1 Cor. 11:3-16).

The fourth item was sandals (Hebrew, *naal* [LXX, *hypoedma*], *minal*; Greek, *sandalion* (Mk. 6:9; Ac. 12:8) or *hypodema* (Mk. 3:11). These were held in place with a leather lace or sandal tong. The soles were made of hard leather with upper portions of finer soft leather. The Jews did not consider viewing the feet as improper for leather footwear like shoes would have been rare and expensive. In addition, in the days of our Lord it was customary to remove one's sandals and wash one's feet as soon as one entered another's residence. It appears that people would walk about the house barefoot while leaving their dirty sandals next to the front door (cf. Lk. 7:44-46; Jn. 13:10-14).<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, both men and women wore a belt or girdle (KJV) of leather or linen. This was used to hold the large blanket-like cloak tight around the waist. Its primary function was to position the robe so that it would not impede movement (cf. Lk. 12:35, 27; 17:8). "As a belt, it held both the sword (Judg. 3:16; 1 Sam. 25:13; 2 Sam. 20:8) and the purse (Matt. 10:9)."<sup>6</sup>

The only other piece of clothing that we need to mention is the holy underwear or "breeches" (KJV) designed by God for the priests. These were made of plain linen and may have been similar to boxer shorts. This special undergarment was required to be worn by all priests in perpetuity so that their genitals would not be exposed near Jehovah's special presence at the tabernacle or temple (cf. Ex. 20:26; 28:42; 39:28; Lev. 6:10; 16:4; Ezek. 44:18). These special undergarments were not worn by all men, but only those who ministered as priests. (We mention them here because they have been repeatedly abused in the debate over pants.)

The point of this brief survey is to demonstrate that modesty as practiced in biblical times involved covering the body from the neck to below the knees. Only the neck, the arms, the feet and ankles were allowed to be exposed. Moreover, the type of clothing worn was *loose fitting* and thus did not reveal the shape of the buttocks, thighs or breasts. Therefore, although cultural styles of dress over time and in different geographical areas are, generally speaking, areas of *adiaphora* (i.e. indifferent and not explicitly regulated by Scripture), nevertheless God has revealed the standard of modesty. The covenant people had no problem with modest styles of clothing found within the Middle Eastern cultural milieu of the day. But, *unlike* many professing Christians in our day, they by and large rejected the immodest styles of clothing that were common among their pagan neighbors.

In Egypt, for example, women wore close-fitting sheath dresses that would be considered sexy even by today's standards. "Depictions of Akhenaten's wife Nefertari [c. 1365-1349 BC], and her six daughters show them in long, flowing, pleated linen drapery. They are portrayed as what we would think of as erotic icons, with slender waists and rounded buttocks and thighs."<sup>7</sup> It was considered immoral and out of character for wealthy Egyptians to appear naked before others. But, it was perfectly acceptable for commoners, slaves and children to appear naked.

In the Minoan culture of ancient Crete women wore stylized, form-fitting colorful dresses that went down to their ankles. They wore a tightly fitting bodice (i.e. a woman's laced, outer garment resembling a corset) below the chest area that left their breasts fully exposed. Nudity

---

<sup>5</sup> Professing Christians who argue that people's ankles and feet must never be exposed (This view is usually based on a misinterpretation of Jeremiah 13:22. The KJV's "heels made bare" should be translated "your heels are violently bared" or "your heels have suffered violence." This expression is a euphemism for a sexual attack by invading soldiers.) must explain the Savior's highly favorable description of the woman's washing and anointing of His own feet.

<sup>6</sup> G. G. Swain, "Girdle" in Gen. Ed. Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, 76), 2:728.

<sup>7</sup> Bronwyn Cosgrave, *The Complete History of Costume and Fashion from Ancient Egypt to the Present Day* (Great Britain: Hamly, 2000), 17.

was acceptable for males and “men of any rank or status roamed freely in the nude.”<sup>8</sup> When the men did wear clothes they were immodest with short skirts, a loin cloth and belts with small aprons. They also wore tight-fitting shorts with decorative tassels. Long before the birth of Christ public bathing and swimming was popular among Greeks and Romans. “A mural found in Sicily’s Piazza Armerina pictures young maidens wearing scanty garments that are dead ringers for modern bikinis.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, sporting events, which were popular in ancient Greece, were usually conducted in the nude. The point is that immodest dress has existed for thousands of years. The people of God have a responsibility to examine clothing styles within their own cultural context and emphatically reject anything that is contrary to the biblical definition of modesty.

## The Biblical Concept of Nakedness

Another area that will be helpful in determining modesty is the biblical use of the term naked or nakedness. The Word of God teaches that the exposure of one’s nakedness outside the lawful marriage relationship is sinful, shameful and totally inappropriate. It also regards the exposure of certain parts of the body (e.g., the thighs) that are perfectly acceptable today as a form of nakedness. There are a number of relevant passages to consider.

