

MEETING AT THE RIVER

(An Autobiographical Fiction)

by David L. Hatton

Part 1 - Surprise

"This moral universe is not something that we create out of our taboos and rules—it is something we discover; it is a "given." — E. Stanley Jones, in *Abundant Living*

Call it a dream, if you wish, or an invention of my imagination. To me it was as real as life, and that's why I recall the details so vividly. Whenever I return to swim there, the scene pops up like a photographic slide show in my mind. I'm still amazed by it, and still grateful.

It was a fabulous day for swimming. Only a few fluffy clouds dotted the sky, and just enough breeze for comfort on the strenuous hike to where it all took place. The length and difficulty of the trail leading to it made this location especially secluded. So, I was very surprised to hear the sound of so many voices, which became louder the closer I got. After the last rise on the path, just before it descended to the tall brush that hid my destination, I realized that the noise was from more than just a few people. But, how could a large group get there? When I parked my own car, no others were in sight.

Then I remembered. When pulling over for gasoline, two buses from the Bible college passed by. Each could have dropped off a load of college kids and parked farther up the road, or driven away. But how? This trail was several miles from the main highway on a narrow dirt road that even my car had trouble managing. Also, the trailhead to the swimming hole was unmarked and easy to miss. That's exactly why I enjoyed this hideaway. Its seclusion provided an escape from the clatter and commotion of the city. It was a haven for a quiet times of reflection. Surrounded there by the natural beauty of God's creation, on every visit I soaked up peace like a sponge. As a bivocational pastor, if it was my turn to preach on Sunday, I especially enjoyed the solitude for undistracted meditation on my sermon. In all my years of coming here, I'd encountered maybe four or five other swimmers. If some blabbermouth knew about this wonderful secret and had led two busloads of students to it, the publicity would destroy the privacy. I was distraught, but also curious as I pushed my way through the tall brush.

Arriving at the end of the path, my curiosity turned into amazement. Covering the large sandy area along the riverbank was a huge crowd, and they were not college students. Less than fifty yards from me was a strange-looking group of men, women, and children, maybe two hundred or more, some standing, others sitting on the sand or smooth boulders scattered along the riverbank. Everybody, except for the children, had on either robe-like smocks or thin tunics, as if in costume for an ancient Greek play. Some of these loosely hanging wraps looked like two sheets of fabric tied together at both shoulders. Others seemed to be a single piece of material bundled in a loop over just one shoulder, leaving the opposite half of the chest exposed. On women and adolescent girls draped in these, it left one of their breasts in full view.

In maternity nursing, my other vocation, I saw women's breasts routinely. Of course, that was in a hospital situation. This outdoor display of several female breasts was an eye-catcher, to say the least. But their exposure drew no special attention from the males in the group. No men

were staring, as I found myself doing.

As immodest as these garments were, nothing was more revealing than the state of the little ones in the crowd. All the infants, toddlers, and young children were in their birthday suits. The babies and toddlers looked cute, but the sight of slightly older boys and girls running around nude together was a little disturbing.

"Who in the world are these people?" I wondered to myself. Because of the naked breasts and youngsters, the answer that first came to mind was, "Nudists!" Or perhaps, I surmised, a group of die-hard "hippies." "Flower children" was the original name during the "Hippy-Movement" back in the '70s. They had often flaunted society's dress codes. Some even allowed their children to do as these were—playing outdoors as naked as jay birds. I had personally witnessed this at a hippie commune one hot summer in Northern California. But my final suspicion was more realistic. This appeared to be a drama scene set up for shooting some sort of epic film. How naked children fit into it I could not imagine, but the sight of bare breasts would be typical for Hollywood. So, where was the film crew? Where was the director? I turned from side to side, expecting to see them. No cameras, no normally dressed stage hands—just this bizarre crowd who had taken over my favorite swimming spot, which now was evidently no longer a big secret.

Then someone started singing. Two or three others joined in immediately. In a few seconds the whole group, even most of the children, were following the melody. After trying briefly to make out the words, I realized they were singing in a foreign language. When that song ended, another one began, then another. I just stood listening, no longer trying to catch any familiar words or phrases. Then, as I was beginning to enjoy the unique harmony in their voices, I suddenly found I could make out the last line of their song: "For His mercy endures forever."

When the singing ended, an elderly man stood up and waved his hand to gain the crowd's attention. Although thin and frail-looking, he had no problem making himself heard. His speaking was crisp and clear, yet I understood nothing he said. Apparently his subject deeply excited him. As he gestured passionately, his voice rose and fell for emphasis. This energetic speech captured the attention of all but the smaller children, who continued playing quietly in scattered huddles.

During his address, I noticed a young mother seated near the center of the group. She was obviously trying to calm her fussy baby. After various pacifying efforts, she held the infant up to her bosom to nurse. This was easily done, since she wore a tunic that already exposed one of her breasts. But I was not ready for what she did minutes later. To switch her baby to the other breast, she merely slipped the tunic off her other shoulder and let it drop. I was shocked. She was now entirely topless in the middle of this large group of people!

Again, topless breastfeeding was something I both watched and helped teach in my job. Our perinatal unit encouraged the "skin-to-skin" nursing of newborns, which means "bare baby against mom's bare chest." This we did in the privacy of a hospital setting. We never taught topless feeding in public. But again, no one except me took special notice of her half-naked body.

After the aged speaker ended his talk, everyone rose to their feet. Another man, who had been standing next to him, suddenly called out a few words, and the whole crowd, including most of the children, began reciting in unison something from memory. Although I couldn't understand their words, it somehow seemed familiar. Then, in the same way it happened during their singing, just before they ended, I understood the very last part of it: ". . . the fellowship of the holy ones, God's pardon for sins, the resurrection of our bodies, and life into ages upon ages."

"The Creed, or something like it," I thought to myself. "Maybe this is a church group."

As I made that silent speculation, my eyes again fell upon the topless mother who was still nursing her baby. Now that she was standing up with the others, her tunic had slid down from her waist, revealing the top half of her buttocks and hanging there precariously. She seemed totally unconcerned. But I was concerned. I remember feeling guilty for fixing my eyes on it, expecting it to drop off completely at any moment.

"No, this is definitely not a church group!" I assured myself, watching the mother's tunic slip down even further. "This has to be a bunch of religious hippies . . . or some kind of spiritualized 'Woodstock,' or maybe even some sort of weird Christian cult."

While contemplating those possibilities, I noticed the crowd was moving closer together and closer to the riverside. The man who had initiated the reciting of the Creed was at the water's edge. He signaled to a woman who came to him carrying several white robes over her arm. He then motioned for another man and woman to join him. As the couple approached, he started immediately pulling his robe off over his head. I gulped. Just like the half-naked nursing mother, who wore no bra or panties under her tunic, he had no underwear. With his robe off, the man stood there stark naked in the crowd. He handed his garment to a teenage girl standing nearby. She calmly took it, as if what he had just done was perfectly normal. No one anywhere seemed alarmed at his behavior. Nor were there any signs of surprise when the couple he had summoned also took off their clothes. They waded out with him into the river, all three of them totally nude. I kept looking from face to face in this large crowd of men, women, teens and children. Not a snicker, not a blush, not the slightest indication that these three naked people were causing any concern or disturbance in what otherwise seemed to be a strongly religious meeting.

