

**“WHAT AM I GOING TO WEAR TODAY?”**  
**AND**  
**WHY WE ASK THE QUESTION.**  
**A Theological Analysis of Clothing in Scripture**  
By:  
**Campbell Silman**

## Preface

The longer I work with youth and families, the more I am aware of the fact that there is great confusion regarding clothing. This confusion often expresses itself in the following ways:

- Obsessions regarding what to wear connected to a deep sense of insecurity and longing for acceptance.
- Bold breeches from what is typically defined as normal attire connected to a deep longing for identity and finding ones place in the created order.
- Continual struggles between parents and children regarding what is appropriate/modest apparel.

It seems that few parents are aware of what the bible teaches regarding clothing and few young people are interested in submitting to what the bible teaches regarding clothing. Many Christian parents seem to believe that any talk of God's reign and rule with regard to clothing is Draconian and out of line with biblical teaching on grace and Christian liberty. Some don't go as far as avoiding the conversation all together, but they stop short of making any real application of the principles of biblical modesty in their children's lives. Still, other Christian parents force extra-biblical guidelines upon their children's dress code out of ungodly fear in hopes that they will avoid the slippery slope to immorality. What is often expressed to children by this type of parent is that their acceptance in God's eyes is not only connected to their dress, but more specifically to their ability to avoid all forms of evil and evil desires. It is not difficult to see the potential harm inherit in all of these positions. The situation is made more difficult by the lack of unity among Christians, even within denominational boundaries, regarding the place and use of clothing.

My interest in this topic has been spurred on by numerous events throughout my life. Several come to mind. The first occurred while I was candidating as a seminary student for a position as a youth minister. During one phone conversation with a church in our denomination, I was asked how I would handle the following situation. "Suppose you were holding a youth activity that involved swimming and you noticed that there was

a young lady there who was dressed in a particularly skimpy bathing suit. What would you do?” As was typical in most of my phone interviews, I began fumbling through my thoughts. I said something to the effect that I would probably not mention it at all to a visitor or an unbeliever, but that if the young girl was a professing Christian, and she had demonstrated the habit of immodesty in her dress, I would probably approach the young lady, or encourage a woman familiar with her to approach her and address principles of modesty with her. Before I could even begin to describe my understanding of biblical modesty, I was cut off. “Sorry, that’s not the answer I was looking for,” said the gentleman conducting the interview. “Don’t feel bad, most people in our denomination would have given the same answer. I simply don’t think there is any room in the gospel of God’s grace for a discussion of clothing.”

Immediately I was made to feel as though my understanding of God’s grace was completely deficient. Had I completely missed the point of the gospel? Imagine my horror when only weeks later a seminary professor, who had obviously talked with the pastor conducting my interview, began giving the same hypothetical situation and complained that our grace-centered seminary was graduating people who thought they could make their own rules for clothing and ultimately for acceptance in God’s sight. Thankfully, no one in the room, the professor included, had any idea that I was the one who had had this conversation. Still, I felt very upset. Part of me felt like I, and the “majority of people in my denomination who would have answered the question the same way,” had been grossly misrepresented. Part of me was also very convicted. For months I wrestled with a real sense of insecurity regarding my understanding of the Gospel not to mention my ability to be a gospel minister. Had I completely missed the point? The more I have studied the issue and talked with others, the more I am convinced that I had not missed the point. Still, it made me acutely aware of the confusion that exists even in our own denomination regarding clothing related issues and in this case the willingness to address them from the bible.

There is also a more pressing reason that motivates my interest in this topic. God in his great wisdom has placed me in a community that deals with this issue on a year-round basis. When I began candidating I said I was willing to go anywhere God would call me except to a beach community, because of my insecurities in addressing the

particular issue at hand. Much to my dismay three of my first four interviews were with churches in beach communities in Florida, South Carolina, and Texas. I ended up in Corpus Christi, Texas, a land of endless summer. In many ways, my experience in Corpus has been that life is perceived to be a continual beach party. Not surprisingly, in 2004 I am continually confronted with people in my city and church who are greatly confused about the issue of clothing. Rarely does a week go by that a parent doesn't approach me for advice on how to biblically address clothing related struggles with their children. I have attempted to give gracious answers from Scripture and many times felt like I was inadequately speaking to the issue. In my search to find concise scriptural and theological support I have realized that there is little to no material which adequately deals with this issue.

In giving thought to this issue, I also realized how complex it is. Any Christian conversation of clothing leads to modesty, which then leads to gender roles, etc. There are many possible areas to study arising from this discussion, but for now I think it is appropriate to focus on the biblical evidence for clothing. Why do we have it? What is it for? What does it tell us about ourselves? What does it tell us about God? How have we abused it? What principles should guide us when we get dressed in the morning?

## The Longing To Be Clothed

**“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ... ‘What shall we wear?’”**

**- Matthew 6:31**

**“Whether homesick or obsessively nostalgic or exiled or romantically forlorn or self-alienated so that they are not at home even in their own skin, lonely persons ache because they are separated.”<sup>1</sup>**

**– Cornelius Plantinga**

A two year old at bath time is a funny thing to watch, especially when they escape! Anyone who has spent time around toddlers knows that there is one pleasure they enjoy in life that surpasses all others. This pleasure is especially great when they learn to walk, and even better when they learn to run. The pleasure they enjoy more than almost any other is simply being naked. As soon as bath time comes, most two year olds can hardly get undressed quickly enough and most parents can hardly keep up with them. The favorite time of day for many two year olds is the brief window of opportunity that might present itself immediately prior to or following bath time to escape the loving control of their parents and to run around free from the encumbrance of clothing.

Somehow and sometime during our early years the unhindered pleasure that we find in running naked at bath time changes. As we grow up, the longing that we once had to undress all but disappears. When it does, this longing is inevitably replaced by its archrival: the longing to be clothed. At some point we become uncomfortable in our own skin.<sup>2</sup> Consider the number of times you have been awakened by the nightmare that you have gone to work or to school only to realize that you have forgotten to get dressed. You’re not alone. Most people, when asked, admit to having some version of this same

---

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be – A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

dream. At some point the longing to be clothed sets in, and it sets in deeply. Many of you, if you were honest, would admit that this longing often takes on a life of its own.

“What am I going to wear today?” Every one of us, at some point in our lives, has asked ourselves this question. For many, this question takes on immense proportion. We spend countless hours throughout our lives attempting to answer this seemingly simple question. We spend equally massive amounts of money in order to give ourselves numerous answers to this question. Why? Why is it that we wake up wondering what we are going to wear (if we didn’t already have our answer the night before!)?

I have been working with youth and families for nearly six years, and I have noticed that the question of clothing seems to be one of the most frequently recurring conversations in most households. The very mention of the word “clothing” confuses most parents, and exasperates most children. “Oh no, not this again.” Unfortunately, it has also been my experience that when it comes to the topic of clothing, the Church has had very little to offer these confused parents, and exasperated children. Too often, the church’s best efforts to address the issue of clothing are reduced to lists of do’s and don’ts. Every youth pastor quickly learns that dress codes are inevitably linked to heartache. What is it about this topic that elicits such a fiery response and exposes so much fear of repression? Does the bible give us any clear guidance on this issue?

If you have ever read the bible straight through, you might recall that the bible is by no means silent on the issue of clothing. In fact, only a couple of pages into God’s Word it becomes clear that clothing has powerful meaning and significance. As you continue your journey through God’s Word the issue of clothing continues to come up time and time again. Jesus himself specifically told his followers not to worry about it. But what should we make of all this? Much of our confusion regarding the topic of clothing arises from the simple fact that we have forgotten the true meaning and purpose of clothing, what it tells us about ourselves, and what it tells us about God. As you look at scripture it becomes clear that clothing is closely connected to sin (where we’ve gone wrong) and to salvation (God’s plan to make things right again). If we ever hope to have a healthy view of clothing, we have to understand its unique connection to sin and salvation.

In order to do this we must go back to the very beginning. We must revisit a time when mankind was naked and felt no shame. We need to examine closely the nature of the change that took place that compelled us to clothe ourselves. We also need to examine the way God has used clothing to reveal his very special love for us. Finally, I think we will arrive at some truly biblical principles to guide us in the way we think about clothing as well as the way we clothe ourselves.

Before I proceed let me make a promise to you. I promise that this will not end up as a list of do's and don'ts. I sincerely believe it to be wrong to make lists of commands that are not specifically mentioned in Scripture and to use those lists to bind your conscience. May God help me keep this promise. Along with this promise I must also give you a word of warning. To the extent that the following pages truly represent God's words, engaging them may shake you and your thinking about clothing to the core. But when it's all said and done, I hope you will find a newfound sense of freedom. Freedom from the question, "What am I going to wear today?" Freedom to enjoy clothing.

## Sin and the Beginning of Clothing

**“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”**

**-Genesis 3:7**

**“Beneath the skin I wore...was something horrible, something soft and weak...and tearful and needy.”<sup>3</sup>**

**-Marya Hornbacher**

### **Naked Without Shame**

One of my most memorable experiences in high school was a trip I made with my Grandfather to his hometown of Jefferson, Georgia. I will never forget making the two-hour trip from his current home in Augusta, Georgia in his mid-80's tan Toyota King Cab pick-up. He let me drive (and yes if you know anything about Toyotas, it is still running)! I had no idea how many amazing things I would see in this tiny central Georgia town, just north of Atlanta. I saw where my great-grandparents and great-great grandparents had lived, worked, worshiped, and been buried. Over a period of about four hours, I got to experience where my family had come from; a place they still look back on with great fondness. What I didn't realize at the time was how much those experiences would eventually help me to understand my family. I always thought I had a pretty good idea of who I was, but I couldn't have been more wrong. There was no way I could have understood who I was without knowing where I came from. I learned I could never really understand the Silman family without visiting Jefferson.

I would like to invite you to join me on a journey (no, not to Jefferson). Join me for a journey back in time to a place of remarkable beauty (definitely not Jefferson!). We are going to a place where everything was good (Genesis 1:31). “Wait a minute,” you

---

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty – Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 169.

might say, “I thought we were talking about clothing.” You’re right. We are talking about clothing. But before we can understand what the bible has to tell us about clothing we must go back to the very beginning. We must visit a place where clothing did not exist, and no one was bothered by its absence. The place is the Garden of Eden.

