Liberated Women and their Daughters

April 21, 2011

Over the last few decades, social commentators have written about the lack of modesty in the current generation and the reasons for it. A recent contribution to the discussion came from an op-ed by Jennifer Moses entitled "Why Do We Let Them Dress Like That?" She talks about women of a liberated generation who now wrestle with their eager-to-grow-up daughters and their own pasts.

She attempts to answer a simple question: "Why do so many of us not only permit our teenage daughters to dress like this—like prostitutes, if we're being honest with ourselves—but pay for them to do it with our AmEx cards?" It's a good question. When you see a young girl dressed provocatively, you have to wonder who paid for it. After all, a young girl usually doesn't have the financial means to pay for the outfits she wears. So why does Mom go along with this?

Jennifer Moses has an answer. "We are the first moms in history to have grown up with widely available birth control, the first who didn't have to worry about getting knocked up. We were also the first not only to be free of old-fashioned fears about our reputation but actually pressured by our peers and the wider culture to find our true womanhood in the bedroom."

While those experiences could actually be used by moms to warn their daughters of the dangers of a promiscuous lifestyle, they do just the opposite. These feminist don't want to be considered hypocrites.

And the mothers are conflicted. Jennifer Moses talks about a mother she knows with two mature daughters who said: "If I

could do it again, I wouldn't even have slept with my own husband before marriage."

The Bible teaches in 1 Timothy 2:9 that "women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control." Even secular social commentators have talked about a "return to modesty."

Jennifer Moses helps us understand why teaching modesty to this generation of young girls have become so difficult for their mothers. It's time for mothers to stop worrying about being called hypocrites and start acting like mothers. I'm Kerby Anderson, and that's my point of view.

"Why Are Bikinis and Short Skirts Immoral?"

Sue, do you ever wear a bikini? Or have you ever worn one? And couldn't a lot of the old biblical rules for dress be mostly for those people back in biblical times? And please tell me this: Is there a certain length when a woman's dress or skirt becomes immoral? For example, are all skirts and dresses above the knee immoral? Just curious.

> *Sue, do you ever wear a bikini? Or have you ever worn one?*

I take it you ask such an intensely personal question because of my answer to email Is It a Sin to Wear a Bikini?. No, I don't wear a bikini, and I never have.

> *And couldn't a lot of the old biblical rules for dress be mostly for those people back in biblical times?*

What “old biblical rules for dress” would those be?

Actually, what we find in terms of “biblical rules for dress” are principles that transcend time and culture. Basically,

1) Men should dress like men and women should dress like women, and not blur the lines of gender (Deut. 22:5).

2) Women should dress modestly (1 Tim. 2:9-10). (For great insight into the transcending principle behind Paul’s prohibition on braided hair, gold, pearls or expensive clothes from this verse, see this recent post by my friend and fellow Tapestry blogger Sandra Glahn: blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sandra_glahn/not_with_braided_hair…or_pearls__)

3) We should do everything in love, which includes choosing dress and behavior that will not cause each other to stumble. Causing a brother to stumble by lusting is not loving.

There is nothing about these principles that is limited to biblical times.

> *And please tell me this: Is there a certain length when a woman’s dress or skirt becomes immoral? For example, are all skirts and dresses above the knee immoral?*

People wiser than me have said that the answer to this question depends on the culture, because styles and morals changes over time and geography. There are moral absolutes (like not murdering) and there are relative morals, which would include dress. For example, some monks at the University of Dallas related to my colleague Todd Kappelman that several of them were teaching in Papua New Guinea where both the temperature and the humidity were very high. The young women students sat in the classroom dressed only in some kind of skirt. Toplessness would have been shameful in the U.S., but in a stifling tropical location, the natives thought nothing

of it.

The men, too, wore only abbreviated loincloths and strings. On one occasion, the monks went to visit a group of men who were "doing laundry"—their loincloths were hanging on the line and they were lounging around naked. Like our response to being caught in the shower when someone comes to the door, they each quickly grabbed a cord and wrapped it around his waist. Then they were no longer embarrassed, even though their genitals were exposed. That's the way that culture works.