"These must be nudists, after all," I whispered to myself conclusively.

What happened next seemed to confirm it. Along the riverbank, eleven other individuals immediately disrobed and handed their outfits to bystanders. The other three naked people were now up to their waists in water, and these new ones had lined up to follow them there. First was an elderly lady, wading very carefully and slowly. She was accompanied by a middle-aged woman who supported her by the arm. Their facial features, and similarity in the build of their bodies, made me think they might be a mother and daughter. A middle-aged man followed the two women. His body was almost entirely covered with thick dark hair, a feature that not only distinguished him from the others, but also made him appear less nude. Behind him came five adolescents, two of them girls and three young men, all without a stitch of clothing. Not one of these teens showed the least bit of shyness about their developing signs of adulthood. After them was an especially attractive young woman whose shape was hard to keep from staring at. She could have been a model on the cover of a women's fitness magazine, but without the bikini. I felt compelled to look away, but had to do it several times, because my gaze kept gravitating back to her. Each time I did look away, I tried to notice if other men in the crowd were admiring her beauty in a similar way. As before, no one seemed to pay particular attention to her.

The last two in the group were a man and woman who appeared to be a married couple. With his arm around her, the fellow had kissed her on the cheek. Hand-in-hand, they kissed once more, this time on the lips and with tears in their eyes, right before entering the water together to join the others.

I was stunned, hardly able to believe what I was seeing. Yet I vacillated between a sense of moral indignity and a feeling that the scene in front of me was strangely innocent and beautiful. To be honest, my main uneasiness at this point was the fear of having intruded upon a

very exclusive gathering involving some very private practices. My anxiety showed up in my feet. They were involuntarily inching me back toward the wall of brush that I had just come through. If my suspicions were correct, that this was some sort of cult, my uninvited presence might be not only intrusive to them but dangerous for me. Yet my brief, inadvertent eye-contact with a few of them gave no nonverbal warning that my presence was unwelcome. But why allow an outsider to witness such intimate activities? First, there was the frank nudity of their children— now, this full body exposure of adults and teens. They had picked a secluded spot for what they were doing. Why gather in secret, unless they wanted to be by themselves for this?

What these naked people were actually doing soon became apparent, and it confused me even more. The leader, assisted by the couple with him, immediately began to baptize all the others, except for the middle-aged woman who had helped the older lady into the water. In spite of the open nudity, the ceremony seemed to follow the basic pattern of legitimate Christian baptism. Fortunately at this point, I was now somehow picking up everything they were saying, just as if I heard it in English. The leader questioned each one about their personal faith, using phrases from the Creed, and each responded with an affirmative confession. Then, the leader baptized them with the help of his male or female assistant, respective to the gender of the one being baptized. The leader used the words, "in the name of the Father . . . and of the Son . . . and of the Holy Spirit," pausing after each phrase to plunge the person into the water a total of three times. I had read about this three-fold-immersion form of the baptismal ritual, but didn't realize it was still practiced.

As each of them emerged from the water, still dripping wet, another part of the ceremony took place. On the bank they were met by the old man who had been the speaker. In his hand he had a clay flask from which he poured out a small amount of liquid on the head of each of them as they reached the dry sand. As he poured it out, he whispered some words that were too low for my hearing. Then the woman who had been carrying the white robes handed them one by one to another woman who put them on each person who had just been anointed. After the last one was dressed, the whole group began to sing again joyously. I understood everything and immediately recognized that the words of the song were from the Book of Revelation:

"Now we sing the song of Moses
the servant of God and the song of the Lamb,
Saying, 'Awesome and marvelous
Are your acts, Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways, O King of eternity.
Who will not tremble before you, O Lord,
Who will not bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy, holy, holy.
All nations will come and bow down to you,
for your righteous works have been revealed."

The singing was almost deafening! It seemed louder than even such a large number of people could make it. From every direction, even from under my feet, the sound reverberated. I was both thrilled and frightened. Shivering inside, I thought, "This must be how angels sound when they sing!"

The song was followed by everyone clapping or raising their hands toward the sky and

shouting various exclamations of praise, the most common one being "Alleluia!" The ten who had been baptized were receiving hugs and kisses from those who were standing around them. While all this was going on, the leader waded in a little closer to shore, but neither he nor the couple left the water. As the shouting died down, he gained the crowd's attention and said a prayer of blessing, thanking God for those who had been baptized.

As soon as the "amen" left his lips, several of the children gave screams of delight as they rushed toward the water. All the teens, most of the young adults, and several of the older ones, headed in the same direction. Again I was aghast as these adults and teens were removing their clothing before running and jumping into the river naked, just as the children were. As soon as robes or tunics were off, it was clear that no one wore underwear. All frolicked about in the water completely bare: children, teenagers, men, women. They were splashing each other, jumping off rocks into the water, making all the familiar sounds of squealing heard at a public swimming pool. But there were no swimsuits anywhere. They were skinny-dipping, and whether from the hilarity of it all, or from my nervous dismay at seeing it, I started to giggle. It was hard to keep the giggling from becoming laughter.

I gave up trying not to stare. This had to be one of the most astonishing things I'd ever seen in my life. But my eyes were taking in more than the naked swimmers. A few women had gathered along a rocky part of the riverbank, and here they also disrobed, not to go swimming, but to wash their outfits. The scene of them working with nothing on, however, was not what you'd imagine. It was so mundane . . . or, to describe it more accurately, so *nonsexual*.

While watching them wash their robes and tunics, I recalled back in my early teens reading a magazine article about women who cleaned their homes in the nude. Those interviewed gave various reasons for doing so, all related to comfort. When I asked my mom if the article was a joke, she said she actually knew a woman who did it. Then I remembered how my adolescent mind's-eye went off picturing what a sight it would be to see ladies doing housework naked. If back then I could have watched this very realistic scene in front of me, it would have cancelled out my imaginary one.

It was like clockwork. After plunging their garments into the water and thrashing them about vigorously, they pounded them against the surface of smooth rocks. After a second rinse, in groups of two, they helped each other wring them out by each holding one end and twisting in opposite directions. It was obvious that they were experts at this.

As I got used to the nudity, I began to realize that more than half the adults still had their clothes on. Although all the children and youth were swimming or playing near the shore, many of the adults sat in small groups, caught up in conversation. But I did see one man get up from a group of other men, walk over to a woman who was washing, and after an exchange of words, take off his robe and toss it to her. She then began washing what I assumed to be her husband's outfit, while he walked back to rejoin his clothed companions. They seemed to ignore his unclad state. I also noticed that a few of the teenage girls interrupted their swimming to join the women in the chore of washing. When finished, they immediately returned to their fun in the river.

The group's elderly did not join in the playful enjoyment of the water. But among them, too, some removed their clothing and waded out into the river just up to their knees. Then, in a squatting position, they began to bathe. Others as well were evidently in the river to take a bath rather than swim. With their laundry done, most of the women went farther into the river to bathe. No soap was used, and only a few had anything that looked like a washcloth. They rubbed themselves with their wet hands and rinsed, repeating the process again and again. Everyone

helped wash each others backs, as if it was an expected courtesy. When bathers finished, they would wade back to the shore to find a rock or fallen tree log to sit on. Others stood on the sand rubbing themselves all over with their hands. I thought this was a rather strange kind of self-massage, until I realized that no one had towels to dry off with. This alternative seemed to use the same principle behind blown-air hand-driers in public restrooms, only a slower process.

