

REBUILDING A GODLY VIEW OF THE UNCLAD HUMAN BODY

(Why and How to Stop "Thinking Dirty" about *God's Image and Temple*)

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" . . . our calling is cosmic: none of life is off-limits from needing to be reformed and conformed to the will of God, and *all* zones of creaturely life require office-bearers outfitted with a passionate heart, gentle mind, and strong feet that bring good tidings of great joy to the world."
-- Calvin Seerveld, "A Cloud of Witnesses and a New Generation"

In the Bible, human nakedness is a rich metaphor, generally overlooked even by Christians. Depending on its context, nudity carries a variety of meanings that range between its wholesome place in creation (Genesis 2:25) to its unfortunate association with poverty (Job 24:7,10) and military defeat (Isaiah 20:2-4). It has both the theological significance of describing how God sees us (Hebrews 4:13), as well as the mundane insignificance of being the only way people in ancient times saw their friends and neighbors bathe (Exodus 2:5; 2 Samuel 11:2) or do dirty, sweaty labor that would soil or ruin their clothing (Exodus 22:26-27; John 13:4; John 21:7, see literal translations). But one thing the Bible does not do, which our culture does infamously well, is to focus exclusively on nudity's relationship to sexual activity and immorality. Through an intense pattern of cultural and religious training, we are blinded from seeing nudity as anything but a lewd sexual display. This blindness insulates us from the fact that, for most of human history, the sight of the naked body was a very common occurrence that did not draw undue attention or automatically create erotic excitement. But modern attention has been so captivated by society's *sexualization of the body* that this obsession has become an earmark of Western civilization. Sadly, most who grow up indoctrinated with such a mental image of the body are blinded from seeing how this view misshapes human thinking. But experience has forced many normal people to acknowledge the devastating influence of this abnormal focus on their minds and lives.

Few areas of our humanity have been more conceptually distorted by Western culture than the natural phenomenon of nakedness. This becomes obvious merely by setting our society's *body taboo* next to the attitude in cultures where a wholesome *body acceptance* is the norm. This simple comparison embarrassingly exposes the West's dysfunctional emphasis. Starting in early childhood, we are socially programmed to associate the fully exposed human anatomy with indecency and obscenity, whether it's experienced by actual sight, or by images, or by imagination alone. Defenders of this overwhelmingly sexual response to the body are quick to point out that sexual intercourse usually happens in the nude. But these *body-friendly* cultures have managed to reproduce themselves quite successfully without our obsessive preoccupation with this one dimension of nudity. When people from those cultures first learn about or come into

contact with this erotic fixation of ours, they variously interpret it as a form of childishness or insanity or perversion. Any or all of these interpretations are confirmed by the adamant zeal and emotion with which we attempt to justify our sexualized view of the unclad body. However, some of our inconsistent behaviors implicitly nullify these efforts. Appreciating the nude artwork on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is only one example of these inconsistencies.

While Michelangelo's painting of "the Creation of Adam" affirms biblical faith, it also challenges our society's prudery and pornography. Originally, God created us "naked" and "unashamed" (Genesis 1:27; 2:25), which is how we continue to enter and exit this life (Job 1:21a). Porno-prudish responses to the sight of nudity come neither from divinely built-in reflexes nor from our inborn human nature. They are sown, cultivated and harvested as a fruit of cultural indoctrination. That culturally-propagated fruit is not only unhealthy, but morally toxic. It's still as poisonous to society today as it was "in the beginning."

Satan convinced our first parents to eat forbidden "fruit" that "opened" their minds to a "knowledge of good and evil" that was independent from God's direct leading (Genesis 2:17; 3:4-5). God's second question to Adam ("Who told you that you were naked?") infers that the devil's very next step, after opening their eyes to independent morality, was to introduce them to a new definition of the natural state in which God had made them. And judging from their behavior in response to this diabolical enlightenment, their liberated moral thinking concluded that "naked" bodies were "evil" and hiding the truth about them was "good" (Genesis 3:9-13). Cultural history shows that not all groups of humans accepted such unnatural thinking about the body. On the other hand, whenever and wherever this demonically-inspired thinking was adopted, it has almost always created a cultural taboo that interprets the sight of the unclad body in terms of shame and inappropriate sexual activity. Yet, all the rational, moral or theological arguments that people invent to substantiate this taboo, or validate its sexualized perception of nudity, are easily dispelled by the many actual human experiences that contradict them.

One noticeable contradiction is the acknowledged decency of naked bodies undressed for health care here in America. If the sexual objectification of naked body parts is truly a *natural human* behavior, then maintaining a "professional" attitude toward nakedness in the hospital or clinic would be an impossibility. But both health care workers and their patients can attest to the fact that such a non-sexual view of nudity it is neither *unnatural* nor *inhuman*. Another contradictory human experience is the acceptance of beautiful nude statues adorning streets in Europe or the appreciation of nude paintings filling museums around the globe. Our enthusiastic attraction to such artwork, even if the nakedness is depicted with explicitly life-like realism, never seems to excite the erotic frenzy predicted by the *body taboo*. We also discover this same contradiction whenever we fail to get sexually stimulated by looking at photos of naked natives living in primitive lands which have not yet been corrupted by this Western sexualization of the body. Spiritually sensitive missionaries who begin work among these "naked people" groups must be overjoyed to discover that same failure of the *body*

taboo's predictions. These examples and many others highlight the obvious but irreconcilable conflict between what our culture scrupulously teaches about nakedness and what normal people invariably learn from a frank exposure to it in a non-sexual context. Dirty thinking about the body in its natural state is a learned behavior. It is the logical result of being taught to have either a *prudish* or a *pornographic* view of our God-given anatomical design and its gender-specific distinctions. But the divine authority of our Creator stands consistently and unwaveringly behind *the naked truth* about our bodies. In light of a realistic, creational understanding, the sight of the bare human body offers a healthy rebuke and an amazingly swift correction to Satan's original falsehood in the Garden of Eden. It almost immediately liberates a person from the unnatural absurdity of the *body taboo*, no matter how long that taboo has possessed the mind and heart.