Before we examine what life was like in the Garden of Eden, let me be perfectly clear. The Garden of Eden was a real place, and Adam and Eve were real people. As we look at the first two chapters of Genesis with all its talk about serpents and fruit, it is easy to find ourselves questioning the reality of such an amazing place. Much of our culture’s confusion regarding the issue of clothing stems from the fact that we have dismissed the reality of the Garden of Eden and of our first parents, Adam and Eve. We have forgotten where we came from. As we begin our search for a proper understanding of clothing, we must go in search of our very beginnings, and this requires that we have an understanding of where our first parents came from. Only then, can we begin to understand why we are so consumed with clothing and what we will wear.

What were the characteristics of the Garden of Eden? What was it like? To be honest, far too many amazing realities existed in the garden than we can deal with here. For the purposes we have at hand I will briefly highlight two fundamental characteristics of this wonderful place where humanity had its origins. The first characteristic is relationships, and the second is that it was far better than we can even imagine.

## **Relationships**

No discussion of clothing can take place apart from a discussion of relationships. In fact, it is hard to imagine anything outside of the context of relationships. This is true because we were created for relationships. Relationships affect everything we are and everything we do. In Genesis 1:26 God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...” Notice God did not say, “Let me make man in my image.” One of the many amazing facts about God is that while there is only one God, he exists in three persons. This reality is what the Church refers to as the Trinity. While the word Trinity is nowhere to be found in Scripture it is clear from Scripture that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all one and the same God (Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew

28:19). You might be thinking, “That doesn’t make any sense.” You’re right, it is much more amazing than our minds can comprehend, but it is true! Here in Genesis 1:26 we see that we (men and women) were created in the image of a God that lives in relationship with himself. Since God is three in one he lives in a constant state of relating to himself. He cannot help but to relate to himself. This means, since we are made in God’s image, that we cannot escape relationships. We were made for them.

One of the most amazing things about relationships in the Garden of Eden is that there was no shame, fear or embarrassment. Think about it. Adam and Eve lived in each other’s presence and in the presence of God naked and without shame. This is an amazing accomplishment. Those of you who are married know this doesn’t happen today, and those of you who are not married do not be fooled into thinking that it will. Still, it is clear from the first two chapters of Genesis that mankind was created to exist in relationships without shame, fear or embarrassment. What would that have been like?

### **So much better than we can imagine**

Actually, it is hard for us even to comprehend a world without shame, fear, or embarrassment because our world is so full of it. Our world is full of sickness, sorrow, pain and death. Theirs was not. Our relationships are full of pain. Theirs were free of pain. Our daily experiences tell us something is wrong. Their daily experiences told them everything was right. They never went to bed at night thinking about all the things they wished had gone differently that day. They never thought, “I wished I hadn’t done that” or “I wish he hadn’t said that.” Everything was good, and that goodness was better than we can imagine. How can we even imagine what that would have been like?

To begin with, we have to realize that Adam and Eve were better. They had never done, said, or thought anything to disappoint each other or to disappoint God. They perfectly loved each other, and they perfectly loved God. Adam and Eve accepted each other for who they were and God accepted them also. Why? They were acceptable! Adam and Eve also fully accepted, worshiped, and adored God. In fact, amid all of the wonders that one might find in the Garden of Eden (all the animals, trees, flowers, etc),

Adam and Eve found their greatest pleasure in their relationship with God.<sup>4</sup> God knew them completely and he loved them completely. They never had to impress God to earn his affection. He simply gave it to them, and they delighted in it. So great was their feeling of acceptance in God's eyes that they were able to live openly before him. That's right – naked and without shame! Let there be no confusion: this was very good. In fact, the only reason it was possible to live naked and without shame was because things were perfectly good. Even better than we can imagine. But somehow, somewhere along the line, something drastically changed.

### **Our First Clothes**

Most of us can remember at least one of our clothing firsts. For me it was my first pair of penny loafers. Yes, I'm not ashamed to admit it - penny loafers (pennies and all). I received a pair just like Dad's as a well-earned reward for giving up the unbecoming habit of sucking my thumb in second grade. Hopefully, your memories are more fashionable. While my first pair of penny loafers seem funny to me now, the first clothes of our first parents were not the least bit funny. The only accurate way to describe them is shameful.

God freely gave all the beauty of the relationships enjoyed in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve. It was an amazing privilege to live in relationship with God and with each other naked and without shame. Imagine the freedom they must have felt. But, freedom always comes with responsibility. God told Adam and Eve to rule over the earth, to fill it and subdue it. He also gave them everything on the earth for their use and enjoyment; everything except the fruit from one tree. For whatever reason (only God knows) God did not allow them to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis 2:17 we see God's warning that if they were to eat of this one tree, they would surely die. Remember there was no sickness, sorrow, pain or death in the Garden of Eden. God was warning them that if they ate of this tree something new would happen. Something worse than they could imagine.

---

<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 1982), Volume 2, 71.

## **Nakedness Exposed**

As I mentioned in the last section, the nakedness that our first parents enjoyed came as a result of their perfection. They lived exactly as God had created them to live, and the goodness of this arrangement offered them complete freedom and acceptance. That is, until they disobeyed. Genesis 3:6 gives us the account of where it all went wrong. “When the woman saw the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” In this verse we are told that our first parents did the one thing they were told not to do. Up to this point they had obeyed, but now that they had disobeyed something new happened. As soon as they disobeyed God they began to feel shame. Why was this? Was this just confused thinking or was it real?

Many in our society today would have you believe that any sense of shame or embarrassment is simply the by-product of confused thinking. We are told that even though we have these feelings, we should not, because we really have nothing about which to be ashamed and embarrassed. In order for this assertion to be true, all of our shortcomings would have to be normal. Our messiness and the messiness that surrounds us would have to be the way it was supposed to be. It would have to be the way that God made us. Yet, the moment that Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil they felt shame because they had done something wrong.

Shame does not make sense apart from disobedience. In order to understand why Adam and Eve felt shame we have to admit that they actually did something wrong. Their shame was just as real as their disobedience. They not only disobeyed God, they knew that they had disobeyed God, and they knew that God saw their disobedience. Remember they lived in relationship with God. They were guilty and they were ashamed. This shame brought with it something else too. All of a sudden they realized they were naked. In verse 7 of Genesis chapter 3 we read, “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked.” All the freedom that they had experienced before they disobeyed had vanished and they felt exposed. Something new had entered the picture, but exactly what was it?

## Something New

Have you ever been in a dark room and had the feeling that you were not alone? It's creepy when you know something has entered into your room, but you don't know what it is. The moment that our first parents disobeyed God something creepy entered God's good creation. The fact that they immediately realized they were naked proves that something new and disturbing had arrived. Being naked had never been a problem before. So, what caused this change? There were a number of new realities that entered the picture, and for our purposes we need briefly to examine three of them.

The *first* new reality that entered the world with the disobedience of our first parents was *sin*. The Westminster Shorter Catechism explains sin this way, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of the Law of God."<sup>5</sup> In other words sin is anything that falls short of God's commands (fails to conform to them) or anything that directly contradicts them (transgresses them). For the first time, our first parents had done something that God had told them not to do. The results of their sin were, as John Murray put it, revolutionary.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly there was *perversion*. Our first parents were twisted and they began twisting good things (Genesis 3:7). Suddenly there was *pollution*. Evil and corruption had entered into a place that had previously been pure and good (Genesis 6:5). Suddenly there was *disintegration*. Our first parent's relationships began to fall apart in every area; their relationship with themselves, their relationship with each other, and their relationship with God were all shattered (Genesis 3:23-24; Isaiah 59:2; Proverbs 15:29). Things were not the way they used to be, nor were things the way they were supposed to be.<sup>7</sup>

The *second* reality that entered the world was *God's displeasure*. John Murray puts it this way, "Now an aspect of the divine character appears that is entirely new in divine-human relations, and that previously was not even suggested. It is that of anger,

---

<sup>5</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism # 14

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be – A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 39-51.

reproof, retribution, curse, and condemnation.”<sup>8</sup> Mankind had never seen this side of God before, because they had never deserved it. But now God was angry, and he had every right to be (cf. Romans 1).

The *third* reality that entered the world as a result of disobedience was the sense of *needing a place to hide*. Immediately following our first parents’ fall into sin and their first experience of the displeasure of God, they tried to escape that displeasure. In Genesis 3:7 we see that as soon as they realized they were naked, “they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.” The need for a place to hide had launched the introduction of clothing. The dialogue that follows is very revealing.

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’ And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’”

For the first time, mankind was “uncomfortable in their own skin.”<sup>9</sup> Adam and Eve were uncomfortable because beneath their skin was something “horrible, weak, tearful and needy.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, it was planted even more deeply than the marrow of their bones. God warned them that eating the fruit would lead to death, and they were experiencing the pain of this reality for the first time. They were sick and embarrassed and they longed for a place to hide. Hopefully, you are beginning to see why we needed to go back to the garden to learn about clothing.

---

<sup>8</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 1982), Volume 2, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be – A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty – Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 169.

## A Definition

There are basically two ways that you can define any object. One way to define an object is by describing what it is made of. For example you might define a table as a wooden platform. Any such definition falls short of truly defining the object because the object could be made of many different things. Tables don't have to be made of wood. In order to understand what an object is you have to understand what it is used for. You need to know its purpose. Finding a definition of clothing is particularly tricky because clothes are not only made of many different materials, they are also used for many different purposes. Defining clothing is even more difficult because it has been around for so long. For instance, did it mean the same thing for Adam and Eve as it means for us today?

If you recall, one of the premises of the argument in this paper, is that much of our confusion regarding clothing today arises from the fact that we have forgotten its original purpose. A good place to begin is with the words themselves. Do we learn anything about the meaning of clothing from the actual words God used to describe them to us?

The Old Testament was primarily written in the Hebrew language. The two most commonly used words for clothing in the Old Testament are *katan* and *labash*. The word *katan* means “tunic or garment.”<sup>11</sup> The word *labash* means “to put on, wear, clothe, or be clothed.”<sup>12</sup> While these definitions are not extremely enlightening for our discussion, at the very least we see that clothing is understood as an addition. It is something that is “to be put on.”

The New Testament was written in Greek. Like in Hebrew, there are two basic words that are used for clothing. These words are *enduo* and *kosmos*. *Enduo* means “to dress, to clothe someone or oneself, or to put on.”<sup>13</sup> The word *kosmos* means “adorning

---

<sup>11</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 509.

