The Failure of Modern Ethics

Rick Wade looks at the rejection of the idea that ethics are rooted in reality external to us and the consequences of that rejection for modern ethics.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Fall of Ethics

When you hear people discussing ethical issues today, do you get the sense they're talking on different levels? I don't mean different intellectual levels; I mean talking as though they are on different planes, in different worlds, even. When we discuss ethical differences, we often find we're so at odds that the discussion quickly grinds to a halt . . . or degenerates into name-calling.

For example, consider the matter of a just war, something that's been a hot topic in recent years. Some say there can be no just war because it's impossible to tell who's the good guy and who's the bad, and no way to predict the outcome. So we ought to all be pacifists. Others say it is just to prepare militarily to meet potential threats, and to make clear that we will go to war to defend ourselves. Still others see justice as applying only to the defense of Third World nations against the exploitation of the Great Powers.{1} Such differences are the result of different fundamental beliefs about what justice *is*.

Because there are competing ideas about ethics, all of which seem to have some truth, the idea has taken root that there is no way to rationally justify ethical beliefs, that they come from within us rather than from some source outside us. The idea that our ethical assertions are rooted in our feelings and desires is called *emotivism*. Traditionally it was believed that ethics were rooted in something external to us, something

objective and permanent. A fundamental reason for the change from the traditional view to contemporary subjective emotivism was that foundational beliefs about the nature of man and the universe were lost.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says ethicists today are like scientists trying to piece together a right understanding of science after a catastrophe has destroyed most of the records of scientific thought from the past. They have the jargon of ethics from former times, but they don't understand the fundamental principles underlying it or how it all ties together. Their task is similar to trying to put together a puzzle with pieces missing and no picture on the box to show what the puzzle is supposed to look like when put together.

It's tempting here to simply attribute this to the fact that Christian beliefs no longer have authority in our society. While this is true, it doesn't provide enough detail. For two reasons (at least) we need to have a fuller understanding of why people think the way they do with respect to ethics beyond just attributing their ideas to unbelief. First, understanding how we got where we are will help us see the problems with our view of ethics today. To simply say, "Well, that isn't biblical" means little today—indeed, some might be *pleased* to know their ideas don't accord with Scripture! If we want to bring about change in individuals and in society, it will be helpful to offer a more detailed and nuanced response.

Second, because we ourselves are so profoundly influenced by our society, Christians often think like non-Christians about moral issues. If we can't find it in a list of rules in the Bible, we often rely on our feelings or pragmatic thinking to guide us. Or if challenged about something we do, we might say, "Well, that's between me and the Holy Spirit. Stop being so legalistic!"

So how did we get here? Let's begin with a brief overview of the history of ethics in the West.

Traditional Ethics

Today people tend to ground their ethical beliefs in their own feelings or desires. Traditionally, however, ethics were grounded in the nature of external reality and the nature of man.

In the days of the ancient Greeks, morality had its foundation in the role into which one was born, or in the nature of the universe. In the tradition of Homer, for example, one's role in life defined one's good. So the king was a good king if he acted as a king should. A carpenter was good if he built well, and a slave was good if he served well.

For Plato, the ground of ethics was the nature of external reality. The standard for goodness, he believed, exists in a world beyond that of our senses—in the world of what he called the *forms.* Forms are abstract entities which allow us to identify a particular thing on earth. So, for example, we know what a dog is because we have an idea of the form "dog." Forms provide a standard by which particular things in the universe are measured. And the highest form, according to Plato, was "the Good."

For Aristotle, the universals Plato called "forms" are not off in some abstract, immaterial realm, but are inherent in the universe. Because the forms are in the natural world, Aristotle believed *purpose* was built into the natural world; by nature things are intended to move toward particular goals, to fit the image of the form.

Early Christian thinkers accepted the basic idea of Plato's forms. However, they believed the forms—including the form of the Good—were in the mind of God, not in some abstract realm. Because God created the universe out of His wisdom and knowledge, morality was thus built into the order of the universe.

Aristotle believed that, as part of this purposeful universe, we, too, have purpose; we too move toward a goal or *telos*. The good toward which we move Aristotle called *well-being*. He believed all of us share a nature which requires us to live a certain kind of life in order to find well-being. Fulfillment is achieved by living a life of virtue. By reason we learn what is good for us in keeping with our nature, and we seek to find that end through the virtues.

A millennium later, Thomas Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that the universe has purpose built into it. He believed that this was due to the creative work of God. For Aquinas, the supreme good is higher than the universe. It is God Himself who is the Good that defines all goods. Our lives are to lead upward to God. Although the ultimate fulfillment of the experience of God will only occur in the next life, Aquinas taught we are now to pursue the goodness of God, our well-being, through a virtuous life governed by the law found in Scripture and in nature.