I stood watching this for maybe twenty minutes. Soon robes and tunics, still wet from washing, were everywhere spread out on large flat rocks, hanging from tree branches, or laid across small bushes. The sight of so many bare bodies was unbelievable. Yet, despite their lack of clothing, everyone's behavior was above reproach. Guys did not ogle girls, nor vice versa. Nothing of a questionable nature took place anywhere. And it was not the actual nakedness that bothered me. I had seen males and females of all ages without their attire for healthcare reasons. But never had I seen anything like this: so many people of both sexes totally exposing their bodies to everyone's view. The sight was overwhelming, but also very confusing. Yes, this meeting was by no means a public gathering. It seemed intentionally private and even appeared to have some kind of religious significance behind it. So why did these strange people have no social inhibitions about mixed-gender nudity? None of them seemed to care, and no one seemed to stare, except me!

Part 2 - Antiquity

"One of the great sorrows which came to human beings when Adam and Eve left the Garden was the loss of memory, memory of all that God's children were meant to be."

— Madeleine L'Engle, in *Walking on Water*

"Any field of life where Christians withdraw simply goes to hell." — Calvin Seerveld

In spite of the seemingly innocent atmosphere, I could not suppress what was building up inside of me. This scene didn't fit remotely into any imaginable idea I could ever have of Christian behavior. I had no clue who these folks were, but if they claimed to be Christians, their manner of openly divesting themselves of clothing seemed far from an acceptable platform for godly spiritual fellowship. Finally I decided *that was it*. I had seen enough. I had slowly been moving backwards almost to the edge of the thicket of brush that opened on the path that had brought me here. Now I was ready to leave. But even as I turned to step in that direction, I felt compelled to take in one more look at this strange panorama, the likes of which I would surely never see again. As I turned my head, I noticed that the aged man, who had preached to the crowd, was making his way toward me.

"Why do you run away, brother?" he called in perfect English. His voice was authoritative, just as it had been when I first heard him preaching. It stopped me from taking another step. When I fully wheeled myself about to face him, he was staring at me with eyes that were both smiling and penetrating. "And do you know your way back?"

"Excuse me, sir," I blurted awkwardly. "I'm not with your group. I'm here by mistake."

"No, no, my brother," he replied. "We all make many mistakes. This is not one of yours."

I was glad he was one who still had on his robe. He kept approaching until I clearly saw how old he looked. His skin was leathery and tremendously wrinkled. When he spoke again, I felt that antiquity was addressing me.

"Mistakes need only correction, if merely the fruit of ignorance. What is done against truth, with eyes wide open, requires both correction and forgiveness."

Now that I had turned back toward the scene at the river, I kept glancing at the crowd. He noticed this, and turning his head, he waved his hand at the widespread display of naked people in and all around the river.

"You think this is what sends you away?" he smiled, shaking his head. "No, my son, this is not why you want to leave. Your eyes know nakedness only too well. Yet today you are offended at just a little of what you have known night after night, year after year. I speak not of beholding the familiar body of your wife. It is your work in midwifery, where you have seen many thousands of unclad women."

I inspected this fellow's face more carefully. Did I recognize him? Had I seen him before? He evidently knew me, or knew about me. I had been a nurse for almost twenty-five years. For the last fifteen my work was in either labor and delivery or postpartum. I still worked those units, exclusively on the night shift. Perhaps he had seen me while visiting a patient. Indeed, in a nursing role where female nurses are usually expected, or sometimes more accepted, a male nurse does stand out. People will remember you and sometimes recognize and greet you outside the hospital, even though you may have no recollection of where you met them.

"Excuse me, but did meet in the hospital?"

His stare was even more penetrating as he answered, "You have met me more often. These brothers and sisters are some of the saints with whom you have spiritual fellowship, or so you claim to believe. Today that 'communion of saints' is manifested, and only for a representation, or 'play,' as you call it. But for us, it is more than drama. We are here on both a pleasant outing and a task of business. We came to correct your thoughts in a certain matter, to heal you of double-mindedness, and perhaps to convince you to help others who need this healing even more than you do."

In an instant that phrase in the Creed, "I believe in . . . the communion of saints," flashed through my mind as if I were saying it out loud. I thought again about the presence of such a large crowd of people in such a remote place, with no sign of any transportation to bring them here. And then there was that ancient garb they wore, or had been wearing when I found them. Who were these people, really? Or were they people at all? Could they be ghosts? Could I be losing my sanity? As my breathing became rapid and my legs weak, I thought about using any strength left in them to turn and hightail it out of there as fast as I could.

"I must be hallucinating this," I said to myself. I had spent a year working part-time on a psychiatric unit where I did watch people talk to their hallucinations. Was I talking to one now? Or was this all a bizarre dream? It seemed so physically real. I shut my eyes tightly for a few seconds and thought, "Wake up! I've got to wake up!" Nothing had changed when I reopened them.

"You are not dreaming," said the ancient man calmly. "We are all very real, even more real than the earth you stand on. It will pass away, as will the old heaven. But we will not pass away, and neither will you."

"You just read my thoughts!" I blurted out.

"I only overheard them," he replied. "But you cannot hear mine, not yet anyway. So I shall speak to you plainly. But first, let's be seated. Your face is so pale that if you don't sit down now, you may soon be falling down."

He was right, and I let him lead me by the hand to a weathered log in the shade. Feeling very light-headed and a little nauseated, I was glad to take a seat. It immediately made me feel better. The old man sat down on a rock facing me, and this time, with my back to them, I was not distracted by the sight of the naked people behind me.

"You do belong to us, and we belong to you," he told me, "otherwise, we would have no purpose here. The Body of Christ, His Bride, is not divided. It remains one, despite man-made separations, despite time itself. The Church is a unity throughout the ages, regardless of the changing customs and traditions of men."

He paused, glancing at the crowd in back of me.

"We sometimes met like this beside streams, at the seaside, near lakes . . . never in such numbers or with such boldness as here today, but certainly with as much freedom. More often we met in smaller groups in homes. But with the rapid multiplication of believers, fair weather drew us out to worship under the heavens, especially near flowing water, like this river, where we could also baptize. Baptism is a matter more serious and sacred than you think. We followed the pattern of John, as Jesus did, baptizing in the way of the Jews, who gave their new converts the ritual *mikveh* washing. In his preaching, John's baptism was a sign of repentance. After our Lord's resurrection, it took on even deeper meaning. But both John's practice and ours followed the Jewish custom of removing all clothing. To the Jews, it represented a return to the innocence of Adam and Eve, but to us it signified a purifying death. We removed the rags of our own

righteousness and symbolically stripped off the clinging habits of worldliness. It showed our need to be washed completely in Christ's blood and buried with Him in death. We rose from the water fully cleansed, raised in newness of life, as naked as newborns coming into a new world. The consecrating oil represented the anointing of the Holy Spirit, who set us apart to serve the Lord. The white robe was a symbol of being dressed forever afterwards in the righteousness of Christ alone. If you search diligently, you will find all of this in what is written. But many of your scribes never report their knowledge of how we baptized. They fail to tell the truth about our adoption and practice of the ancient *mikveh*. To their own shame they were ashamed of the beautiful symbols in the nakedness of baptism, forsaking the meaning of the word itself. Who is so foolish as to bathe themselves while keeping a garment wrapped about them? Baptism has forever been a full and true bath intended to cleanse the whole body. Only thus does it signify a complete washing away of sins. This symbol in baptism was not erased without squandering its edifying purpose for believers."