<sup>12</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 527.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Bauer, F.W. Gingrich, Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 264.

or adornment” and is clearly used in the New Testament in reference to clothing.<sup>14</sup> As with the Hebrew words for clothing, the Greek words are not overwhelmingly informative. Again the only thing we see is that clothing is something “to be put on.”

If we are truly to understand the meaning of the word clothing we need to examine it in the context of its beginnings. It is clear from the context of Genesis 2 and 3 that clothes were indeed something “to be put on.” It was something extra. If the Garden of Eden was packaged for sale it would have to include the words “clothing not included.” It would also have to be marked “no clothing required.” We have already clearly seen that clothing was not needed in a place where man was free from sin. Our first parents created clothing only after they had sinned in order to hide themselves, specifically their shame, from God and quite possibly from each other. In this context, clothing would need to be defined as *anything used as a covering for the purpose of hiding one’s nakedness and shame before God and before man.*

As you test this definition it is important to ask if it accurately reflects what clothing is intended to communicate. Does it accurately reflect what clothing tells us about God, and does it accurately reflect what clothing tells us about ourselves?

What does our longing for clothing tell us about God? First, it tells us that God is there. Adam and Eve clothed themselves, not because they wanted to hide from each other, but because they wanted to hide from God. God was there and they knew it. Second, clothing tells us that God intimately knows us. Adam and Eve attempted to hide from God because they were aware that he knew what they had been up to. Their longing for clothing was an ever-present reminder that God knew everything about them. You might ask, “Why then did God have to ask them why they were hiding?” Quite simply, he did not have to ask. He did not ask the question out of ignorance; he asked the question because our first parents had not yet seen what their fig-leaf-clothing revealed about themselves.

What does our longing for clothing reveal about ourselves? First, it tells us that we are not alone. Our first parent’s first clothes were created out of an inescapable sense of God’s presence. They had been created for relationships and they could not escape

---

<sup>14</sup> Walter Bauer, F.W. Gingrich, Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 445.

that fact, but they sure were going to try. Second, our clothing tells us that we are known. Our first parents made clothes specifically because their worst fears were in fact a reality: **God knew what they had been up to!** This had never been a problem before, but it was now because of the final truth that our clothing reveals about ourselves. Third, our clothing tells us that we are not OK. It is specifically because we are not OK that we long to be clothed. Likewise, this longing highlights our neediness. We don't want others to find out how bad we really are. We would much rather hide all of our ugliness, and one of the main ways do this is behind clothes. But does this really work?

### **A Fundamental Flaw**

It is interesting and even amusing to think about our first parent's first clothes. What did they really think they were accomplishing? In response to mankind's first attempt at clothing John Calvin wrote, "For what end? That they may keep God at a distance, as by an invincible barrier!"<sup>15</sup> Yes, Calvin could be sarcastic! It seems clear that they were at best confused into thinking they could hide from God. Of course they couldn't hide from God. But remember that sin brought with it perversion, pollution, and disintegration. Their relationship with God had already disintegrated to the point that they had forgotten who he really was and what he was capable of. Their hearts were already so polluted that they felt the need to hide. Their minds were already so perverted that they thought they could use a fig leaf to protect them. Did you ever stop to think that the very first clothes were a perversion of a perfectly good fig leaf? But what was the flaw of these first garments?

The fundamental flaw in humanity's first clothing was that they were the product of humanity ingenuity; the product of sinful hearts, hands, and minds. We must keep in mind the full extent of mankind's sinfulness. The fact that fig leaves were a failure demonstrates that humanity was completely incapable of providing for themselves the hiding place they needed and so desperately longed for. Broken people can't fix their own brokenness. You might be asking yourself, "Is sin really that bad?" You better

---

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999) 159.

believe it! One consequence of sin was the total depravity of man.<sup>16</sup> This means that sin so radically affected every aspect of humanity that mankind is completely incapable of doing anything to cure his miserable condition. No amount of clothing, or anything else manufactured by man, can cover our guilt, shame, and neediness. Nothing we put on our bodies can give us the acceptance we so desperately long for. It wouldn't have mattered if Adam and Eve had been able to design a suit of clothes that could rival Versace. The problem was that they did not have the ability to cure their newfound sense of shame. (cf. Genesis 6:5; 1 Kings 8:46; Psalm 14:3; Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Mark 10:18; Romans 3:20, 23).

This begs a question. Is it sufficient to define the word clothing based on mankind's first and obviously sinful attempt at creating it? At some level it is, but there are other practical questions. Can a definition based on the very first and obviously sinful attempt at clothing have any bearing on how we understand clothing today? Should we adopt a definition and understanding of clothing that was perverted and polluted to begin with? Wouldn't it be great if we had some other way of defining clothing, possibly one that was not so polluted? Thankfully, we do have more to go on than our first parents' polluted attempt to clothe themselves. Still, before we look at the rest of the biblical evidence we must make an additional observation. In order for this definition to apply to us today, we too would have to need a place to hide, and have reason to hide. Up to this point I have assumed that we have some connection to our first parents. Is this true? If so, how are we connected to our first parents?

### **Hand –me-downs**

It is very clear in scripture that the sin of our first parents (the pollution, perversion, and disintegration) as well as their subsequent longing for clothing (a place to hide) was passed down to their children and subsequently to the entire human race. Our own experience supports this reality, and biblical evidence makes it perfectly clear. If you read through the rest of the book of Genesis you will see that Adam and Eve's descendants carried on the tradition of pollution, perversion, and disintegration that was

---

<sup>16</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 2000) 225.

handed down to them by their first parents. Their descendants were (and still are) murderers, liars, and cheats. In the book of Romans Paul teaches how this happened. He explains that, "...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." (Romans 5:12) The sin of our first parents was handed down to us such that we all sin and all receive sin's ultimate punishment of death. We are born with it. We are even conceived in it (Psalm 51:5).

But these hand-me-downs are not like the ones you receive from an older sibling or a friend. Often we get hand-me-downs because they are convenient, not because we necessarily want them. In fact, many of you who were raised wearing hand-me-downs can probably recall feeling as though it wasn't fair that you had to wear someone else's clothing. That's where the analogy breaks down. Yes, we are born with the sinfulness of our first parents, but it is not the least bit unfair. The testimony of scripture is that even while sin is now deeply planted in all humanity, such as it could be described as being in our blood, we don't receive it reluctantly. We love to disobey (Genesis 6:5). We are all like a two-year-old playing with an electrical outlet. We don't understand or care that it's dangerous, and telling us it's wrong only makes it more fun. We are born with pollution, perversion, and disintegration in our blood and we back up that fact with acts of disobedience on a regular basis. The disobedience of a toddler is motivated by a sinful nature and is evidence of the imputed guilt of Adam's sin.

We still need a place to hide. We still long to hide our guilt, shame and neediness, and this longing haunts our dreams at night. The last thing any of us wants is to be exposed for what we really are. Can we find the hiding place for which we so desperately long? We have already seen that the very first clothes were not beneficial for giving us that hiding place, but there is something more. Let's turn our attention to the rest of the biblical material on clothing.

## **Salvation and a New Type of Clothing**

**“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”**

**Genesis 3:21**

**“Maybe we have our embarrassment for a reason.”<sup>17</sup>**

**-Wendy Shalit**

We have already established the folly of sewing fig leaves together. Leaves could never provide the hiding place that our first parents so desperately longed for, nor could anything else they might have pieced together. They needed something different. But what exactly did they need? If our first parents were ever going to receive any sense of relief from their shame, if they were ever to experience a true hiding place, it would have to come from someone other than themselves. They would need a new type of clothing. As we turn our attention to the broader biblical picture regarding clothing something becomes very clear; God longs to cover our guilt and shame and to provide the hiding place we so greatly desire. While clothing had its beginnings in sin, shame, and guilt, it has much richer meaning in connection with the cure for sin, shame and guilt. While clothing was the product of disorder, God uses it in his plan to reorder and repair the broken remnants of his image in humanity.

### **New Clothes**

In Genesis 3:21 we read something that is truly amazing. We read that God himself provided our first parents new clothing. It simply says, “The Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” In this act God demonstrates to Adam and Eve, and to us, his desire to cover the guilt and shame that are associated with sin. What was so different about these new clothes? Were they really

---

<sup>17</sup> Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty – Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 21.

any better? These new clothes were both fundamentally better than the fig leaves, and in some ways actually worse.

### **For Better**

At first glance the main difference between Adam and Eve's fig leaves and their new animal skins is the fact that they were made out of skin. Functionally speaking, animal skins are much more durable. They would have lasted longer and offered better protection from the elements. Some have also emphasized the fact that blood had to be shed to provide for these new clothes. God typically involves the shedding of blood when entering into relationship with mankind, for the purpose of offering salvation and covering our guilt and shame.<sup>18</sup> Some have gone so far as to suggest that the shedding of blood for these new clothes is a precursor to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament and ultimately to Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross.

This makes too much out of the shedding of blood for these new clothes. The most we can confidently affirm is that the shedding of blood for these new clothes demonstrated to Adam and Eve that taking the life of an animal for the good of humanity was an appropriate exercise of the dominion God had given them.<sup>19</sup> While the taking of animal life for the benefit of humanity is foundational for the sacrificial system God would later institute, it does not seem legitimate or necessary to connect these new clothes to Christ's sacrifice simply by nature of the fact that they both involve the shedding of blood. In fact, they share something far more basic and far more significant to our understanding of clothing.

The main reason these new clothes were better than Adam and Eve's fig leaves was not to be found in the material with which they were made, but in the hands that made them. These new clothes were better because God made them. In these new clothes we see that God was aware of the neediness that accompanied sin, and that he was willing to provide for that neediness. This act demonstrates that, even in the midst of

---

<sup>18</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980) 7.

<sup>19</sup> C. F. Keil, *Commentary of the Old Testament – The Pentateuch* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001) 66-67.

the origins of sinfulness, God was willing to offer a cure. We have already established that mankind, because of sin, could not fix the problem of sin or the guilt and shame associated with it by themselves. Sin could only be fixed by someone without sin and guilt could only be covered by one who knew no guilt. By providing new clothes for Adam and Eve, God, the only one who could have covered their shame, demonstrates that he is willing. If there is any connection to be made between these new clothes and the cross of Christ it is that both demonstrate the willing disposition of God to involve himself in the cure for humanity's suffering. In this regard these new clothes were fundamentally better than fig leaves.