So, since styles and times change, we have to look at the heart issue that reveals one's motive in choosing the way we dress. If a woman chooses garments in hopes of making men look at her admiringly in a sexual way, or if she chooses clothes in hopes of making other women compare themselves to her and be jealous, then I would say that is sinful because it falls short of God's desire for us to honor Him and love each other.

That means there is no absolute line, particularly in relation to the knee, that defines morality.

I would also point you to an excellent answer on the "Got Questions" website:

> *Whether or not to wear a bikini is a question many women struggle with, but for a Christian woman, the issue takes on additional implications. The Bible tells us that God calls women to modesty, which means to not draw attention to themselves: "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" (1 Timothy 2:9-10). God also calls us to purity: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). The question is whether or not a bikini is consistent with modesty and purity.*

Another issue to consider is that God calls all people to control their thought lives, so as women, we should not cause men to lust: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-29). When we cause men to look upon our bodies lustfully, we are inducing them to commit the sin of lust and this is displeasing to God.

A further consideration is that our bodies, like our minds and hearts, belong to God and are to be used for His glory, not our own. Romans 12:1 tells us, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your spiritual act of worship." When we offer our bodies to God as "living sacrifices," we are saying in effect, "My body is yours, Lord. Use it for your glory." It's hard to imagine a bikini-clad body being used for God's glory. [Sue's note: This is not talking about the husband-wife relationship, where there is total freedom to dress to please and arouse one's spouse in private. See the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament.]

Or course, wearing a bikini in a private location, like a fenced-in back yard is probably acceptable, providing there is no visual access to the yard by the neighbors. According to the verses above, we have the responsibility not to put the males around us in a position that they might lust or have impure thoughts (see also Matthew 18:7).

www.gotquestions.org/Christian-bikini.html

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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“Is It OK to Look Down My Girlfriend’s Top?”

Im a 17 year old male and have been going out with my girlfriend, who I truly love, for almost two and a half years. We are both Christians and have set boundaries that will ensure that sex will only happen after marriage (which could be a possibility for us in a few years). She is a modest girl, unlike the many around who have no problem showing too much skin. I know it is wrong to look at females dressed like this and do my best to keep my eyes off (which I have become pretty good at). I have been trying to determine whether it is OK by God, for me to look at my girlfriend when she wears a top that can be seen down. She is OK with it and appreciates that I don’t look at other girls that way. Is it OK for me to look at the one girl I love in this way as long at it is not lustful and I don’t get addicted to looking at her. I don’t want to be sinning. But, if it’s OK by God I want to be able to enjoy looking at the wonderful girl he has sent to me (God gave her to me after I stopped masturbating). Looking at her helps me to not look at other females when they pass by which is great, but is it OK to look at her this way before marriage.

Dear _____,

The real question is, “Does looking down my girlfriend’s top so I can help myself visually to her breasts, help me or hinder me in my walk with God?” Another important question is, “Does it honor her?”

I would suggest that helping yourself to the breasts of a girl you are not married to is 1) outside the boundaries of marriage, which is the only place where you have a right to gaze at a woman’s breasts, and 2) very effectively pulling

your attention off God and holy thoughts, and thus is NOT helping your walk with God.

You may intend to marry your girlfriend, but nothing can guarantee that it will happen until you've said "I do." Couples often break up before marriage despite their hopes and intentions. Furthermore, it is VERY unusual for 17-year-old couples to end up marrying each other, which means that the chances are, you've been looking down the top of another man's future wife, and there is some girl out there that you WILL marry, hoping that you will keep your eyes and all other body parts to yourself as you wait for her.