Sitting down not only helped me feel better physically but calmed me emotionally. Somehow, as the old man spoke, I became more relaxed. My anxieties about this whole strange affair were subsiding. I no longer tried to analyze whether this was some sort of intense dream, or a vivid vision, or what. Yet with this calmness and peace came a heightened alertness. I found myself listening carefully and intently to what he was saying. Somehow I knew I had to remember it. Even the issue of the mixed-gender skinny-dipping going on behind me was pushed to the back-burner of my mind.

"We often used these outings of worship and baptism," he continued, "for domestic duties as well, such as washing clothes or bathing. This is where you felt divided from us, where you felt offended. It is also where you are out of touch with your ancestors in the faith. You live in a time still under the spell of the Gnostic heresy that crept into the Gentile churches. The Gnostics were false teachers, despising the world of God's creation, calling it the defiled work of a demon. They boasted in their secret *knowledge*, their realms of *gnosis* that would save them from this material world. After infiltrating our flocks, they beguiled the weak into believing that Jesus Himself was only *spirit* and not *flesh*, that He made Himself seem to be like one of us by condescending to our human weakness. They taught that the Son of God was the Son of Man in appearance only. Such a damnable heresy! So, we fought those falsehoods, as you well know.

"However, some of your celibate sages, who sought to be 'wrestlers of the Spirit' in the desert, began to drink in this Gnostic poison. While they were quick to condemn Gnosticism in creed, they were blind to its influence in deed. They did not deny the fleshly nature of our Lord, nor did they deny the sanctity of our bodies. But, in an effort to control the carnal nature, they began to dishonor the fleshly body, whose goodness the Creator had pronounced and our Lord's Incarnation had affirmed. They supposed that a denial of our fleshly dust could liberate our spirits from carnal lust. But such neglect of the body, wrote the Apostle Paul, is of no value against a sinful indulgence of the flesh. Freedom from sin is the work of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. But this dust, this flesh . . ."

Here the old man stretched out his arm to me and pinched some of the dry, darkly tanned skin of his forearm.

". . . this is to be raised up, this is to be renewed, this is to be resurrected and glorified," he said, pounding his fist on his own chest and waving his other arm at those behind me. "This body, your body, and all these beautiful bodies, will be restored to life, just like the body of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! 'In this hope,' said Brother Paul, 'we have been saved.'"

He paused, almost as a preacher would pause before making the next point in a sermon, then added, "Many converts entering the church in the early days held to Greek ways and Greek ideas. Gnosticism appealed to the Greeks. The Gnostic philosophers believed and taught that the physical body was separate and foreign to the spiritual nature of man. To them, the human spirit alone was valuable. They saw the material realm and the physical body as worthless and evil. This concept led to two different practices. It made some Greeks bold to live in lust, thinking that nothing done with their bodies mattered to God or effected their spirits. Others treated the body and its needs with disdain, using harsh forms of neglect and denial, in order to deepen the division between the body and spirit. So, the very same Gnostic view of the body produced two ways of misusing it, two kinds of behavior that appeared to be opposite, but which had an identical root. This same thinking prevails in your world today—a view of the body that disgraces it through sexual lust and another that disgraces it through unnatural shame. They seem to be in opposition, but they are twins born from the same womb, and each thrives upon the other's existence."

I was trying to follow his reasoning and having a mental block. Suddenly, two terms flashed through my mind as clearly as if they had been spoken. One was "pornography" and the other was "prudery." It struck me as an odd pair of words to be together in the same thought. I noticed a very serious look in the old man's eyes. He had briefly paused, and his head was nodding as if to affirm either what he had just stated or what he must have read in my thoughts.

"From the beginning," he continued, "God told us what we are. *Man* is earthly soil, shaped by His own hand into His likeness, and made a living soul by the very breath of His Spirit. The image of our Creator is stamped into the dusty clay of our material being. In that same dust we will rise and live again. When our spirits, souls, and bodies are reunited in their true human oneness, we will display that image again and for all eternity in the full glory of Christ's redemption. This, and only this, is our true 'adoption as sons.' As He is now, a resurrected human with a real and eternal body, so shall we be on that day. The freedom and manifestation of the children of God can only be completed in resurrection."

This time, when he paused, I used the opportunity to interject a question, "These nude baptisms you did in the river and the ones you spoke of—honestly, I've never heard of such a thing. That way of baptizing people would be totally unacceptable today."

"Where people still bathe themselves under the open sky, I think you would still find the old way of baptism a welcome practice," he replied. Then, with a concerned look, he leaned forward slightly, making sure he had eye contact and my full attention. "What made our manner of baptism slowly diminish from the church? The early bishops sought their spiritual training in the desert. They brought back to the churches the 'wisdom' they learned at the feet of the monks. They spread an idea of spiritual life that disparaged the physical body in which spiritual life has its true meaning. The mere flesh in which we live became the source of a Christian's troubles and temptations. The beauty shining from bodies created by God was no longer to be celebrated, but feared and avoided. To them, even marriage lost its godly value. Many a monk left the city for the wilderness not just for prayer. They wished to distance themselves from the presence of women, whose bodies they feared as temptations. They forgot that in her flesh a woman bears the divine image of our Maker no less than a man. The bodies of both share the honor of being sacred temples for the Holy Spirit, as the Word of God teaches. If the monks had weighed their vain imaginings against the truth of God's Word, they might have avoided the sway of Gnostic thinking on their teachings about the body."

Although I had enjoyed reading from some of the desert fathers in a course on church history at Berkeley, I knew that some of their practices had no precedent in Scripture. The hermits and the monastic communities did have a high view of the spiritual life, but often their way of treating marriage and the body sometimes bordered on what I felt was psychologically unhealthy. Still, I liked reading them.

"Study this well," he said emphatically. "You will find that, as the influence of the monks increased, what you saw here today diminished from the churches. These ten beautiful baptisms should not have been strange to you but familiar. All your life, this is what your eyes might have known of baptism, if the churches had not sipped from a Gnostic cup, carelessly held to their lips by the monks. But, tell me, did your heart not feel a rich symbolism in the ceremony today?"

"I felt there was a kind of innocent beauty," I replied hesitantly. I hesitated because of also remembering how immodest I thought it seemed. How could I describe it to any of my peers in the pastorate? In fact, if I tried telling what I'd seen to any Christian friends, most would probably condemn it as disgusting and disgraceful to God. The old man must have overheard my thinking beyond my verbal answer.

"So, I need labor no further to convince you that most believers today unknowingly carry this Gnostic view of the body," he proceeded. "To them it is a holy trust, almost as sacred as the Gospel itself, for they defend it with the same vigor shown in defending the message of Christ. What was in our day seen as normal and commonplace, they now deem as shameful and lustful. How could they think otherwise, if this is what the church has always taught them? Yet, just as represented here in your presence, we always baptized our converts naked, just as naked as all of us were whenever taking a bath. No one took a full bath inside houses, as you do. Whenever the whole body needed cleansing, everyone bathed under open skies wherever water was available. From infancy to old age, boys and girls grew up seeing the appearance of the male and female body. This was wholesome knowledge, and very sobering, especially to the maturing minds of our young people. If a man was Jewish, all knew it, because a man's circumcision was often visible. No one thought it a shame for the sign of the Old Covenant, or for the retained foreskin of the Gentiles, to be seen at the common latrine, or at the river, or in the public baths of the Romans, or at the public contests, where athletes competed naked in the Grecian style."