### **For Worse**

It must also be observed that these new clothes did not ultimately cover the sense of guilt and shame that Adam and Eve experienced. They were only temporal expressions of God's mercy to sinful people. While they were intended to alleviate the shame associated with sin, they did not cure it. In fact, they actually served the purpose of pointing out just how bad things had gotten because of sin. Calvin suggests that these new clothes were meant to remind Adam and Eve how much worse things had become. He writes, "God therefore designed that our first parents should, in such a dress, behold their own vileness, just as before they had seen it in their nudity, and thus be reminded of sin."<sup>20</sup> Calvin is saying that even while these clothes demonstrated God's desire to provide for the neediness of our first parents, they also were ever-present reminders of their neediness. Have you ever considered when you're getting dressed in the morning, that your clothes highlight the fact that you are sinful? As we turn our attention to the fuller sense in which God demonstrates his love and provision through the picture of clothing, we must not forget the fact that clothing is connected to disobedience and guilt.

---

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin. *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999) 181.

## **Nakedness and Clothing in the Old Testament**

Let us now turn our focus to the broader testimony of Scripture regarding clothing. In order to address adequately the issue of clothing it will be necessary to highlight the place of nakedness in Scripture as well. Since nakedness and clothing are inseparably linked by sin it is appropriate to deal with them as two sides of the same coin. The following survey is not intended to deal with all of the biblical evidence regarding nakedness and clothing. But this quick glimpse at representative passages will give us a better foundation for understanding our neediness and God's provision in light of the biblical imagery connected to clothing.

### **Historical Books**

The most foundational passages regarding clothing in the Old Testament are those passages we have already considered in the first three chapters of Genesis. Here we learn of clothing's connection with sin as well as God's intention to cover our shame and to restore and reorder the brokenness caused by our sin. Still, there are other passages in the historical books that contribute to our understanding of nakedness and clothing. Let us briefly consider three of them.

#### *Genesis 9:18-29*

In this passage we read about the post-flood account of Noah and his three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. We are told that Noah became drunk and passed out naked in his tent only to be found by his son Ham. Ham not only looked upon his father's nakedness with no concern for his father's shameful condition, but he proceeded to tell his brothers about it. Shem and Japheth discretely (walking backwards to avoid seeing their father) covered their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke and discovered what had happened he proceeded to curse Ham's family (specifically his son Canaan) and he blessed his son's Shem and Japheth.

Many different attempts have been made to explain the importance of this passage, and some of them have been very unfortunate and far-fetched. It is important only to point out that nakedness did not cease to be associated with guilt, shame and neediness after the garden. If anything is clear from this account, it is that nakedness continued to be a source of shame and that covering nakedness was more pleasing to God than exposing it. This fact remains consistent throughout the Scriptures (Ezekiel 16, Matthew 25:31-46).

### *Leviticus*

The book of Leviticus is full of detailed explanations regarding sacrifices, the ordination of priests, rules for cleanliness, atonement, and holiness laws. These detailed rules and regulations make little sense unless they are viewed in the larger context of God's desire to reorder a world that was wrecked with disorder. In Leviticus we not only learn that God is a holy God, but we also learn that order is important and somehow connected with holiness. It should not surprise us to find that in this book on holiness and order, God gives numerous instructions regarding clothing. Remember that clothing and is intimately connected to God's desire to reorder a broken world. Throughout the book of Leviticus, it is repeatedly stressed that clean and orderly clothes were required for participation in covenant ceremonies and in everyday life (Leviticus 14:47; 15:5). Possibly the most specific description of orderliness in connection to clothing is found in Leviticus 19:19 where God's people were told not to wear clothing woven of two types of material. While most of us rejoice in the fact that these rules do not specifically apply to us today, we need to acknowledge that the principle of orderliness remains. Order is important to God's plan of salvation, and that God uses clothing as a means of communicating order.

Another interesting contribution from the book of Leviticus to our understanding of clothing is found in the sixteenth chapter regarding the principle of atonement. The principle of atonement is perhaps the clearest explanation in scripture of God's desire to provide for the neediness of sinful mankind. Having already clearly established mankind's inability to deal with its sinfulness, it needs to be acknowledged that the

principle of atonement, not the metaphor of clothing, was God's primary means for communicating his provision for mankind's neediness. Yet, we should not miss the subtle similarities of the principle of atonement and clothing.

So far I have suggested that clothing is anything we use to hide our nakedness and shame before God and before man. I have also suggested that God has used his provision of clothing to Adam and Eve as well as the metaphor of clothing throughout Scripture to communicate his desire to offer us a place to hide. In Leviticus 16 God describes and commands his people to carry out an annual day of atonement. The idea of atonement centers on the fact that mankind cannot deal with its own sin.<sup>21</sup> Through the process of atonement God provided a way for his people to place their sins on an unblemished goat and symbolically remove the guilt of sin by sending the goat into the desert. This act of atonement did not cure the problem of sin in and of itself, but served as God's appointed means of dealing with sin. More significantly it pointed to Christ's actually taking our sins upon himself to remove our sins once for all (1 Peter 3:18).

What is interesting about the principle of atonement is that it carries with it a sense of covering. The root of the Hebrew word for atonement, *kopher*, has two basic meanings. In one sense it means "to ransom or to reconcile through the paying of a price."<sup>22</sup> But there is also a sense in which the root word *kopher* means "to cover over or pacify."<sup>23</sup> While the connection of the principle of atonement and that of clothing should not be overstated, it is clear that in both cases God clearly demonstrates his desire to provide for our need by providing a covering for us, something to hide our guilt and shame. If the connection between clothing and atonement seems somewhat vague at this point, it will become abundantly clear when we look at the New Testament passages on clothing and their connection with God's ultimate provision for our guilt and shame through the atoning sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>21</sup> I. H. Marshal, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman, *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996) 102.

<sup>22</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000) 497.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

*Deuteronomy 22:5*

A first glance at the words of Deuteronomy 22:5 strikes most of us as incredibly odd. Here we are told that a woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord detests anyone who does this. These words do not sit very well in an egalitarian culture that has largely accepted homosexuality, and protects the rights of transvestites. What was the point? It seems that once again God is making clear the necessity of order, and once again clothing is critically involved. This verse stresses the importance of maintaining the divine distinction between the sexes. Clothing is used as a reminder of created order and a practical outworking of submitting to God's created order.<sup>24</sup> We are told in this verse that the blurring of these boundaries is the result of the disorder and perversion brought on by sin.

**Poetic Books**

As with the historical books of the Old Testament, the poetic books also address the issue of nakedness and clothing in a literal sense, and draw upon the image of clothing in a metaphorical sense. We will look briefly at four different examples from Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Solomon.

*Job 29:14*

In the book of Job we see the image of clothing referred to metaphorically. Job describes his attaining to divine attributes in terms of clothing. In Job 29:14 Job looks back fondly on the days before suffering fell on his house, and he recalls with joy the working of the Spirit in his life and the fruit he experienced from God's hand. He writes, "I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban." It is interesting to see that Job describes these God-given attributes in terms of clothing. Righteousness and justice are described as characteristics that adorned his life. They

---

<sup>24</sup> C. F. Keil, *Commentary of the Old Testament – The Pentateuch* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001) 945.

were characteristics that demonstrated he had been blessed by God, and metaphorically Job equates them to his clothing. This use of metaphor by Job exemplifies the fact that Old Testament saints understood their attaining to the righteousness and justice of God in terms of clothing.

### *Psalm 132*

We see the same type of reasoning in Psalm 132, but this time in more striking detail. In verse 9 the psalmist requests that the Lord's priests would be "clothed in righteousness." The Lord responds (v16) by saying he will clothe the priests of Zion with salvation and her saints with everlasting joy. Once again we see the characteristics such as joy and righteousness described in terms of clothing. It is also clear that the psalmist viewed salvation in terms of clothing offered by God. Calvin points out that these verses refer to the righteousness of God adorning God's people.<sup>25</sup> The psalmist understood these attributes as part of God's provision for his people's neediness. They were divine attributes given by God to cover his people in such a way that they would be known for his attributes instead of their sin. In Psalm 132 we clearly see that the identity of God's people was intimately connected to the divine attributes with which God himself clothed them.

### *Proverbs 31*

Similarly, in Proverbs 31 the wife of noble character is described not only as wearing clothes of fine linen (v 22), but also of being "clothed with strength and dignity" (25). Her righteous character is described in terms of something that someone else has put on her. In the covenantal context of the book of Proverbs it only makes sense to see these characteristics as by-products of the salvation (re-ordering, restoring, healing) that God confers upon his people. Here, as in the instances from the book of Job and the Psalms, righteous attributes are understood as part of God's provision for shame and

---

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999) 151.

neediness and are described in terms of clothing because they are so intimately connected with God's covering our shame and restoring his image in us.

### *Song of Solomon*

There is one other mention of clothing in the poetic books that deserves mentioning. I am referring, more specifically, to the absence of clothing that is described in the Song of Solomon. At the outset of our analysis of clothing in Scripture I pointed out that before mankind sinned they enjoyed living in relationship with one another free from guilt and shame, and subsequently they also lived free from clothing. Ever since sin entered the picture the story has been quite different. In fact, the consensus of biblical material describing nudity after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden has been that nudity reveals our guilt and shame. This context makes the nudity mentioned in the Song of Solomon all the more striking. How is it that nudity in the Song of Solomon is not only praised, but it is also delighted in?

The Song of Solomon is an account of the covenant love shared between a husband and a wife. It is in this context, and this context alone, that God has commended nudity for our enjoyment. Marriage has been established by God as a picture and reminder of the fact that it is not good to be alone (Genesis 2:18, 25). It is also a metaphor often used by God to describe the way he relates to his people (Ephesians 5:22-33; Ezekiel 16; the book of Hosea; etc.).<sup>26</sup> It is in this kind of relationship that God's people, marred by their shameful past, can enjoy acceptance. Likewise, in marriage, husbands and wives are intended to enjoy a level of acceptance that would be shameful in any other context. Passages such as 5:10-16, and 7:1-9 leave little room for doubt that husbands and wives are intended to find pleasure in each others nakedness. This is worth noting in an analysis of clothing in Scripture because nudity and the biblical context in which it is to be enjoyed are so misunderstood in our culture today. We will revisit this issue again in the conclusion of our analysis.