First, there is the incident of Ham and his father, Noah. In Genesis 9 Noah becomes drunk and goes to sleep in his tent and his blanket falls off leaving him nude and fully exposed. In verse 22 we are told “Ham saw the nakedness of his father.” Then in verse 23 Shem and Japheth take a garment and walk backwards into the tent in order to cover their father without seeing him naked. This incident results in a curse on Canaan, a direct descendent of Ham in verse 25. The fact that the text says only that “Ham saw the nakedness of his father” and that the immediate remedy was to cover their father’s nakedness while avoiding seeing him naked indicates that at a minimum it was improper even for Noah’s own sons to look at him naked. Ham had a responsibility to abstain from looking at his father’s exposed genitalia and should have covered him up so others would not see his nakedness. This was both a violation of modesty which falls under the seventh commandment and a failure to respect his father which is under the fifth commandment.

Second, in Leviticus 18, where there are several moral laws dealing with sexual immorality, we repeatedly find the imperative, “you shall not uncover the nakedness.” This expression is connected with close relatives (v. 6), father or mother (v. 7), step-mother (v. 8), sister or half-sister (v. 9), granddaughter (v. 10), step-sister (v. 11), aunt (vs. 12, 13), aunt by marriage (v. 14), daughter-in-law (v. 15), sister-in-law (v. 16) and step-granddaughter (v. 17). The expression “uncover the nakedness of” refers to sexual relations or intercourse. It is a phrase that implies both the presence of impure motives (Ezek. 16:36; 23:18; Hos. 2:9-10) and the intense shame associated with gross impurity and judgment. Thus, it is used to describe the horrifying fate of women who have been taken captive (Isa. 47:3; Lam. 1:18; Ezek. 16:37).

Third, in the prophetic books, nakedness is often associated with humiliation and shame. In Isaiah 20:4 we are told that the king of Assyria will lead Egyptian and Ethiopian prisoners of war away “naked and barefoot, with the buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.” Captives were deliberately humiliated by removing their clothes. Such a situation reminds us of the time that Harrun deliberately humiliated David’s servants by shaving off half of their beards and

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Pollard, *Christian Modesty and the Public Undressing of America* (Pensacola, FL: Mt. Zion Pub., n. d.), 17.

cutting off their garments in the middle, exposing their buttocks before sending them away (cf. 2 Sam. 10:4). If the Bible regards exposing the buttocks as humiliating and shameful, then obviously Christians (male or female) should not deliberately show off their buttocks with swimwear or tight pants.

In Isaiah 47:3 Babylon's humiliation and reproach is described as the uncovering of her nakedness. This nakedness results in disgrace and shame. In verse 2 the nature of this degradation is more specific: "Review your veil, take off the skirt, uncover the thigh." The people of Babylon will be reduced to a base form of slavery. The proper attire of a woman of dignity is exchanged for the dress of a slave. The veil of the hair is removed. This was considered immodest in most cultures until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The garments that normally covered the legs modestly are removed for humiliation and heavy labor. The female slave in most ancient cultures was degraded and treated as a sex object. It is noteworthy that the uncovering of the thigh in verse 2 is equated with nakedness in verse 3. What modern American woman today regard as attractive, sexy and stylish (i.e. bathing suits, mini-skirts, hot-pants, short shorts, etc.), God regards as a form of nakedness that ought to be humiliating and shameful.

In a similar vein we are told in Nahum 3:5 that because Nineveh played the role of a harlot to the nations, she would suffer a whore's punishment: "Behold, I am against you," says the LORD of hosts; "I will lift your skirts over your face, I will show the nations your nakedness, and the kingdoms your shame." Their judgment is set forth with three clauses that essentially describe the same thing from different perspectives. The uncovering of the skirts upon their face means that the long flowing robes will be flipped up over their head to expose the body underneath. "Apparently this exposure was part of the customary public disgrace decreed for harlots, and similar treatment is announced for Hosea's adulterous wife (Hos. 2:3), for unfaithful Israel (Jer. 13:26), for inconstant Jerusalem (Ezek. 16:37ff), for the people of Saphir in Micah 1:11. Certainly captives of war were made to endure the disgrace of nakedness. See Is. 47:2, 3 (of Babylon) and Is. 20:24 (of Egypt and Ethiopia)."<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, sexual immorality is associated not simply with abject humiliation, disgrace and shame but also blindness. The prostitute was put on public exhibition with her own disgusting, filthy skirt covering her face. Our wicked nation's spiritual blindness is reflected in her whore-like attire. The female pop singer is marketed to young teenage girls as a harlot and parents rush out to buy immodest clothes that emulate their whore-like idol.