During my first 25 years of nursing work, I continually witnessed the illogical discrepancy between prudery's precepts and nudity's reality. My routine experiences with nakedness did not jive with the vain imaginations about it that were created by our society. All those years I felt I had to live with this contradiction, seeing it merely as a quirky part of life, an inexplicable inconsistency, a rationally unsolvable paradox. Finally, I learned about the inherent connection between prudery and pornography. These two ideologies not only spring from the same false, ungodly view of the body, but their apparent opposition actually weds them inseparably in a symbiotic relationship. They feed off of one another, constantly fueling each other's fire. My job as a nurse laid a strong foundation for rejecting both those false conceptions about the body. But later, my research into the phenomenon of human nakedness led me to embrace what I now believe is a more sound and God-honoring viewpoint.

Typically, the unanimous social power of the *body taboo* resists any open-minded investigation of its own validity. It even stirs up hostility to the word "nudity" itself. That closed-minded attitude insulates most people from any kind of honest or intelligent search for the truth. For years it blocked my own mind from discussing *nudity* calmly, thoughtfully, and realistically. But anyone with enough courage to stand still for a moment against that taboo's stream of opinion can feel how fiercely it flows. Such a momentary mental pause allows a person, perhaps for the first time, to perceive exactly where this current is taking us. The *body taboo's* porno-prudery sweeps us far away from a godly, creational perception of our natural embodiment as humans. It keeps our minds "in the gutter," until it finally dumps them into a sewer system of "filthy" attitudes about the body and its anatomy. Allowing or promoting this defiling process is an offensive *slap in the face* to our Creator. These physical bodies of ours are not only "fearfully and wonderfully made" by Him (Psalm 139:14), but He calls them His "image" (Genesis 1:27) and "temple" (1 Corinthians 6:19). The fact that they maintain their divinely ordained status despite the absence of clothing is actually a firm theological "slap in the face" to the *body taboo* itself!

So, what is my wish in all this? Am I dreaming an impossible dream by trying to restore a wholesome *body acceptance* for our external anatomy? Am I imagining that someday, before God finally strips away all clothing in death or rapture or judgment, our

society can return to a sound, healthy mentality about the naked body? Is it a hopeless hope to believe that we can unlearn our culture's wayward, toxic viewpoint? Can we really readopt attitudes and behaviors that treat our physical human anatomy as a beautiful example of God's creative glory, as Christian theology actually teaches? I have very little confidence that my own insights can win the world to my opinion. It will take more than logic and personal testimony to reverse this widespread porno-prudish mistreatment of the unclad body as an object of obscenity and shame. That's because the trouble is not just an intellectual misunderstanding. It's a moral bondage. It may partially be a problem of the mind's perception, but it is even more a need for the heart's liberation. Despite an absence of faith in my own efforts to change the minds or hearts of individuals, I have complete trust in Christ's promise that knowing the truth can set us free, especially when He personally is involved in the process (John 8:32, 36). So, my prayer is that God's divine, creational truth about the body be made known by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, especially by the Christian believer, whose physical body is His temple, meant to honor and glorify the God Who fashioned it.

The truth about our bodies is not that complicated. Take a good, long look at yourself in the mirror the next time you take a shower. Half the world has exactly the same anatomical equipment you see. In the other half, even the sexually distinguishing variations are absent at the outset of embryological development. When nakedness is observed realistically, its simplicity is obvious. But when obscured by the man-made morality of "fig leaves" (Genesis 3:7), its wholesome nature can be exploited for immoral duplicity. Although that deceptive abuse of nakedness abounds in our society, people can still discover the simple, realistic truth about the body, and by that discovery, be set free from the deceit. None of us were born believing that the sight of human nudity is an obscene sexual event or an invitational prelude to sexual activity. We have learned to think that way, which means that we can unlearn that way of thinking. Purely logical reasoning, as well as the experiences of masses of people throughout history, expose this sexually lewd interpretation of the unclad body as an aberrant pattern of thought. Given the human heart's propensity for selfishness and depravity (Jeremiah 17:9), such a falsehood has easily self-fulfilled its own prophecies. Its unnatural principles have successfully shaped a cultural mentality where its predicted indecencies could flourish, and they certainly have here in America. But this popular, widely accepted falsehood is not only illogical and unnatural---it's God-dishonoring! It needs to be confronted with the truth. I believe that those who can resist the overwhelming current of worldly opinion long enough to investigate this common aspect of our humanity, will have a transformational shift in their thinking. Rather than letting their minds and bodies stay conformed to this dysfunctional, sexualized view of the body fostered by our culture, they can return to the will and viewpoint of the Creator (Romans 12:1-2).