---

<sup>26</sup> Scotty Smith, *The Reign of Grace: The Delights and Demands of God's Love* (West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishing Company, 2003) 82.

## Prophetic Books

The image of nakedness and clothing continues to unfold in the prophetic books. There are numerous instances where nakedness and clothing are alluded to by the prophets, but for our purposes we will examine only a handful of representative passages.

### *Isaiah*

The prophet Isaiah offers several different uses of the imagery of nakedness and clothing. In chapter 47, verse 3, Isaiah describes the fall of Babylon in terms of their nakedness being exposed and their shame being uncovered. In chapter 57, verse 8, Isaiah links literal and metaphorical nakedness to the literal and metaphorical unfaithfulness of God's people. They are described as uncovering their beds and gazing upon the nakedness of those they love. While this picture is broad enough to encompass unfaithfulness of any kind, it undoubtedly also includes the literal act of prostitution as well. In either case nakedness is tied to unfaithfulness, sin and shame.

Isaiah also makes another interesting and far more profound reference to clothing in chapter 11. In this passage Isaiah is describing the coming Messiah, and part of his description is very pertinent for our understanding of clothing. In verse 5 he describes Jesus Christ, the coming Messiah, by saying "righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist." We have already looked at passages demonstrating that Old Testament saints referred to their participation in divine attributes such as righteousness and faithfulness in terms of clothing. What is different about this passage is that Isaiah uses the image of clothing to describe the Messiah's possession of divine attributes. If righteousness was the Messiah's belt, and the Old Testament saints understood they needed to be clothed with righteousness, then it follows that they would have understood they needed to be clothed with the Messiah's clothes. If this is true, the New Testament texts we will consider later enjoy a much richer historical context.

*Ezekiel 16*

In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel the prophet confronts the Israelites with their unfaithfulness. In this confrontation he retells the history of God's faithfulness to them since their conception as a nation by means of the image of childbirth. Ezekiel describes the Israelites' condition when God first formed them into a nation in terms of a neglected and discarded newborn child to whom no one provided the normal means of affection. Their cord was not cut, nor were they washed (v. 4). No one looked on them with pity and they were thrown into an open field and left naked and kicking about in their own blood (vs. 5-6). Ezekiel paints what might be the most graphic picture of the neediness of sinful mankind (in this case the Israelites) ever to be found in Scripture. We should not overlook the fact that this portrayal of neediness and shame includes nakedness. C. F. Keil, in his commentary on the book of Ezekiel, explains further that, "nakedness represents deprivation of all the blessings of salvation with which the Lord endowed Israel and made it glorious, after he had adopted the people of his possession."<sup>27</sup>

Next, Ezekiel describes the way in which God provided for the need of his newly adopted people. We are told that God gave them life (v.6), caused them to mature (v.7), covered their nakedness (v.8), and cleansed them (v.9). In verses 10-14 we have a detailed explanation of the beauty of the clothing that God bestowed upon them, and we are told that their fame grew among the nations because of the beauty God had given them. Because this picture is allegorical in nature it is difficult to ascertain the meaning of the numerous clothes mentioned in this passage. Still, it remains clear that God's provision, with all the riches that this entails, was understood in terms of his covering their shameful condition with clothes.<sup>28</sup> It is also clear that this clothing brought with it a new identity and fame. The Israelites were known and viewed as beautiful because of what God had provided for them. It is also interesting to note that in the remainder of

---

<sup>27</sup> C. F. Keil, *Commentary of the Old Testament – Ezekiel, Daniel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001) 115.

<sup>28</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999) 108.

this chapter Ezekiel describes the way the Israelites misused the glory that God had given them in order to worship other gods. Their unfaithfulness is then described in painful detail.

*Zechariah 3:1-4*

In this passage Zechariah encourages the people of God who returned after exile to hold out hope. Even though they had returned from exile their situation remained tenuous at best. The condition of the priesthood remained unjust and the faithful would have viewed this as substantiating any doubts they had regarding the future glory of God's people. Still, Zechariah encourages them to have hope. In this passage he explains that, despite the condition of the priests, God has the power to deal with sin. Once again, as we have seen throughout the Old Testament, the image that is used to describe God's power to provide for brokenness is the image of clothing. While the high priest is pictured in filthy clothes, God is said to remove his sin and place rich garments on him. Once again God's provision for spiritual neediness is described in terms of clothing.

**Other Old Testament Uses**

Before concluding our survey of Old Testament passages regarding clothing, I want briefly to point out two other interesting uses of clothing in the Old Testament. These are the act of tearing clothes and the act of spreading the corner of one's garment over another. Clothes tearing occurs over twenty times in the Old Testament and several times in the New Testament. Spreading the corner of ones garment over another does not occur as frequently, but it is still significant.

*Clothes Tearing*

It is clear that the tearing of clothes is associated with grief and shame in the Old Testament. Most occurrences are connected with mourning (Genesis 37:34; Joshua 7:6).

Sometimes it is used in connection with guilt and fear (Numbers 14:6 – Joshua and Caleb fear the elders would not listen to their commendation to obey the Lord and enter the land; Jeremiah 36:24). The tearing of clothes, that which was used to cover their sense of guilt and shame before God and man, was the ultimate expression of grief in the face of guilt, shame, and the effects of brokenness.

*Spreading the corner of one's garment over another*

The act of spreading the corner of one's garment over another occurs a couple of times in the Old Testament. In the book of Ruth, when Ruth approaches Boaz on the threshing floor to ask his favor in marriage she asks him to spread the corner of his garment over her (Ruth 3:9). In Ezekiel 16, which we have already looked at, the manner in which God is said to cover the Israelites nakedness is by spreading the corner of his garment over them. In both of these instances the reference seems to apply to some culturally understood expression connected to the marriage relationship. Boaz clearly understood Ruth's request to be connected to marriage, and God's action in Ezekiel 16 is undoubtedly connected with his entering into covenant relationship with his people along the lines of a marriage covenant. The validity of this connection in Ezekiel 16 seems to be strengthened by the fact that Israel's unfaithfulness is referred to as prostitution or marital unfaithfulness. It is significant to notice that the images of clothing and marriage were apparently understood as bearing some connection with one another. The extent of this connection need not be overstated, but should not be ignored. Both clothing and marriage are used to represent God's provision for our needs as well as his desire to live in relationship with us.

**Summary**

Throughout the Old Testament nakedness and clothing are inseparably connected to the shame and guilt that accompany the brokenness of sin. The testimony of the Old Testament is that our clothes literally remind us of our brokenness and need. At the same time, God uses the image of clothing throughout the Old Testament as a metaphor for his

plan to remove our guilt and shame and to restore our relationship with him by covering us with his own attributes.

## **Nakedness and Clothing in the New Testament**

The testimony of the New Testament continues to build on the images and nakedness and clothing in much the same way as in the Old Testament. Once again the image is used to demonstrate God's provision for our need, his dealing with our guilt and shame, and his desire to live in relationship with his people. As in the Old Testament, clothing is used both literally and metaphorically in the New Testament. As we look at a number of key New Testament passages regarding clothing, we will see that God uses this image of clothing to further clarify his provision for his people through his Son, Jesus Christ.

### **Gospels**

In the Gospels we see many of the themes connected with clothing in the Old Testament repeated and clarified. The following passages represent some of Jesus' key teachings regarding clothing.

#### *Matthew 6: 25-34*

In this passage, located in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself confronts his people's excessive worry. It is interesting that the two objects of concern that Jesus addresses are two objects that are most critically connected to the needs of humanity: food and clothing. The main reason for his argument is that he alone can provide for the needs of his people. If he gives life, certainly he will sustain and protect it. He then goes on to compare the clothing he can offer to the clothing attained by wealth. He states that the lilies of the field are clothed more gloriously than Solomon, one of the wealthiest men ever to live. The significance of this passage is that, as Calvin has so eloquently stated, "believers ought to be convinced that, though all means fail, they will want nothing that

is necessary for their full satisfaction, provided they continue to enjoy the blessing of God alone.”<sup>29</sup> It is also important to note that this passage makes clear that clothing itself can become a stumbling block for believers. Out of our great desire to cover our guilt and shame, we often forget that only God can provide us with the covering that we need.

*Matthew 22:1-14*

In this passage Jesus shares a parable in which he likens the kingdom of Heaven to a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent servants out to those who had been invited to come, but they refused and ultimately mistreated and killed the king’s servants. The king then tells his servants that the banquet is ready and that they are to go into the streets and bring to the banquet anyone they can find. The servants fill the wedding hall with guests, but when the king arrives one man is found not wearing wedding clothes. Because he is not properly clothed he is thrown outside into the darkness.

It seems clear that this passage refers to God’s initial invitation of the Jews to his kingdom. It also seems clear that this passage refers to the subsequent extension of this invitation to the Gentiles. What is not as clear is the meaning of the wedding clothes that the unfortunate guest did not acquire. What is the significance of this clothing? Calvin suggests that the clothing refers to the new life brought about by the Holy Spirit at salvation as well as the attributes that necessarily accompany this new life. Calvin suggests that the man is kicked out of the banquet because he does not have the new life or the accompanying attributes that all believers have by nature of the clothing God provides to his people. From this passage we learn that the only way to be a part of the Kingdom of God is to be clothed in the benefits and attributes only God can provide.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999) 342.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 174.

*Luke 24:36-49*

Luke goes even further in describing the way we receive the blessings of God. In this passage, Jesus has appeared to his disciples after his resurrection to instruct them regarding what they are to do next. Not only does he tell them they are to preach the message of the gospel, he also says he will give them the power to do so. In verse 49 he writes, “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” When we read these verses in connection with the beginning of Luke’s next writing, the book of Acts, it becomes clear that the “power” Luke is talking about is the promised Holy Spirit. For the first time we see a clear connection to being clothed with a member of the triune God. In this instance Luke tells the disciples that their ability to fulfill the great commission will come as a byproduct of their being clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Paul’s Writings – *Clothed with Christ***

As the testimony of Scripture unfolds it is becoming clear that God desires to provide for our guilt, shame, and neediness by clothing his people not only with his attributes, but also with himself. Nowhere in Scripture is this more explicitly stated than in the writings of Paul. Paul goes further than any other to explain God’s provision for our every need in the offer of the clothing of Christ Jesus himself. Paul specifically states in Romans 13:14 and Galatians 3:26-27 that we are to be clothed with Christ.