"But today we live in a clothed society," I argued. "Clothing is the common standard."

"Do you think that ours was not a clothed society as well?" he questioned, raising his profusely wrinkled brow. "Since mankind was cast out of Eden, almost every tribe and nation have used clothing in various forms and for various purposes, but not always to hide the body. And for us, its common use did not make its removal an uncommon sight. When we came across a garment folded on a rock or hung on a bush, we were never surprised to find its owner nearby working in a field or bathing openly at a stream. Yes, we too grew up with clothing as an expectation. But mere nakedness itself was not usual. A scene like ours here was perhaps exceptional, even in our day, but not extraordinary. It could never have shocked us, as it did you. By learning to use clothing as a moral covering, you cover up the body out of shame, considering its natural state shameful without that covering."

I gave him a puzzled look, and he changed his approach.

"Let me ask you, brother," he said, pointing in the direction of the river. "Could you convince any of these believers here, young or old, that the naked body of a mother or a father, or of a sister or a brother, is a shameful thing to look upon? Could you persuade them to believe that they are defiled by beholding their friends and relatives in the very state in which the Lord of

heaven and earth had created them?"

"Well, certain parts of the body . . .," I began, but stopped abruptly. I was thinking specifically about the genital area and was going to say 'should always be covered up.' But that was the very part of a woman's body I normally uncovered at my job, without any moral qualms whatsoever. It would be hypocritical to finish my sentence.

"Search the Scriptures diligently," he went on. "Within those sacred pages, no part of the body brings shame to a person unless exposed by oppression or poverty or lasciviousness. Try as you make, you could never persuade the older believers here to see it otherwise. But, what if you did somehow succeed in convincing these children that their nakedness and the bare bodies of those around them are indeed indecent and obscene? It would bring corruption into their young minds where presently there is only purity."

He paused briefly, continuing to stare at me with penetrating eyes.

"Think this through carefully, brother," he continued, speaking more slowly, I think, so I would fully comprehend what he was saying. "If you kept certain parts of the body always hidden from their sight, calling them evil to look upon, then any normal curiosity or innocent desire they might have to see those hidden parts would itself become a temptation. Whenever those forbidden areas became visible, as they are here today, then even the act of seeing them would wound the conscience. Also, thereafter, wicked men could occasionally make those same hidden parts visible for truly corrupt purposes, even for enslaving their souls in wicked thoughts. Think of it, then. By taking that which God called *good*, and calling it *evil*, you have fashioned a stumbling block over which people can trip and fall into sin and bondage. Does this sound familiar to you, my brother? It should sound all too familiar, because this is what your religious leaders have done with their unnatural shame for the body. And other sinful scoundrels, those whose minds inhabit brothels, have used that shame to turn the body into an unnatural pathway for lustful pollution. Both of these corrupters of truth drink from the same stream. Both of them malign the work of their Maker by the heresy that flows from Gnosticism."

Prudery and *pornography* were again the two words that popped in and out of my thoughts.

"Yes, both are wretched—not only that cursed business of selling lascivious thoughts as merchandise, but its twin, from which it draws its power," proclaimed the old man, raising his voice and sounding like a fiery prophet. "The marketing of lewd images finds no home in the mind unless a foundation is built for it there by distorting goodness of the body through shame. How ungodly that young minds have learned by precept to think of the naked body only as an invitation to fornication and adultery. Such instruction, for which your religious leaders are famous, lays the cornerstone for this prostitution of God's image. When leaders and teachers, yes, even respected elders, forbid the common sight of the body in such simple activities as these you see here in front of you—when they call God's temple obscene or indecent to look upon—then at their feet lies the guilt for opening youthful hearts to this damning trade! Only when such unclean thinking is healed by true repentance will the unclean houses of such merchants of filth collapse!"

Part 3 - Education

"The tree of the knowledge of good and evil gave our first parents a taste for knowing things outside God, in a way in which they are not known truly, instead of knowing them in Him, in Whom alone we are able to find them and know them and love them as they are." — Thomas Merton, in *No Man Is an Island*

"Yet could it be possible, in the long run, to wear clothes without learning modesty, and through modesty lasciviousness?" — C. S. Lewis, in *Perelandra*

When the old man gave this explanation about the strength behind pornography, my heart shuddered. His powerful, in-your-face logic was convincing and convicting. Why hadn't Christian thinkers, including myself, considered this before? It had never crossed my mind that our shameful attitude toward the naked body might actually be empowering the stranglehold that pornography held on our culture. It was an extremely painful thought.

"Gnostic contempt for the physical flesh is blinding. It stains the mind!" he insisted. "You questioned why you never heard of the early church's nude baptisms. What you saw here today was to many of your scribes an incredible scandal that deserved to be passed over silently and unreported. And believers today, who read their books of Bible history, have no opportunity to learn how naturally we regarded the unclad state of the body. It is as though a veil covers their eyes. They cannot see how ordinary the sight of nakedness was, not just in our time, but through all the centuries wherein the whole of Scripture was written."

"The whole of Scripture?" I questioned. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean you see no naked gardeners, as Mary mistook our resurrected Lord for, when He left His grave wrappings behind in the tomb. You see no naked fishermen, as was Peter working on his boat when the Lord called to him from the shore. You cannot envision Jesus speaking about naked farmers when He said, 'let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes' on that coming Day of Desolation. You do not see a naked debtor working all day with his garment held in pledge, whose holder was told by God's Law to return it at sunset. Why? Because it was 'his only covering . . . his garment for his skin. What would he sleep in?' You see no household slaves serving without clothing, even as our Lord did when He, like a slave, knelt to wash our feet. You fail to see in the Song of Songs how the body of the Shulamite was so thoroughly tanned, because her angry brothers made her work in the sunshine of the vineyards. Why do you see none of this? Because you do not see what clothing meant to people of our time. We treated clothing with great care, since most of us owned only a simple robe or cloak. During manual work, we avoided soiling that one piece of apparel by taking it off. Dirty sweat and frequent washing quickly wore out even the best linen. Our skin outlasted our garments, and it always dried faster when we washed it. 'Easier to bathe your body than your cloak' was the old saying."

"I've never seen any of these things in the Bible," I broke in, still trying to maintain a respectful attitude, "and I've been studying God's Word for years."

"Yes, you have, and only very recently," he reminded me with a challenging look, "you read again, for what?—the fifteenth time or more!—how God commanded Isaiah to strip himself barefoot and naked for three years as he went about preaching God's message. Did this not startle you, brother? No, because you hurried past it quickly. It was too foreign and did not fit in your thinking. So, you never stopped to contemplate what it would mean for you as a preacher, if God gave you yourself such a command. If you had taken the time, you could have imagined the

public outcry such a scene would cause in your own day, an outcry that was absent in Isaiah's. Did you ever wonder why that was so, why his neighbors were not offended by his nakedness. Why should they have been? A naked prophet was not a strange sight to them, whether Isaiah, or Micah, or others. Even King Saul was taken to be among the prophets in the minds of those who saw him naked and prophesying for a whole night under the stars. Normally prophets were seen unclad only for practical reasons, such as working in a garden or washing at the river. But when preaching naked, Isaiah made himself into a living sign of his own task to unveil the truth. This Hebrew custom of preaching with such openness is not far from the idea of the Greeks with their fable of "The Naked Truth."