Both Greek and early Christian ethics, then, were grounded in objective realities: the nature of man, the nature of the universe, and, with Christians, the nature and creative work of God. What we *ought* to do was determined by what *is*, by the nature of ultimate realities. But this was all to change.

Modern Ethics: The Loss of a *Telos*

About the time Aquinas was formulating his ideas on ethics, some other Christian scholars decided that God's law was *not* grounded in His *mind* but rather in His *will*. What was the significance of this shift? Well, God's law could change (according to His will), rather than being something eternally fixed. Laws were thus not universal and eternal. They could be provisional or have exceptions.

This change eventually resulted in a major shift in ethical thought. If morality wasn't grounded in God's reason and hence

into the order of the universe He created, there was no necessary connection between what *was* and what *ought to be.* Ethics no longer had any ground in the universe itself. Fact and value were separated.{2} Without value built into the universe, the idea of a purposeful (or *teleological*) universe was lost.

In modern times, the loss of the idea of an end or *telos* for the universe was extended to mankind. Belief in human nature had been undercut. What are we supposed to be? Alasdair MacIntyre says that previously there were three elements in ethics: man-as-he-is, man-as-he-should-become (referring to man's end or *telos*), and the ethical precepts that would enable him to move from one to the other. Now, because it is no longer known what man really is by nature (or is supposed to be) the second part (man-as-he-should-become) was lost. What was left was man-as-he-is and some ethical principles that were mostly just holdovers from the past. So ethics is no longer about helping us become what we should be, but about helping us do our best as we are now.

In modern times multiple ethical systems have been devised to improve man-as-he-is with no understanding of man-as-he-should-become. Some have looked to psychological impressions as guiding principles (David Hume, for example). Utilitarians believe our greatest good is happiness, and they use a scientific approach to determine what makes for happiness. With Friedrich Nietzsche, in the nineteenth century, the split between fact and value was complete—his ideal man stands alone under no other rules but those of his own making.

One result of all this is that Westerners have ended up with a rule mentality in ethics rather than a character mentality. Because there is no universal law and no *telos* of man, we confine ourselves to what we should *do* rather than what we should *be*. Also, as noted earlier, because there are so many opinions about ethics, some have concluded that reason isn't a reliable source for ethics, that moral assertions are simply

expressions of our own feelings and desires.

Emotivism

Thus, modern ethics has been left with the chore of understanding what makes for the good life for man-as-he-is with no notion of man-as-he-should-become. Different systems have been presented, each of which has a different starting point. While there is often agreement on particular ethical precepts, this is usually because these precepts are held over from traditional ethics albeit without their traditional foundation. It is also because of our God-given basic understanding of the law (Rom. 2:14-15).

How is it that two people can present systems of belief, each of which seems to be logically consistent, yet which are very different? It can be very confusing! Thoughtful people put together systems of ethics they think are objective and consistent, and then don't understand why others don't agree with them. This is because of different starting points. Starting points for ethics are important, for they determine which direction the logical progression of thought will lead. These starting points include ideas about the nature of mankind and the existence of God and whether He has revealed His desires to us. Other ideas grow out of these, such as notions about freedom and obligation. Such starting points are rarely brought into the conversation; they are simply assumed. And I think most people have no clue that, first, they *do* simply make important assumptions like those just noted, and second, that the ethical precepts they espouse are dependent upon these unspoken (and often unrecognized) starting points. Thus they state their moral opinions as if they are settled facts which everyone should recognize, and they are baffled when others don't agree. When people with opposing ethical ideas or systems clash, it is rather like two groups of people deciding to build highway systems, choosing places to start building on the basis of some nonrational reason, and

constructing their highways according to different ideas about how highways are to function in transportation. Would it be any wonder if the two highway systems don't fit together well?

This is one reason ethical debates so often degenerate into name calling. For surely if someone doesn't recognize how clearly true what I'm saying is, it must be because the person is just being stubborn or dogmatic, or (one of the worst charges one can make today) allowing his religious beliefs to inform his moral beliefs!

The perceptive listener who understands the importance of starting points might want to press the individual to clarify his starting points and defend them.{3} What one is likely to find, however, is that the person hasn't given such matters any thought. All we know is that we should be free to do what we like. Even the old maxim, "One's freedom goes as far as the next man's nose" doesn't mean too much. He should just move his nose!