Throughout Scripture God has used clothing to communicate his desire to address our brokenness. Throughout redemptive history the extent of God’s provision becomes more and more clear. Here, in the writings of Paul we see the image of clothing used to describe the definitive answer to our every need. Paul leaves no room for doubt that the ultimate cure for covering one’s guilt and shame is to be clothed with Christ himself. What does this mean?

To be clothed with Christ means to be “so closely united to him, that, in the presence of God, [you] bear the name and character of Christ, and are viewed in him

rather than in yourselves.”<sup>31</sup> To be clothed in Christ is to be completely hidden, safe, and free from all accusations of guilt and shame by nature of the righteousness of Christ being put on us or credited to our account. This image of Christ’s clothing, when used in general terms, carries the same meaning as what is commonly referred to as justification. “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”<sup>32</sup> Let us turn our attention now to the specific blessings that accompany the clothing of Christ.

### *i. The Status of Christ*

In Galatians 3:26-27 Paul addresses the newfound status that God offers to his people. He writes, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Paul is telling us that by nature of our being clothed in Christ we receive all the benefits of being sons of God. If we are clothed in Christ, our status as God’s adopted sons and daughters is just as certain as Jesus’ status as God’s only begotten Son. In verses 28-29 of this same chapter Paul goes on to stress that the new status we find when we are clothed with Christ also brings with it a newfound unity with others who have been clothed with Christ. Regardless of our cultural or biological differences we are made one by nature of the uniform we wear. This change in status is often referred to as adoption. “Adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.”<sup>33</sup>

### *ii. The Identity of Christ*

Paul also uses the concept of clothing to distinguish between the status we once held as children of wrath and the new status we now hold as children of God. His

---

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999) 110-111.

<sup>32</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism # 33

<sup>33</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism #34

comparison of the old and new status is done in terms of the “old” and “new self.” In both the third chapter of Colossians and the fourth chapter of Ephesians Paul makes explicit the necessity of putting off the old self and putting on the new self. The “putting on” he describes is used in the same sense as clothing. It is interesting to note the way this “new self” is described. In Ephesians 4:24 the new self is said to be “created like God in true righteousness and holiness.” In Colossians 3:10 the “new self” is said to be in the process of “being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” The Creator of which Paul speaks has already been specified in Colossians 1:15-16 as Christ, “the image of the invisible God.” Paul is explaining that the new clothes that accompany salvation give us a new identity that is being conformed to the image of Christ. Not only does the clothing of Christ give us a new status before God, it also gives us a new identity. As our neediness and brokenness is replaced with the fullness of Christ, the image of God that was broken by our sin is restored and we become more and more like Christ. This process is what is often referred to as sanctification. “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”<sup>34</sup>

### *iii. The Characteristics of Christ*

In Colossians 3:12-14 Paul goes even further in his explanation of this newfound identity when he explains that believers are also to be clothed with the characteristics of Christ. He writes, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved (i.e. those who have been clothed with Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit), clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Paul is making clear that those who are clothed with Christ will resemble Christ by means of participating in the characteristics of Christ. If we are clothed with Christ, then we will begin acting like him.

---

<sup>34</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism #35

*iv. The Protection of Christ*

In Romans 13:11-14 Paul encourages believers to live in light of the new identity that God has given them. In verse 12 he writes, “So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Paul wants believers to know that putting on the armor of light brings with it a certain protection from evil thoughts, words, and deeds of this life. Paul further explains what he means by the armor of light in verse 14 when he writes, “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” He is telling us that the cure to the shame and guilt that we experience because of our evil thoughts, words, and deeds is nothing short of clothing ourselves in Christ. Not only does the clothing of Christ provide the cure for sin, it also provides protection from the recurrence of sin. Paul himself acknowledges that believers will not completely be able to avoid sin in this life (Philippians 3:12), but the clothing of Christ offers us a newfound ability to avoid sin by nature of the protection of Christ.

Paul further explains what the protection of Christ entails in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 6:13 Paul encourages believers to “put on the full armor of God so that when the day of evil comes, [they] may be able to stand [their] ground.” While it is clear that this armor is meant to provide protection, the nature of this armor is often misunderstood. The armor of which Paul is speaking is none other than Christ himself. Paul’s description of the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, etc stand in close connection to the armor of light which he tells us in Romans 13 is Christ himself. That the armor here mentioned is referring to Christ is further substantiated by Isaiah 11:5 where the prophet uses similar terms to describe the clothing of the coming Messiah. This is significant because it emphasizes the fact that all of the protection we need is to be found in Christ, and not in ourselves. On our own, we are naked, shameful, and completely unable to do anything to protect ourselves from sin. With the clothing of Christ, we have been given everything we need to stand firm against sin and the attacks of the evil one.

*v. The Glory of Christ*

If the clothing of Christ has given us everything we need to stand firm against the attacks of the evil one, it would stand to reason that they also provide us with everything we need to be confident of our future participation in the glory in Christ. Paul makes this logical conclusion indisputably clear in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5. He writes, “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

The clothing of which Paul speaks in these verses refers to the future glory that belongs to us in Christ. He connects our longing to have every remnant of shame and guilt completely removed with the image of the final clothing that will occur in glory. None of us desires to be found naked (exposed for what we really are) on that day, and by virtue of the clothing Christ has given us and the deposit of the Holy Spirit, we can be assured that we will be found completely clothed and acceptable to God. Paul gives similar assurance in Colossians 3:3-4 where he writes, “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

**Other New Testament Uses**

There are two other ways in which clothing is addressed in the New Testament that briefly deserve mention. We need to look first at the instances in the New Testament where internal beauty is commended as more important than external beauty. Then, we need to look at the references to white robes.

*Inner vs. Outward Beauty*

There are at least two places in the New Testament where internal beauty is commended over external beauty. In 1 Peter 3:3-5 Peter explains, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.” While Peter is by no means forbidding that women ever wear jewelry, braided hair or fine clothes, he is pointing out the fact that we are prone to confusion regarding the true nature of beauty. His statements are intended to highlight the nature of true beauty and to commend these attributes as more worthwhile and lasting in the eyes of God than are the wearing of gold jewelry, braided hair and fine clothing. As with other New and Old Testament passages the emphasis is that true beauty is the result of being clothed with the attributes of God. Peter implies that those whom Christ has clothed with such attributes will then strive to allow the attributes of Christ to influence, guide, and control the things they wear.

Similarly, in 1 Timothy 2:9-10 Paul gives the following instructions to women. “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.” Paul gives these instructions specifically in the context of addressing behavior in public worship, but it would be a mistake to restrict the application of these verses to public worship alone. Those who profess to worship God are to represent him appropriately at all times. Paul, like Peter, is stressing the importance of allowing the characteristics of God that accompany the clothing of Christ to rule over every aspect of our lives, including our physical clothing. Why does he say that women should dress modestly? He does so because those who claim the name of Christ should find their identity first and foremost in the person of Christ. The most beautiful woman in the world, while she may wear fine clothing, should ultimately be known for resembling the character of Christ. This is completely consistent with the

description of the virtuous wife in Proverbs 31 who is said to have worn fine linens, but, more importantly, was clothed with the attributes of God.

### *White Robes*

One final use of clothing is the image of white robes that occurs in several different passages throughout the New Testament. The first place it occurs in the New Testament is during the transfiguration when Peter, James and John witness Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. In each of the synoptic gospels Jesus' clothes are described as becoming bright white. Matthew writes that his clothes became as white as the light (Matthew 17:2). Mark says Jesus' "clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them" (Mark 9:3). Luke says Jesus' "clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning" (Luke 9:29). Without going into the significance of this action, it seems quite clear that Jesus' appearance changed in order to reveal something of his heavenly glory. Calvin writes, "this was not a complete exhibition of the heavenly glory of Christ, but, under symbols which were adapted to the capacity of the flesh, he enabled them to taste in part what could not be fully comprehended."<sup>35</sup> This helps us to understand the other occurrence of white robes found in the New Testament.

In Revelation 3:17-18 Jesus is addressing the church in Laodicea. He writes, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see." In these verses Jesus is again stressing the necessity of being clothed with the clothes that only he can provide. Interestingly, he refers to these clothes as white clothes. In the passages regarding the transfiguration as well as this passage in Revelation the image of white clothes seems to be used to describe the perfection and sinlessness that only God can provide, and that believers only experience in glory.

---

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999) 310.

This is further exemplified in Revelation 7:9 where a multitude of saints in glory are pictured, all wearing white robes. There is also striking similarity between these passages and Daniel's description of God seated on the throne, wearing clothing that was white as snow in Daniel 7:9. As with most uses of metaphorical language, it is dangerous to read too much into the meaning and significance of these white clothes. What seems clear is that God employs the image of clothing to explain his provision for our need in this life in a way that culminates in the life to come by means of benefits and attributes that he already possesses.

### **Summary**

The New Testament passages related to nakedness and clothing continue to portray the neediness of sinful mankind and God's provision for our brokenness. Proper clothing is described as a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of God, and Christ is described as the only proper clothing. The clothing of Christ is said to provide thoroughly for all of our needs by providing us with all the blessings of Christ including his status, identity, characteristics, protection, and glory. The inward beauty that accompanies Christ's clothing is also stressed as more significant and lasting in God's eyes than the beauty that comes with fancy clothes and jewelry. Ultimately, we see that the clothing of Christ brings about a transformation unlike any other. It is an internal transformation that, in turn, transforms everything we do, even the way we dress.

## **What am I going to wear today?**

**“...put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its  
Creator.”**

**-Colossians 3:10**

**“Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.”<sup>36</sup>**

**-Bono**

We live in a society that is obsessed with beauty. Almost any time of day you can find a makeover show on television. “Extreme Makeover”, “The Biggest Loser”, and “What Not to Wear” are only a few of the popular shows which market to the age old human desire to be something more beautiful than we really are. Deeply woven into the fabric of our societies’ understanding of beauty is the place or role of clothing. We live in a society where most people have a closet full of clothes. For many their closets become toolboxes, if you will, of equipment that they use to construct, to the best of their ability and understanding, the most socially acceptable self they can make.

It would be a mistake to overlook the luxury of this sinful endeavor. Millions of people around the world will never have the luxury of asking themselves, “What am I going to wear today?” Nevertheless, millions of people are haunted by the same question. As I suggested in the introduction of this paper, many people are plagued by this query, and too often the church has failed to offer a biblical response to this burning desire.