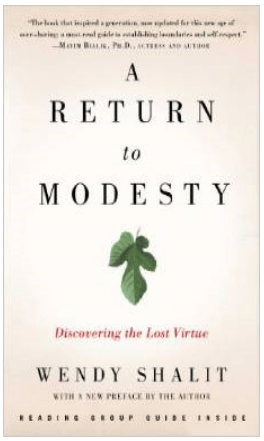
I know I've been very blunt here, but in the interest of giving you direction that will best help everyone involved, both now and in the future, I want to encourage you to exercise self-control in where you look, and don't deliberately put yourself in a position where you are able to look down anyone's top.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

A Return to Modesty

The Loss of the Virtue of Modesty



This article is an examination of Wendy Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*. The book was written in 1999 and addressed to her "parents, and anyone who has ever been ashamed of anything." *A Return to Modesty* is an examination of public and personal attitudes toward the problems faced by young women at the end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Shalit's starting point is the change from a healthy modesty toward sexual experience to a sheer embarrassment at the lack of experience. Her book is not a call to a prudish, Victorian sexuality, but a reminder of the value inherent in female modesty and the rewards for those who wait until marriage to become sexually active. Arguing against a culture which systematically attempts to rid us of our romantic hopes and natural embarrassments, Shalit offers young women an open invitation to cultivate one of the most feminine of all virtues, and to do so without shame or regret.

A Return to Modesty is divided into three parts: the first concerns our present view of sexual modesty and the problems with this view. The second section surveys the intellectual battles which led to our present situation. And the third is a look at women who are saying "no" to contemporary values and returning to an earlier conception of modesty.

The War on Embarrassment, the title of the first chapter,

looks at the early and middle ’80s when sex education in grade schools was beginning to become more commonplace in the United States. Young girls ten and eleven years of age sat in mixed company as instructors discussed the particulars of intercourse, venereal disease, and birth control. The result, argues Shalit, is that subjects that had been discussed privately among the separate genders are brought into the open in such a way that all modesty is systematically removed. Preteen girls are taught to be ashamed if they are embarrassed, and embarrassed if they are ashamed. The ensuing confusion leads to a schizophrenic approach to sexuality which will follow the young girl through puberty and into young womanhood.

The impact of this early exposure to sexuality is discussed in the second chapter, *Postmodern Sexual Etiquette.* Here the modern dating scene is shown to be a direct revolt against the supposedly debilitating sexual disease of Puritanism and the Judeo-Christian ethic.{1} The traditional maturation cycle of courtship, love, and marriage has been replaced by a sequence of hook-ups, dumpings, and post-dumping checkups. The result, which we will discuss, has been that women are generally disrespected, trivialized, and abused in ways that should concern us all.

The Normalization of Pornography

As we continue our examination of modesty, I would like to cover the statistical fallout from our behavior during the last half of the century.

Stalking, rape, and harassment of women in the work place and at home all increased dramatically during the latter part of the twentieth century. But nothing is as alarming an indicator, says Shalit, as the “normalization of pornography.”{2} The contemporary debate is little more than a “ping-pong” game over censorship with feminists and conservatives crying “yes,” and the civil libertarians

volleying back “no.” What is missing is the realization of how our views of pornography have shifted and a recognition of the impact that this has on the lives of ordinary men and women.{3}

One indicator of our growing acceptance of recreational pornography is the increase in strip clubs in the past decade, up over 100 percent from 1992. Strippers have become a kind of cultural wallpaper, and are present to such an extent that they are no longer shocking.{4} Women who object to their husbands and boyfriends looking at porn are accused of being prudish and full of hang-ups. The result has been a plethora of diseases and disorders as women attempt to look like the airbrushed super models seen in magazines and film.

A young woman named Jennifer Silver was concerned that her boyfriend was reading *Playboy* magazine, but she and her friends were reluctant to say anything which would make them seem prudish or un-cool. In a porn-friendly culture Miss Silver’s opinion was only valued if it was sympathetic to the norm. She said in an article to *Mademoiselle* magazine:

> *The real reason I hated Playboy was that the models established a standard I could never attain without the help of implants, a personal trainer, soft lighting, a squad of makeup artists and hairdressers, and airbrushing. It’s a standard that equates sexuality with youth and beauty. I didn’t want my boyfriend buying into Playboy’s definition of sexuality.{5}*

Her boyfriend discontinued his reading in light of Miss Silver’s observations, but many men, even Christian men, do not see the harm in this kind of indulgent and sinful behavior.