One might excuse this on the basis that the average person doesn't have the time or training to probe such philosophical minutia. But even with philosophers, it has been observed they too have simply chosen or accepted their starting points for no rational reason.{4} The fact is that, philosophically speaking, the basic principles of each system cannot themselves be proved; they are *non*rational. (This isn't to say they are *ir*rational; just that they are outside the limits of rational proof.) They might be simply assumed or consciously chosen, but they have their basis in something other than reason.

As a result of all this confusion, some have concluded that there really *is* no rational basis for ethics; that all moral statements are in the final analysis just expressions of our own feelings, attitudes, or preferences.{5} As noted previously, this is called *emotivism*. But one has to ask: If our feelings and preferences are ultimately personal and

individual, how can we then expect others to hold to the same beliefs? And in a society in which we must function together, how do we get others to agree with us if our beliefs aren't grounded in something external to the individual which can be rationally understood and acknowledged? It is done by swaying people emotionally. Morality isn't considered a factual matter, but an emotional, psychological one.

MacIntyre describes the situation this way:

> Moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. It is to be secured, if at all, by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one. We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others.{6}

In traditional ethics, one could present a law to a person—a law coming from an outside source and presented as factual—along with reasons to believe it, and leave that person to think about it and decide whether it was true or false. But with emotivism, since there are no objective reasons behind a precept, one person must manipulate another to get the other to change his or her mind. C. L. Stevenson, "the single most important exponent of the theory" according to MacIntyre, said "that the sentence This is good' means roughly the same as I approve of this; do so as well'. . . . Other emotivists," MacIntyre continues, "suggested that to say This is good' was to utter a sentence meaning roughly Hurray for this!'" Thus, to say "arson is wrong," for example, is simply to express one's own feelings and to try to influence others by producing certain feelings or attitudes in them. It's like saying, "I disapprove of arson and you should, too."

Thus, although I might *talk* as though I'm giving you good reasons, I'm really just trying to emotionally manipulate you.

A *law* isn't the authority; the person making the ethical claim is. When we realize this, we become suspicious, expecting others to try to manipulate us to get us to agree with them.

We see this kind of manipulation routinely in our society. An advertisement selling fast food might say absolutely nothing about the food itself (which may actually be bad for one's health), but instead will seek to evoke feelings of warmth and happiness using images of people having a good time together. Intimidation through name-calling has been used by supporters of abortion rights in saying that pro-lifers are woman haters, vindictive, unconcerned about women's health. Gay rights supporters call proponents of the traditional (and biblical) model of human sexuality "homophobic."

In his excellent study on the rise of secular humanism in our society, James Hitchcock describes three stages of acceptance employed by the mass media that served to bring about a transformation in our moral outlook that had little or nothing to do with reason.{7} The first stage was bringing to light things which were previously unmentionable all in the spirit of a new openness. The second was ridicule, "the single most powerful weapon in any attempt to discredit accepted beliefs." Hitchcock notes that "countless Christians subtly adjusted their beliefs, or at least the way in which they presented those beliefs to the public, in order to avoid ridicule. Negative stereotypes were created, and people who believed in traditional values were kept busy avoiding being trapped in those stereotypes." The third stage was "sympathy for the underdog." Those upholding traditional morality (thinking primarily of the Judeo-Christian tradition) were depicted as bullies.

Such charges work on our emotions. Who wants to be considered a bigot or be charged with being a "fundamentalist" with all the negative baggage that term bears today? On the other hand, shouldn't we support the "rights" of the supposed "oppressed" among us? The "victims" of "repressive" laws?

The Failure of Emotivism

There are a number of problems with emotivism.{8} One problem is the moral divisions it permits in society. There is no single moral "umbrella" which covers all people. If your morality is yours, I cannot correct you; I cannot pull you under the umbrella, so to speak. When someone is accused of moral wrongdoing, the accused will likely say something such as, "Who are *you* to tell *me* I'm wrong? To each his own!" The person who responds this way believes an individual's morality is his own and not objectively true for everyone. The person is thus offended that another person would try to force *his* preferences on him. The idea that the accusation might be based on objective, universal moral law isn't even considered. Moral consensus is faltering in our society today largely because of such thinking.

The closest people get to thinking in objective terms is when they agree that something could be bad because of its practical consequences. But that's not at all the same as morality grounded in something universal and eternal. The individual is left to weigh the odds: to do the thing in question and suffer such-and-such consequences, or *not* to do it and suffer the loss of whatever he or she is trying to obtain or accomplish. Although it can be helpful to point out the consequences of our actions—there *are* consequences to sin—we can't base our moral decision making on such things, because we can't always predict the future. Even if we're accurate, the other person can still think, "Well, it won't hurt me," or, "I can handle that (the particular consequence)" and brush our objection aside.