It is my hope that this brief theological analysis of clothing in Scripture will prove to be a helpful resource to anyone perplexed by this fundamentally human question. As I draw my analysis to a close, I want to make a few observations to those who seek practical counsel on the topic of clothing. First, I want you to see that clothing is inextricably tied to responsibility. Second, I want to encourage you to see and experience the incredible freedom that God has offered in the clothing of Christ.

---

<sup>36</sup> Bono, *Grace*. From the U2 album: *All that You Can't Leave Behind*. Universal International Music, 2000.

## Responsibility

I hope it has become abundantly clear that the human longing to be clothed is the direct result of the brokenness caused by our disobedience to God. In many ways our longing to be clothed stands as an ever-present reminder of the fact that we are responsible for the brokenness in this world. But, as we have observed, God has used clothing to assure us that he has not left us in our brokenness. Throughout Scripture God has demonstrated his desire to cover the nakedness associated with our brokenness by means of providing us with a covering. This desire was ultimately fulfilled when God sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins in order to offer us the perfect covering of Christ himself, with all his benefits. We must also notice that internal beauty associated with being clothed with Christ necessarily brings a newfound power and responsibility to live in a manner that is worthy of the clothes we have been given. Everything that we do should be done in conformity and submission to Christ, as he is the true image of God.

The difficulty is that we do not experience this perfectly in this life. While we have been given everything we need in Christ such that we can be assured of our salvation, we will not experience the full blessings of Christ until he returns and we appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:4). As we live in this period of tension between what we have already been given and what we have not yet received, we will continue to struggle with sin, even as we grow in grace. Unfortunately, many Christians are greatly confused about the reality of the present struggle in this life.

Many would have us believe that once we are saved by God's grace (i.e. clothed in Christ) we must then perfectly take up the responsibility of living like Christ (i.e. putting on the new self). They would also have us believe that any shortcomings we experience along the way jeopardize our participation in the eternal blessings of Christ. This thinking clearly misunderstands the importance of the biblical imagery involving clothing. Ever since our first parents' first attempt at clothing themselves, the image of clothing has demonstrated the fact that we can contribute nothing to our neediness. If our brokenness is to be cured and our shame and guilt removed, it must completely be done by God. It would not suffice for him to clothe us with Christ and then leave us on our

own. When Paul tells us to put on the new self or to put on the armor of God, he is telling us to rely continually on Christ as the only sufficient cure for our miserable condition, both when we come to Christ, and as we wait for him to return.

Others would have us believe that the clothing Christ brings has nothing to do with the clothing we wear on a daily basis. They appropriately emphasize the “delights” of God’s grace for salvation, but they overlook the “demands” of God’s grace that practically apply to our lives.<sup>37</sup> This mindset claims that any discussion of our daily dress is in fact contradictory to the Gospel. The testimony of Scripture clearly does not support this point of view.

This brings us to a more practical question. Does the biblical evidence regarding clothing offer us any practical principles to guide believers? Scripture clearly offers us a number of very practical principles to guide us as we get dressed today. It is to these principles that we will now turn our attention.

### **Outward expressions reveal inward realities**

One thing that is abundantly clear from the passages we have observed is that outward expressions reveal inward realities. Ever since Adam and Eve first attempted to cover themselves in the garden, their actions revealed the fact that things were not right. Peter makes clear that those who have been clothed with Christ are to strive to have the characteristics of Christ rule over everything they do, including the way they dress. Peter suggests that believers should give priority to inward beauty, but this inward beauty should also affect their outward behavior, including dress.

We need to make a crucial observation. The reason that clothing has caused so much confusion from the garden to the present day is because it is so intimately connected to our brokenness and need. Fundamentally clothing is not a matter of fashion; it is a matter of the heart. The reason we are so confused about clothing is because our hearts are so broken by sin. If we ever hope to understand the proper use of clothing, we need to be aware of the many ways we have abused it. It was my contention

---

<sup>37</sup> Scotty Smith, *The Reign of Grace: The Delights and Demands of God’s Love* (West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishing Company, 2003) 17.

at the outset of this analysis that Adam and Eve's first clothes were a perversion of perfectly good fig leaves. If this is true, it should not surprise us that we still use clothing for inappropriate ends. Let me suggest several ways in which we have attempted to use clothing as outward expressions of fundamentally human longings/inward realities.

*i. Status*

Clothing is often misused as the basis for acceptance or status. One of the first things we do when trying to win the approval of a group of our peers is to dress like them. I'll never forget an occasion when I witnessed ten high school girls in a youth group who, while adamantly denying this fact, suddenly realized they were all dressed exactly the same. They all had on the same style of jeans (same color and all), the same style t-shirt (very short sleeves with no writing or logo), as well as the same type of tennis shoes (all were wearing running shoes). They turned to look at one another, suddenly became silent, and simultaneously crossed their arms and leaned back against the couches they were sitting on in a move that looked so well rehearsed you would have sworn it was choreographed.

For many people the use of clothing as a status symbol is very intentional. Still, for others it occurs at a completely unconscious level. To some extent, the desire to dress like those around us is completely natural. Uniformity in dress is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. In fact, there are numerous occasions where uniforms seem to strengthen relational bonds. The problem occurs when we allow ourselves to be so controlled by the prescriptions of "fashion" that we begin to make our clothing choices based on a fear that we will no longer be able to maintain a certain level of status or acceptance. It is this type of thinking that I believe unwittingly motivates the unintentional uniformity that exists on most Jr. High and High School campuses as well as in most workplaces.

Those who struggle with this temptation need to remember that God has provided a far greater status in Christ to those who believe. He has told us that those who are clothed in Christ are united together with one another by virtue of the fact that they are all viewed as God's children. We have been offered Christ's status as children of God, and

the same level of acceptance in the Father's eyes as he has always had for his Son. There is simply no greater status or level of acceptance that we can achieve.

### *ii. Identity*

Clothing is also misused by many in an attempt to define who they are. The followers of Marilyn Manson, Goth, and the hippie movement all come to mind. For many of the followers of these popular movements clothing is inseparably connected with their understanding of themselves. Fans of the Goth movement don't just dress in Goth clothes. Most of them also define themselves as "Goth." The parents of children who have allowed clothing to become their identity are used to hearing their children explain their style of dress by saying, "It's just me. It's who am I."

The danger in this way of thinking is that it is inherently out of touch with eternal realities. Any attempt to define oneself by temporal means such as clothing completely denies the fact that we have been created in the image of God for a far greater and longer-lasting purpose: "to glorify God, and enjoy him forever."<sup>38</sup> Those who struggle with understanding their identity in terms of clothing need to remember that they have been created in the image of God and that this God has sent his Son to restore that image in us by means of clothing us with himself. God desires that we find our identity in him so profoundly that we could say with Paul, "to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21).

### *iii. Image*

Another way clothing is misused is related to image, or the way we wish to portray ourselves to others. Because we were created for relationships, we are inherently concerned about what others think of us. Because we are sinful, we are often more concerned about what others think of us than we are with how we demonstrate God's love to others. One of the chief manifestations of excessive concern regarding self-image is excessive concern regarding how we are dressed. Anyone who has been more

---

<sup>38</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism # 1

concerned with preparing their outward appearance on Sunday morning than they were with preparing their heart for worship knows what I am talking about.

Our ultimate goal in clothing ourselves should never be the approval of other sinful human beings. The question that should guide our clothing decisions is not “I wonder what he/she will think of this outfit,” rather “Does this outfit adequately portray the characteristics with which Christ has clothed me?” Those of you who struggle with this way of thinking need to remember that God is in the process of restoring his image in you by means of clothing you with the characteristics of Christ. In fact, being clothed with Christ will force you, by nature of the transformation it brings, to begin thinking in terms of the characteristics of Christ. If you belong to Christ, you should find yourself increasingly concerned with whether or not you are demonstrating Christ’s righteousness, justice, truth, love, and so forth in everything you do; even the way you dress.

#### *iv. Independence*

If every generation is remembered for its lasting influence on society, it is possible that my generation will be remembered for the battle cry “Who Cares?!” This question is by no means unique to my generation, but it seems to characterize almost everything we do. Fundamentally this is a cry of freedom; a cry of independence from any transcendent or architectonic truth. “Who Cares?!” has been applied to everything that my generation has done, especially to clothing. The basic reasoning behind this question is that if there is no true God, then there are no true normative guiding principles and no basis for you to tell me what to wear. If God doesn’t care, then no one should, especially not you! This way of thinking has led to many abuses of clothing. The ultimate expression of independence in relation to clothing is the rebellion against clothing itself.

I would argue, in light of the overwhelming testimony of the biblical material on clothing, that the desire to live free from clothing is ultimately a desire to live free from a sense of dependence upon God. Ever since sin entered our world, clothes have served as one of our greatest reminders of our neediness. If there is no God, then there is no measure to judge our brokenness and need. If there is no brokenness and need, there is

no true need for clothing. While it might serve as a functional benefit during a snow storm, it would not be ontologically tied to the sinfulness of humanity. I firmly believe that the fact that more people do not flock to nudist colonies is evidence of the fact that clothes are tied to the reality of the presence of guilt and shame and ultimately the reality of God.

Those who have struggled with this desire for independence need to deal honestly with the fact that they are broken and needy. The longing to be clothed is intimately connected with the presence of God and the presence of evil. We were designed for relationships with God and each other. While it may seem much less frightening to deny the presence of a holy God and the evil within ourselves, we must not forget that God has offered the cure for our brokenness. Those who are clothed in Christ by faith receive the benefit of Christ's protection from guilt and shame as well as his protection against the attacks of the evil one. We do not live independently from God, but by God's gracious provision of Christ's clothing we can know the security of God's presence and protection and not simply the fear associated with our guilt and shame.

#### *v. Success*

One final misuse of clothing that deserves mention occurs in connection with our view and understanding of success. Everyone longs to be successful though few understand what success really means. Most in our society would connect success with fame, wealth, and lasting influence. One of the main ways we are told to achieve fame, wealth, and lasting influence is by the way we dress. We have all heard the old adage "Dress for Success." What this often means is that if we wish to achieve fame, wealth, and lasting influence we need to dress as though we have already achieved it. Whether we achieve it or not, we can at least be ready for it if it happens.