"The naked truth?" I asked, for though I knew the phrase, I never heard the fable.

"How Falsehood stole the clothes of Truth, while Truth was bathing in a river, and how Truth went about naked thereafter, instead of taking up the clothes Falsehood left behind. It is an ancient and worthy parable, one that your own world needs to hear again and to heed."

"But if what you're saying is true," I asked, "why hasn't this all come out before? The Bible is the most important book in my life. Yet, I haven't seen what you're describing. Of all the Bible teachers I've heard or read, not one of them has ever mentioned anything like this."

"This is the very heart of what I have been telling you!" he persisted. "You have seen all these things *without* seeing them, seeing only what your own customs insist that you must see. Your books written about the Scriptures, and the pulpits from which your people hear the Bible taught, are under the same influence. What you have seen here, how we baptized, how we bathed our bodies, how we did the simple task of washing our garments—these your scholars might easily have seen, but they did not. It is not that they lack intelligence. They just cannot bring themselves to think beyond what their own customs allow. I tell you, a Gnostic view of the body laid the foundation for those customs. Indeed it has spread like leaven completely throughout the whole lump of dough. Although so distant in time from the roots of this heresy, you still feed on its fruit today. No, it's true. You have not really seen. You cannot see, unless the veil is lifted from the eyes of your mind."

He turned his own eyes heavenward and closed them.

"O God, if even this brother's eyes are still shut, with all that he already knows, with all that he has already seen in his work of midwifery, what then of the others?"

I could see that he was frustrated, and I think, even a bit irritated. As he paused for a moment, I remained silent. His gaze briefly left me, returning to the crowd of his companions. He took a deep breath just before resuming his effort to lift from my mind the veil he mentioned.

"Brother, can you not see how David appeared on the day he danced before the Lord dressed only in a small ephod, the little vest worn over priestly robes? His wife Michal despised him for disrobing in the sight of his slave-girls, but he was expressing a heart filled with praise to God. Or do you not see how Lazarus became naked when the Lord told them to unbind him from his graveclothes and let him go free. Without those wrappings, his body's only covering was the joyous embrace of his two sisters, followed by the many hugs from relatives and friends who had been his mourners only moments before. He greeted and kept talking with them that way, until someone thought to bring him his robe. And can you not see how Peter prayed over the dead body of Dorcas, still lying naked after being ceremonially washed in preparation for her burial wrapping. When she came back to life, he immediately presented her to a houseful of grieving friends. Were they shocked by her nakedness? No, but by the sight of their dead loved one standing before them alive. Why should they be ashamed of her unclad body? They had seen it so

frequently at the seaside where she bathed—where they all bathed, where she and other Christian believers had been baptized? This was the way the Lord had made her, the way the Lord had made them—naked—the way we all enter this life, the way we all leave it!"

At this he rose to his feet with excitement. He had the same passionate look on his face as when I first heard him speaking to the crowd. An enthusiastic smile lit up his profusely wrinkled countenance.

"O my brother," he continued, staring down with sparkling eyes into my own, "when you read Scripture, how can you fail to see what we all saw the day the Lord rode into Jerusalem on a donkey? Crowds were throwing their garments down on the road before him. What a beautiful sight that was! And why so beautiful? Because the men and women were acting just like little children who think nothing of leaving their clothes behind when pursuing something more delightful. This was how the Lord said they were to receive His kingdom, like little children.

And will you not let your mind behold the sight we saw on the day the Holy Spirit fell? After Peter's sermon, three thousand men and women, young and old, received baptism in the name of the Lord. More than one hundred of us helped administer baptism in the flowing pools. All of us were as bare as those who kept coming to us, until all that great multitude had washed away their sins, calling on the name of the Lord. Yes, no doubt, the congregations of today's believers would have called those baptisms an abomination. Oh, but to us, the sight was so marvelous, so wonderful, so beautiful!"

He paused, lost for a moment in reflection. I myself was also lost in an imaginary vision of what it might have looked like in downtown Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost with a few thousand people getting baptized nude in public. There was no way my Bible college professors would have envisioned something like that ever happening.

"No, when reading through the Scriptures, they see none of these things," he repeated. "Not how we bathed, or slept, or prepared our dead for burial, or how we baptized converts. If we owned just one garment, then we washed it and our bodies together, allowing them both to dry in the sun. During hot, sweaty toil, we wore nothing. When sleeping with our cloak as a blanket, we wore nothing. If ever that cloak was lost or stolen, we went naked, as truly naked as a slave sold in the marketplace. That loss brought shame not because of our naked body, but because of our poverty. When our Lord said, 'I was naked and you clothed Me,' do you think He spoke in metaphor? He was speaking plain words about a truly naked person who needed a warm cloak. He told those owning two garments to give one to the brother or sister who had nothing at all. And have you forgotten His command to us if we had two garments and lost one of them in a lawsuit. We were to give our prosecutor our other piece of clothing as well, and to walk out of court as naked as a prophet. It would not be a sign of shame, but of trust in the justice and provision of the Lord. All these things are in the Scriptures, my brother, all of them, and more. But they are unnoticed by those charmed with a lascivious understanding of the body. You have sat long under that spell and are blind to our customs with simple nakedness. Our way of treating the body will remain invisible to you, as long as you refuse to open your eyes."

I made no response. What he said was painting new mental pictures of Scriptural scenes. And he was right. I had failed to see them in my Bible reading. My upbringing kept me from getting even close to imagining that people back then could have lived without normal modesty.

"Modesty?" replied the old man, repeating my thoughts. "You call it modesty to make the body a center for lustful attraction? In the beginning God fashioned these bodies with His very own hands. He intended the glory of His image to shine from them as an awesome sight, not

something to be shamefully hidden, especially from the eyes of the young as they grow up. Self-made coverings to hide in—that was the first fruits of Satan's deceit, and its constant use breeds deceitful practices. Fig leaves draw both the eye and the mind to what is concealed beneath them. When what they hide is never commonly displayed, garments, rather than preventing lust, become its invitation. Satan knew this. If the flesh could be kept always hidden through false shame, it could be wantonly uncovered for truly shameful ends."

"But God Himself gave Adam and Eve animal skins to cover up their nakedness," I argued.

"So it is taught," he replied. "But we must let the whole of Scripture tell why He gave them coats of leather. Innocent animals died that day in Eden instead of our first parents, whom God said would die 'on the day they ate' the forbidden fruit. Those animal skins atoned for them, covering their sins while reminding them of their guilt, which is all that atonement can do. That first sacrifice was God's double kindness. It spared them from immediate death, while providing them a better shield than fig leaves would offer against cold weather and thorny fields in a world made harsh by their sin."

I had read both these interpretations in various Bible commentaries, but I asked, "Why not a third reason? To cover their nakedness for the sake of modesty?"