It is not enough to say we want to return to a more modest culture; we must actively strive to create such a culture. If women are ever going to be able to be modest, men will have to

value that modesty, and one way to do so is by allowing women to be who they are and not place impossible demands on them.

The Intellectual Landscape

In part two of her book Shalit takes aim at the intellectual battles which have led to the present crises in virtue. Under the guise of "being comfortable with our bodies," our universities, advertising companies, and even fellow Christians have urged women in the last half century to "let it all hang out." Indicative of this attitude is a quote from *Bazaar,* a leading women's magazine, in response to a cover which offended some readers:

> *The barely revealed breast on our August cover wasn't meant to offend. It was meant to celebrate the beauty of the female form. Bazaar believes that women should feel comfortable with their bodies.*

The response to this reader's letter was in effect saying that, if one should choose to be modest, then it is a reflection of not being "comfortable with one's body." The result is that we've become so comfortable with the body that people feel free to dress immodestly from the beach to the grocery store.

Shalit continues her examination of the intellectual landscape of modesty with a glimmer of hope based on nation-wide surveys in some of the most prominent women's magazines. Her findings are that 49 percent of women wish they had slept with fewer men, and the happiest women were those who had the fewest partners.{6} In addition to these observations, one could add that the same women's magazines that frequently advocate a more progressive and immodest lifestyle are also full of the confessions of women who have low self-esteem and feel that they are ugly and do not measure up to an increasingly critical society.

Following the statistical surveys, Shalit examines the idea of "male obligation." In an unusual turn she says that it is difficult to expect men to be honorable. Many women send messages that men are no longer expected to behave like gentlemen.{7} The short skirts, plunging necklines, and pouty lips so popular today are an invitation for men to stare at and perceive women as objects. The honor women want from men, argues Shalit, begins with the signals that women send. Those interested in a clear guide to a return to modesty, in their own lives or that of their friends and daughters, will find such a guide in Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty.*

Modest Dress

In an effort to find a way back to a more modest approach to sexuality, Shalit turns to some themes common in most religions. First she makes the observation that there is almost unanimous agreement among religions that modesty is inextricably linked to holiness.{8} In the first of several examples, Shalit quotes Christ's admonition: "Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked and then see his shame."{9} After this she recalls the occasion when Moses covers his face, and is afraid to look upon God. Finally, she considers the account of Isaiah when he sees the fiery angels surrounding the throne of God, and four of the six angels' wings are not functional because they are used to cover their feet. The rationale, says Shalit, is that in the presence of the Holy One, they should cover themselves.

In the section titled *The Return to Modest Dress,* Shalit documents the changing trends in women's dress. She discusses how women who have rebelled against the immodest dress characterized by spandex, push-up bras, and bikinis have found a new self-respect they never knew was available. In addition to this, these same women have found that they are attracting the kind of men they really desire as opposed to men who approach them for their outward beauty alone.

There is a difficulty for young women who choose to be a part of the counter-culture of modesty Shalit is advocating. We live in a time when the loss of one's virginity is considered a right of passage into maturity. Young women who choose to hold on to their virginity are often ostracized by other girls who wish to have partners in their loss. The result is that one must frequently choose between the loss of innocence, or the loss of fellowship with one's peers. This is a tragic choice to ask of a young, teenage girl who desperately wants to be accepted.

The problem is not confined to young women alone, but is played out among more adult women with the same dire consequences. Men no longer have to marry a woman to get them to sleep with them and the result has been a growing hostility toward the institution of marriage.{10} The power to say "no" that women once collectively possessed, has been surrendered to the point that it is very difficult to reclaim. Shalit's book shows the way out of a dark forest of our own making.