The problem with this way of thinking is that it is tied to an understanding of success that is fundamentally unbiblical. Our goal, as humans created in the image of God, is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever"<sup>39</sup> by living according to the way he has prescribed in his Word. The ultimate measure of our success is not dependent on our

---

<sup>39</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism #1.

accumulation of temporal goods, any amount of temporal notoriety, or our ability to leave our mark on this world. The ultimate measure of our success is Christ himself, the only person perfectly to reflect the image of God in man. This is true both before we believe and after we believe. Once we have been clothed with Christ, Christ does not cease to be the measure of our success. As Christians, our only goal is to glorify God by pursuing Christ-likeness. Thankfully, as we have seen in the way Paul has used the image of clothing, God himself is committed to making us more like Christ as our new self is renewed in the image of its Creator. This means that our success is guaranteed, and that we can be assured that we will one day participate in the glory of Christ. The only measure of success is the clothing God has provided for us in Christ.

## **Order**

Another biblical principle that I believe should guide our understanding of clothing is the principle of order. Throughout our survey of biblical passages regarding clothing it has been abundantly clear that clothing is connected to disorder and God's plan to reorder this broken world. Does this principle offer us any practical advice when considering how we should dress?

Many Christians say that the Gospel has nothing to do with clothing. I hope by now you have seen that the Gospel has everything to do with clothing. Not only has God chosen to use the image of clothing to describe the way he provides for our every need, it is also clear that the clothing he provides in Christ brings with it a fundamental change in our lives such that the way we think about clothing is now to be governed by the attitude of Christ. Does this mean we should all dress exactly as Christ dressed? Certainly not! Christ dressed as a first-century, Jewish, male carpenter. Still, I am quite certain that Jesus would not have dressed in a manner that was contradictory to the principles of order that his Father had prescribed.

The difficult thing is deciding how to apply the principle of order today. Most of the passages that specifically deal with orderly clothing in Scripture were Old Testament ceremonial instructions or case laws that were temporarily tied to God's working covenantally in the lives of the nation of Israel as his covenant people. These case laws

were meant to communicate God's holiness and his desire to reorder his creation. This desire was ultimately communicated in Christ such that the specifics of the Old Testament sacrificial laws are no longer necessary. Still, the principles involved in these case laws were based in the very character of God which has not changed (Malachi 3:6). So, the principles of these laws and instructions are still applicable to us today.

One thing that is clear from these passages is that God's desire to reorder the universe extends to clothes. This being said, it is difficult to defend any position that denies that the power of the gospel should influence the way we dress. It also seems safe to say that God's willingness to impose restrictions on clothing, specifically for the purpose of communicating his holiness and grace, demonstrates that restrictions on clothing are not, in and of themselves, contradictory to the Gospel. Those who would oppose any use of dress codes in connection with church events out of fear that it would hinder the message of the gospel need to realize that God himself imposed dress codes for the purpose of communicating the Gospel. Surely we need to be aware that God's dress codes and our dress codes are not the same, and as I have already mentioned, we are no longer required to enforce the dress codes of the Old Testament. Still, it does seem that the principle of order would instruct us that it is permissible to use dress codes so long as they are used for the purpose of more clearly communicating the Gospel of grace. This means that dress codes must never be confused with God's laws, as this would be contradictory to the Gospel of grace. This also means that the specifics of the dress codes themselves must be governed by the Gospel of grace, explained in terms of the Gospel of grace and enforced in light of the Gospel of grace. When used in keeping with God's principles of order, dress codes can actually become a beautiful means of communicating God's desire to provide for our brokenness.

### **Occasion**

A final guiding principle that stands out in our analysis of biblical passages regarding clothing is that of occasion. From tearing clothes while mourning to white garments in glory, it seems clear that different clothes are appropriate and even necessary for different occasions. As we consider how we should handle our responsibility when

getting dressed, I would like to notice three ways the principle of occasion should guide us.

*i. In Bed*

The first occasion that bears mentioning is the bedroom; specifically the marriage bedroom. It is no secret that we live in a day and time when the sanctity of the marriage bedroom has nearly been forgotten. In all likelihood, confusion regarding the occasion of the bedroom is the primary source of confusion regarding what we should wear. Let me explain.

The fashion industry of our day is obsessed with sex. Let's face it, in a sinful world, sex sells. But, as those who have been clothed with Christ, we are forced to ask ourselves to what extent it is appropriate to mimic the fashions of a sexually saturated society. Among all clothing related struggles in Christian households, it has been my experience that this struggle leads the way. Unfortunately the principle that best informs us regarding this struggle is often missed. This principle, of course, is the principle of occasion.

The primary reason that is often appealed to by Christian parents and leaders when addressing modesty in clothing is that we should clothe ourselves in such a manner as not to cause our brothers and sisters in Christ to stumble (as if this were completely possible). Certainly, demonstrating this sort of self-sacrificial love will flow from putting on the new self and striving after the characteristics of Christ. Still, it is even more appropriate to correct this sort of clothing abuse by acknowledging the proper occasion for displaying one's naked body. As we have clearly seen in the Song of Solomon, God has designed a specific occasion for men and women openly to share their bodies with one another and to find pleasure in their nudity. Interestingly, this occasion is not playing in the schoolyard, working in the office building, or walking down the street. The only occasion where the naked body is to be delighted in is in the marriage bed. This begs the question; how much exposure is permissible outside of the marriage bed? God does not explicitly tell us. He has only left us this principle to guide us. Since we do have this principle to guide us our question should not be "How little clothing can I wear and still

be OK?” The question we should ask is “Do I actually believe God’s designed occasion for sharing nudity to be best, and am I seeking to live in conformity with this principle?” By God’s grace, as he conforms us into the image of his Son, this will be the attitude of our hearts.

### *ii. In Worship*

A second occasion that bears mention is the occasion of worship. As we noticed when we looked at 1 Timothy 2, Paul specifically addresses clothing in the context of discussing what is appropriate to the occasion of public worship. It is in the context of public worship that he commends the attributes of Christ as more beautiful than the attributes attained by beautiful clothing. Why is this significant?

We have already observed that we inappropriately attach all sorts of meaning and significance to clothing. We are prone to find our status, identity, image and glory in clothing. When we come together for worship, we come together to worship Christ. It is Christ alone that is our status, identity, image and glory. Paul is stressing the importance of proper clothing in public worship because it is his desire that all of the praise and honor in worship be directed to Christ alone. This too should be our desire. We also need to realize that everything we do is an act of worship before God. Therefore, this principle should always guide the way we dress.

### *iii. In Between*

I have already mentioned the fact that this present life is characterized by the struggle between two realities. We have already been saved by God’s grace, but we have not yet experienced the fullness of God’s glory. In many ways, we live in what could be called an in between time. We live in between Christ’s first coming and his second coming. This in between time is characterized by tension and longing. Paul writes in Romans 8:23 that “we ourselves...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” How does the principle of occasion guide those who live, and get dressed, in between the two comings of Christ?

We need to acknowledge the fact that we live in a time where our clothes remind us of our brokenness. We also live in a time where our clothes remind us that God has not left us alone in our brokenness. God has used the image of clothing throughout Scripture to emphasize the fact that we need him. Only God can provide for our every need, and we should be reminded of this every time we put on our clothes. Whether our clothes come from Sears or from Saks, those who have been saved by grace through faith are equal in God's eyes by nature of the fact that they have been clothed in Christ. Because God has provided everything we need in Christ, we also live in a time when we can look forward with full confidence to the day when we will experience the blessing of being clothed in the full glory of Christ. As we look forward to that day, there is one final principle that must govern our understanding of clothing.

## **Freedom**

The final principle that must guide our understanding of clothing is the principle of freedom. Anyone who has ever truly wrestled with the question "What am I going to wear today?" knows that it can be all-consuming and brings with it an incredible feeling of bondage. Having worked with youth for a number of years, I am well aware that many young people lose sleep and shed tears over what they will wear the following morning. The message of the Gospel is that we no longer need to be held captive to the question "What am I going to wear today?" God has provided for all the longing of our hearts in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Those who are clothed with Christ by faith are offered freedom from the burden and desire to find their status, identity, glory, etc. in what they wear and freedom to enjoy clothes within the safety of God's created order. This is why Paul can write in Galatians 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." It is my desire that this brief analysis of the theological significance of clothing in scripture will help you better understand, appreciate, and experience Jesus' words in Matthew 6:31 "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we wear?'" May your heart freely sing:

**“Jesus, thy blood and righteousness  
My beauty are, my glorious dress;  
‘Midst flaming worlds, in thee arrayed  
With joy shall I lift up my head.”**

**-Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, 1739**  
**-Translated by John Welsley, 1740**

## Bibliography

- Barnhouse, Donald Grey. *Romans Volume 4: God's Covenants, God's Discipline, God's Glory; Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964.
- Bauer, Walter, F.W. Gingrich, Frederick Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 2000.
- Boice, James Montgomery. *Romans Volume 4: The New Humanity, Romans 12-16*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995.
- Bono. *Grace*. From the U2 album: *All that You Can't Leave Behind*. Universal International Music, 2000.
- Brown, F., S. Driver, and C. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000.
- Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- . *Commentaries on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- . *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- . *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- . *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- . *Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- . *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999.
- . *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1975.

- Delitzsch, F. *Commentary of the Old Testament – The Book of Job*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001.
- . *Commentary of the Old Testament – Psalms*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001.
- Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Hawthorne, Gerald F., and Ralph P. Martin. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993.
- Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology – Vol. One*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.
- Howe, Neil, and William Strauss. *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
- Keil, C.F. *Commentary of the Old Testament – Ezekiel, Daniel*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001.
- . *Commentary of the Old Testament – The Pentateuch*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001.
- Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms – Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1973.
- Kittle, Gerhard. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964.
- Kim, Jung. *Significance of Clothing Imagery in the Pauline Corpus*. New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Marshall, I.H., A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman. *New Bible Dictionary*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996.
- Murray, John. *Collected Writings of John Murray*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 1982.
- O'Brien, Peter T. *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 44: Colossians, Philemon*. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982.
- Orr, James. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956.
- Plantinga, Cornelius. Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be – A Breviary of Sin*. Grand

- Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Christ of the Covenants*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980.
- Shalit, Wendy. *A Return to Modesty – Discovering the Lost Virtue*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999.
- Smith, Scotty. *The Reign of Grace: The Delights and Demands of God's Love*. West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishing Company, 2003.
- Stott, John. *Romans: God's Good News for the World*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994.
- Watts, Alan. *Does It Matter? Essays on Man's Relation to Materiality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970.