"Do you think their sin changed God's mind about their nakedness?" countered the old man. "He had declared it 'very good' on the day He fashioned them in the image and likeness of His very own spiritual form. From whom would He be hiding their bodies, if that was His intention for those skins? Was it from the animals, which were all still naked themselves? Was it from each other, a naked husband and wife? If that was His plan, then it is sinful today for spouses to see each other so. Our public bathing, our practice of baptism, your work in midwifery, have all been transgressions of His law, if that was His teaching by those skins. But think on this, my brother. If He meant for their skin to be hidden as a moral requirement, as a righteous covering, then He could have left them with their fig-leaf garments. That had been the very purpose for which Adam and Eve had made them. They were trying to hide what they felt was no longer worthy to be seen, no longer to be viewed with rejoicing. Such guilty fear and shame came from eating fruit from the forbidden tree. It had the power to divide them from their Maker, from each other, and from the goodness God had created in their own bodies."

"Their sin brought about this alienation" I reminded him.

"Their sin of disobedience was in eating a fruit that God said would kill them," the man insisted. "And it did kill them! There was a kind of knowledge in that forbidden fruit that made them lethally independent from their Maker. Satan lured them to that knowledge, that *gnosis*. He knew it would destroy their union with God and turn them away from moral dependence on His Word. He knew it would bring an unholy separation between their minds and their bodies. It would make a false division between their spirits and their flesh, which God had purposefully created as a union between the spiritual and the physical worlds. Can you not recognize this as the false separation taught by the Gnostics? Above all else, their reaction to their own naked bodies after they had sinned, shows the ancient, demonic origin of Gnosticism. It began in Eden."

"But after the Fall, humans down through history have naturally been ashamed of their nakedness," I reasoned. "Doesn't that indicate that such shame was part of God's punishment?"

"If you truly think shame about nakedness is part of our nature, then you know neither human nature nor human history," he contended. "Humans from infancy upward feel no natural shame about their naked bodies. It must always be carefully taught. But even if well taught, it can

also be unlearned."

"Unlearned?"

"On a wedding night, for example, or at a river swimming with friends, or even as you have unlearned it through your work with naked women."

He paused and watched as I pondered that.

"True shame comes when you sin against the truth, but false shame comes when you trespass against a lie that you still believe to be true."

He paused again, then returned to his argument.

"No, my brother. To say that our Creator caused this division, this false shame—to say He made our human spirits alien to the dust into which He incarnated them, turns God into the champion of the Gnostics. It makes a mockery of His glorious promise to resurrect these physical bodies. No, my son, you must not believe or teach or act as though God made clothing from skins to do what Adam and Eve were trying to do—using fig leaves to hide their wonderful bodies. Satan told them of this need to hide nakedness. Satan, the liar, always tries to cover up the truth. But God, Who is light, always unveils the truth. His divine Word strips us even more nakedly than the removal of clothing. God did not clothe Adam and Eve to hide their bodies from sight. He clothed them in sacrifice to protect their souls from the justice of His holy wrath, and He clothed them in skins to protect their own skin from the earthly consequences of that wrath."

"But where does modesty come in? It's also a Scriptural principle."

"First, you must know it's true meaning," he said. "It has nothing to do with the sufficiency of fig leaves. Your world causes modesty to lift clothing from its use in meeting practical needs to make it into a means of establishing righteousness. With clothes you feel yourself modest. Without them you feel immodest. But these are not the concerns found in the words of either Paul or Peter. Both apostles spoke against the use of clothing to attract attention, and both concluded by instructing us to dress ourselves in godly virtues. The modesty they call for is a godly humility. That is why it is said, 'Modesty is in the mind.' I say it is in the heart."

Here he pointed at the crowd behind me, and I turned around, looking again at the many naked people still playing in the water or laying on the sand in the sun.

"Look at them. Have you seen here any men or women today trying to attract attention to themselves?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

"And in your midwifery? Among the women you see naked, women who do not have any clothing to sustain this kind of modesty you are talking about—do you notice among them any true immodesty, as it is spoken of in God's Word?"

"I don't quite understand what you mean."

"I mean your women in childbirth, whose wombs are open to you, whose breasts are fully exposed, do they try to attract your attention to themselves in the way they talk, or smile, or stare with their eyes, or arrange the posture of their bodies?"

"No," I had to admit.

"Then both here and there, the nakedness has been as modest and as virtuous as it could ever be, despite the removal of man's fig-leaf coverings."

This really nailed me. I knew that I had held a double-standard. On one hand, when watching a topless mom nurse her baby, I saw nothing wrong in it. But if I saw her breastfeeding that way at a restaurant or in a public mall, I would think it immodest. Recently, however, a lactation instructor pointed out to me how the *breast visibility* taboo in our culture was a big

factor in America's breastfeeding failure-rate, in comparison to countries where the sight of women's bare breasts is socially accepted. In spite of my double-standard, my gut-level feeling was that people in our society did need to see more open breastfeeding. Men in our culture needed weaning from a childish and unhealthy sexual interest in the breast. Only by open breastfeeding could both men and women be shown what God made breasts for in the first place.

"Exactly!" agreed the old man, smiling at my thoughts. "Earlier you saw a young nursing mother exposing herself in a manner you have only before seen in private. But you yourself have never been any less a male in private than all the men around her were in public. All of you find women attractive. Rhoda, the young mother you were watching, is a very lovely lady. Yet neither you, nor any of those men, were looking at her lustfully. She herself was as modest as an angel. There was nothing she did with her eyes or face or limbs that even hinted at trying to draw attention to herself."

Strangely, the image of this woman Rhoda came back into my thoughts. In my mind's eye, I saw her sitting on the sand near the river facing my direction. Again, she was nursing her baby, but now she was wearing nothing at all. Suddenly she looked up at me and smiled, then the image in my mind disappeared. I looked in the direction of the river, and there she was, as naked as I had seen her in my mind. She looked up and smiled. I gasped and turned back to the old man.

He chuckled a little at my surprise, then resumed in a serious tone of voice, "In a world where such scenes as you see here are forbidden, clothing can be easily used to call attention to the body in lustful ways. Yours is just such a world, and it overflows with that kind of lust. In your midwifery, your eyes have already been opened to see the sickness in your own country, a land where women's breasts have become a lustful obsession. What God originally designed to reflect His own nurturing nature, perfectly imaged in breastfeeding of women, has been smothered by an unnatural use of breasts to lure the eyes of men. Your women even wear tight belts that lift up their bosoms for that very purpose, to draw men's attention. Is such an invention not a clear example of true immodesty, according to Paul and Peter? Yet your women have grown so accustomed to these immodest breast-belts that they feel undressed when not wearing them. They even feel ashamed if they do not wear them under their clothing as they enter the house of God to worship. And if ever they failed to do so, even your elders would shame them into putting them back on. Tell me, brother, is that not absolute confusion about the true meaning of modesty?"

He looked at me with those penetrating eyes, and I knew it was time for me to make some kind of response to all that he had been saying.

"I guess you're right about the Bible's definition," I replied. "My own idea about modesty is probably more cultural than biblical. And I've never thought through the implications of outdoor bathing on a society's view of the body. I've never considered that people back in Bible times might have had only one piece of clothing, and what that meant practically. But, I still have trouble with some things you've mentioned. I think I can imagine Jesus leaving the tomb naked, but not the idea of Mary meeting Him that way. It just seems wrong somehow."