How To Get There

"Loss of innocence is nothing new," writes Shalit, "but it is our assumption that there is now nothing to lose."{11} We frequently act as though previous generations have decided that young women need not value their innocence, and we are powerless to resist the pressures of society. However, we are told exactly the opposite throughout the Scriptures. We are told that we can, and must, resist the world. We are told that the individual can choose to behave differently than societal norms. And, we are reminded that the failure to resist the temptations and standards set by secular society is sin.

The first thing we must do in order to return to a more modest society is to believe that it is possible, and to voice our desires for such a return actively. The second thing we must do is realize that cultures differ about what exactly is modest. Shalit cites examples of eighteenth century France

where women would not bare their shoulders, Chinese women shy about their feet being exposed, and native women of Madagascar who would "rather die of shame than expose their arms."{12}

Shalit proposes that we listen to the universal instinct within us which has been systematically suppressed. We know that we are naturally shy and sensitive to some things and should sometimes, but not always, cultivate our reservations rather than trying to overcome them. Quoting Francis Benton, Shalit writes:

> *Specific rules about modesty change with the styles. Our Victorian ancestors, for instance, would judge us utterly depraved for wearing the modern bathing suit. Real modesty, however, is a constant and desirable quality. It is based not on fashion, but on appropriateness. A woman boarding a subway in shorts at the rush hour is immodest not because the shorts themselves are indecent, but because they are worn in the wrong place at the wrong time. A well-mannered and self-respecting woman avoids clothes or behavior that are inappropriate or conspicuous.{13}*

In order for society, and especially Christians within a secular and hostile society, to return to modesty we must be willing to look a little awkward in our actions and appearances. God has called us to be a strange and peculiar people for His purposes. One of the easiest and most influential ways to do this is through our outward appearances and actions. We should return to modesty before it really is too late.

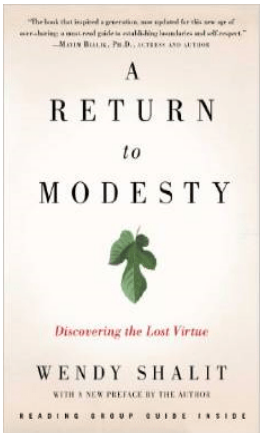
Notes

1. Wendy Shalit, *A Return To Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 26.
2. Ibid., 49-54.
3. Ibid., 49.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 52.
6. Ibid., 90.
7. Ibid., 104-105.
8. Ibid., 218.
9. Rev. 16:15.
10. Shalit, 227.
11. Ibid., 241.
12. Ibid., 232.
13. Ibid., 232.
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"Is It a Sin To Wear A Bikini?"

On a Christian site, someone said that it is a sin to wear a bikini. I do not agree because I went sailing the other day and I was the only one not wearing a bikini and the men on the boat did not gaze at the women wearing bikinis. I do not think bikinis are immodest because they can be appropriate when swimming, just not for walking around on the street or other public places.



I would like to direct you to Wendy Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty*, which covers the subject of modesty

(and immodesty) better than anything I've ever read. It is consistent with a Christian world view even though the author is not a Christian.

In my opinion, wearing a bikini is sinful under most circumstances because the purpose of it is to show off as much flesh as possible while still covering the absolute essentials of genitals and nipples. There is nothing God-honoring about bikinis and much that is gratifying to the flesh: for men to leer and for women to show off their bodies. Scripture calls us to live and dress modestly, not to gratify the flesh. It calls us to do everything to the glory of God: wearing bathing suits that are designed to cause men to lust and women to publicly display their bodies is the opposite of glorifying God.

If the men on your sailboat didn't gaze at the women wearing bikinis, I would suggest that they may have been desensitized. Or perhaps they were just wearing sunglasses and you didn't notice their eyes! <smile>

I will add a disclaimer. There is nothing at all sinful in a wife wearing a bikini if *only* her husband will see her in it. Showing off her body to please him is part of the pleasure of sex that God intends for married couples to enjoy. See "The Song of Solomon" in the Old Testament for biblical evidence of that.

I'm glad you asked.

Sue Bohlin

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