The flip side of that is that we are often afraid to take a stand on ethical matters ourselves for fear of being accused of pushing our own subjective beliefs on others. We are only heard if we can couch our objection in terms of the other person's self-interest.

Another obvious problem with emotivism is inconsistency. Although emotivists *claim* to believe that moral precepts are expressions of personal preference, they often speak as though they are making objective moral claims binding on everyone. They exhibit here, I think, the truth of Paul's comment in Romans 2 that we all have the law written on our hearts. We *do* believe there is a difference between right and wrong, and that there are universal moral laws. As C.S. Lewis was fond of pointing out, we all know about fairness, and we expect others to as well. Thus, the emotivist moves back and forth between expressing moral beliefs as though they should hold for everyone, while also meeting challenges to their *own* actions by saying the challenger's beliefs are his own and can't be forced on others. They can tell *you* what *you* should do, but don't dare tell *them* what *they* should do.

Finally, on the philosophical level, emotivists try to mix too different kinds of statements, which results in confusion. They hold that *evaluative* statements—those which are supposed to be making objective evaluations such as "arson is wrong"—express personal *preferences*. Evaluative statements and statements of preference are two different kinds. To substitute one for the other is illegimate. If a person says arson is wrong, does he mean that arson is really wrong—for everyone? Or is he really just saying that he doesn't like arson? If a person is making an evaluative statement, then I need to consider his case and decide whether to continue my career as an arsonist! However, if he is just expressing his personal preferences, I can smile and say "that's nice" and start flicking my matches. Imagine the difficulty in public discussions of ethical issues under such circumstances.

Response

How shall we respond? To simply point people back to the Bible as the proper source of morality won't do today. The Bible is seen as just a religious book with rules pertinent only for

those who believe it. That isn't to say we *shouldn't* speak God's Word into our society. The question is *how* we are to do that. When Paul was in Athens and had the chance to address the whole crowd assembled in the marketplace, he didn't quote Scripture. He *did,* however, give people biblical truth (Acts 17: 22-31)—in his own words and addressing their specific need.

Thus, we ought to consider offer more sophisticated arguments which are thoroughly biblical and which address the need of the day. As part of our efforts to convince people of the rightness of a biblical view of ethics, it would be helpful to follow the lead of early champions of traditional morality and reinvigorate the notion of purpose in the universe. We should seek to reestablish the truth that we share certain characteristics simply because we are human, and that a virtuous life makes for a good life because of the way we're made. We can point out specific needs all humans share, such as security, belonging, and physical provision (food, etc.). We also know that certain things are wrong (such as incest), and that certain things are right (such as justice and courage). These kinds of things are universal; we rightly expect others to recognize their value or their evil. They are not matters of individual tastes.

We might not be able to gain the agreement of every individual on all the universals we propose, but if we work at it we can find at least one moral "law" any given individual will agree is universal. Once one is established, we can go for a second and third and so forth, until we think the person is willing to seriously rethink the current belief that ethics is a subjective matter. From there we can explain these realities by the fact that we are created by God.

Some scholars propose a return to the virtue tradition of ethics.{9} As Christians we can easily see the ethical benefit of recognizing that we have a nature given us by God through creation, and that there is an end or *telos* toward which we

are moving which is defined by the character of Christ. This makes ethics a matter of character development rather than just rule following. Perhaps Protestants should reconsider the natural law tradition long championed in Roman Catholic theology. Whether that is the best direction to go is now being considered by reputable evangelical scholars. Whatever we decide about that, we must turn away from emotivism. It is bad for individuals and bad for society.

Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 6.

2. Cf. Arthur Holmes, *Fact, Value, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 77.

3. The late Francis Schaeffer is a very helpful resource for understanding the significance of starting points and learning how to expose them. See his *The God Who is There,* 30th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), especially Section IV.

4. MacIntyre, 19f.

5. Ibid., 11-12.

6. Ibid., 12.

7. James Hitchcock, *What Is Secular Humanism? Why Humanism Became Secular and How It Is Changing Our World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1982), 83f.

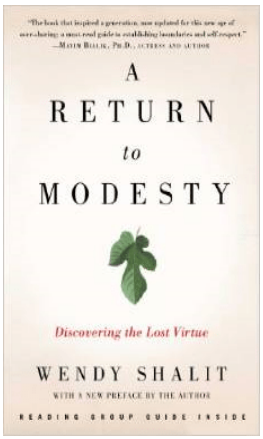
8. Those wishing to consider a more philosophically rigorous study are urged to read MacIntyre's *After Virtue.*

9. Recall the popularity of William Bennett's book *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). Bennett, by the way, is a Roman Catholic who holds a B.A. in philosophy and a

Ph.D. in political philosophy in addition to his law degree.

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.