The association of nakedness with shame and spiritual blindness is also found in the book of Revelation: "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" (3:18). The Biblical message with regard to nakedness is clear. It is something shameful, disgraceful, humiliating and disgusting. Only when a people are spiritually blind do they emulate the harlot in her appearance. One could make the case that the style of dress in modern America both inside and outside the churches indicates that judgment in a sense has come and that without repentance things will only get worse.

Fourth, the Bible regards a person as naked when they are only wearing their undergarments. This point is established by John 21:7: "Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, 'It is the Lord.' Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher coat (*ependutes*, only here in the NT) unto him, (for he was naked) and did cast himself into the sea." The word "naked" in this passage does not mean that Peter was without any

---

<sup>10</sup> Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock, 1977 [1959]), 307.

clothing whatsoever. Fishermen at that time would strip down to a loincloth or sleeveless tunic while they fished so their movements would not be impeded. “That *naked* often stands for slight clothing, needs no further demonstration.... Theophylact says, ‘a linen shirt, such as the Phoenician and Syrian fishermen were wont to wear.’”<sup>11</sup> There are two suggestions as to Peter’s girding himself before jumping in the water to walk to shore. One is that he tied up his fisher’s shirt to make it easier to move in water. The other is that he put his outer garment tightly around his waist to take it to shore.<sup>12</sup> From this passage we learn that wearing skimpy clothing around others of *the same sex* (e.g., in a gymnasium or private pool) is lawful. We also learn that skimpy clothing is regarded as a form of nakedness in Scripture. Therefore, modern swimwear and many popular ways of dress in our day are clearly inappropriate. (This reinforces what we have already noted with regard to Isaiah 47:2-3 and the baring of the thigh.)

Before we move to the issue of pants and women we would do well to pause and reflect on what we have learned from God’s Word and apply to our own situation in America. The Bible unequivocally rejects any form of dress that leaves the thighs exposed or reveals the buttocks. Moreover, Hebrew dress did not expose any part of the breasts. This would certainly include what is called “cleavage.” In addition (as we have already noted) clothing styles were loose-fitting, never form-fitting. Consequently, even when fully covered the shape of the breasts, thighs and buttocks were never revealed. Therefore, even though the type of dress worn in the days of our Lord is not worn today, we must emulate and imitate the modesty of their clothing. While cultures and styles change, that which causes persons of the opposite sex to lust does not change. What the holy prophets regarded as shameful, humiliating, disgraceful and a sign of judgment is now regarded attractive, stylish and a sign of prosperity. Generally speaking, Americans have been habitually dressing immodestly for many decades. What is disturbing is that with rare exceptions, professing Christians in our day dress immodestly just like everyone else. If churches are going to be serious about sanctification and the call to separation from this world, then this practice needs to change. This does not mean that we need to dress just like people in a former age (e.g., the 19<sup>th</sup> century prairie dresses and bonnets), but that we must

---

<sup>11</sup> E.W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock, 1980 [1865]), 2:476.

<sup>12</sup> A number of commentators believe that Peter put on his outer garment and girded it in order to appear before Jesus properly dressed. It is highly unlikely however that Peter would put on his large wool robe before jumping into the water. Even with it girded it would have made his movement through the water highly difficult. In addition, Peter lived with Jesus for three and a half years. It is likely that Jesus had already seen Peter in his underwear or fishing outfit on a number of occasions. It is likely that the disciples left their bulky outer garments on shore and that Peter girded his fishing garment. The word translated “fisher’s coat” (KJV) (*Gk-ependutres*) is unusual. Thayer writes, “*an upper garment,...* Jn. Xxi.7, where it seems to denote a kind of linen blouse [i.e. a shirt] or frock which fishermen used to wear at their work” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 (1901)], 230). A wet robe would make fishing difficult. Therefore, fishermen wore a shirt of light material to prevent sunburn, yet which left the legs free to get wet and jump into shallow waters. This means that having one’s legs exposed (thighs and all) was considered nakedness. (The New King James translation of this passage is poor and reflects an interpretive bias on the part of the translators.) Regarding nakedness in Scripture there is also the intriguing incident in Mark 14:51-52, “Now a certain young man followed Him, having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young man laid hold of Him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked.” It is the general consensus of commentators that this young man had thrown something on hastily because he was awakened at a late hour and rushed out to be with Jesus. The word translated linen cloth or linen sheet is a single word (*sindon*) that indicates a fine fabric. Most outer garments (the cloak) were made of wool. Thus it is likely that he was either wrapped in a bed sheet or a tunic (i.e. an undergarment). Therefore, most commentators believe that this young man fled totally naked.

choose modern clothing that conforms to biblical standards of modesty. Christians need to be salt and light to the surrounding culture and society. This includes how we act and how we dress.

Copyright 2011 © Brian Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)