"She had already seen Him stripped and nailed on the Cross naked," said the old man.

"I've never envisioned Him that way," I replied. "All the paintings show Him . . . you know, with a loin cloth . . . something covering His genitals."

"The Romans cared little that His loins were showing," he answered. "In fact, Pilate used the crowd's view of them as a mockery to the Jewish leaders. Circumcision was the sign the Jews proudly bore, claiming that it set them above the Gentiles. When, against his will, they coerced

him to crucify Jesus, a frustrated and vengeful Pilate took advantage of our Lord's fully visible circumcision to slap the face of Jewish pride. The words he placed above Christ's naked body made the ridicule inescapable: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.' Few artists have ignored the wrath of religious opinion to paint or sculpt the truth about the Crucifixion."

When I thought about it, I did remember seeing a sculpted crucifix displaying a totally nude Savior, one done by Michelangelo. At the time, I thought it a terrible thing to be shown in the art encyclopedia I was looking through.

"I guess you're right," I admitted. "We do have a hard time seeing things in any other way than our culture tells us how we must see them."

Part 4 - Decision

"Man's intelligence, however we may misuse it, is far too keen and too sure to rest for long in error. It may embrace a lie and cling to it stubbornly, believing it to be true: but it cannot find true rest in falsehood.

The mind that is in love with error wears itself out with anxiety, lest its error be discovered for what it is. But the man who loves truth can already find rest in the acknowledgment of his mistakes, for that is the beginning of truth." — Thomas Merton, in *No Man is an Island*

My mind reeled with all this ancient preacher had been throwing at me almost non-stop. His words and reasoning clearly challenged what I'd grown up to consider as the "gospel truth" about nakedness. It made me realize just how thoroughly I was "a child of my culture." Yet my choice years ago to become a male nurse had been a giant step in a direction against the cultural current. Especially at that time, the issue of opposite-sex body exposure seemed to be the worrisome point with certain family members. When I finally cross-trained into labor and delivery, the concerns raised about that decision made my direction even more counter-cultural.

"Memory is good, brother," the old man said to me. "Remembering a point of departure helps you locate where you are in your journey, and perhaps where the journey was really meant to take you in the first place. Those familiar voices that doubted the virtue of your decision still linger, don't they? Yet you know that the Lord guided your steps. Yes, you know this especially in your present work of helping women deliver and nurse their children."

I did. I was not only absolutely certain that the Lord had led me into nursing, but I also had multiple indications of His hand of blessing in this awesome realm of seeing babies born into the world. Of course, most people had no problem with the idea of bona fide healthcare workers seeing the nakedness of the opposite sex, even though it is normally a social taboo. Whenever the inconsistency of such a double-standard became logically apparent, so did the stigma of my intimate work with women's bodies. Even recently a pastor's wife made a comment to me about it, and after so many years of experience, I still lacked a good answer to the question, "David, how can you work with naked women without a problem?" I could only reply, "It's not like you think, not for me, and not for the women I help."

"They suppose a problem," the old man went on, with his uncanny ability to read my thoughts, "because their false view of the body fans the flame of their imagination, a flame fueled by Gnosticism. It still burns in you, even after all you've seen and known in your care of women. At every step of teaching you, I've had to fight against its hold on your thinking. Brother, that heresy has no place in a Christian's mind. It defames the work of our Creator and makes His temple a pathway for defilement. The defilement is real, for it resides in the carnal mind. But it is not resident in God's fleshly handiwork, which is to be received with dignity and thanksgiving."

"Doesn't clothing maintain that dignity?" I reasoned. "Wearing clothes seems to prevent that mental misuse of the body. I know I'm accustomed to nudity, but most men would be mentally tempted by seeing all these naked women bathing here today. Even the Bible has the example of King David lusting after Bathsheba, because she was bathing outside in public view."

"You blame his lust on a woman's bath?" asked the old man facetiously. "He lusted because he saw Uriah's wife naked?"

"The Bible teaches it," I replied.

"You need to re-read the passage," he contended. "What teaches it are sermons that

expound the minds of preachers instead of the Scriptures. Far from condemning Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan used her as the innocent lamb in his parable to convict the king's heart! If she was wrong for bathing in her courtyard, so were all the rest of the women in Jerusalem. In those days as in ours, everyone bathed outside, from the poorest beggar to the daughter of Pharaoh. To David, naked women were a common sight. What caused him to lust after and take his neighbor's wife was not the sight of her beauty, but his own selfishness. Do you think God gives the commandment not to covet, then makes it impossible to obey by creating an irresistible temptation? You, better than many others should know that by the beauty He has created, 'God tempts no one.'

As he slowly stated those last four words, I somehow knew he meant for me to recognize them as a quote from the Bible. My mind completed the verse automatically: "but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."

"Brother James said it well," affirmed the old man. "But our Lord explained it better by saying that lust comes not by what enters from outside the body but by what arises from within the heart. If Bathsheba sinned at all, it was not by her public bath, but by her failure to scream out and resist the violation of her marriage by a selfish and lustful king."

Then his eyes looked beyond me to the riverside. He stepped over and, with an amazingly strong grip, literally pulled me up to my feet. With his hand on my shoulder, he turned me to face the crowd of his companions. Immediately my eyes met those of the girl whose shapely body had caught my attention during the baptisms. Now that I could fully see her face, she looked even more like a beauty queen. She was still wearing her white robe received after the baptism and was walking in our direction. I was dismayed that she kept approaching us. Then I noticed that it was the old man motioning for her to come.

"The Lord's beautiful creations," he said, pointing at her, "are a cause for thanksgiving, not for lust. With or without clothing, the sight of the body's beauty should bring sincere delight, never sinful desire. God's lovely handiwork and our ability to enjoy it are both gifts from Him. As an Artist, He not only enjoys displaying His artwork, but delights to hear it praised."

"The Lord be with you, Prisca," he greeted her as she reached us.

"The Lord bless you, father," she answered in return, kissing him on one cheek then the other.

He introduced me, "Prisca, this is a shepherd of the Church and a midwife by trade."

"A midwife!" she exclaimed with a giggle. The old man gave her a firm look, and she turned back to me with a more subdued smile.

"A midwife, then, and the Lord's servant. Welcome to you!" she said politely. "I have never met a brother who helps mothers in the pains of childbirth. If I had carried children, I would have felt it an honor to have God's shepherd for midwife."

Then, before I knew what she was doing, she made a sudden lunge and had planted a kiss on both my cheeks, as she had done with the old man.

"Prisca, find Jason for me," the old man requested. "Tell him not to concern himself with the Table. There is no longer time. But the children may sport in the water a bit longer."

"Oh, father," she moaned with disappointment. "Not to have the Table of Thanksgiving?"

"Go, Prisca," he insisted. "You know the business of our visit."

He stared into her eyes, and though their lips were not moving, I felt I heard an unintelligible whispering between them. Then she wheeled about and left.

"Prisca's faith is precious and deep. She is a lover of her Lord, and followed Him in the

footsteps of His suffering," he pondered, as his eyes followed her graceful form on her way back to the others.

"She's really attractive, " I half-whispered, "It makes me glad she has something on now."

"A while ago you saw the full beauty of her body," he said bluntly, "yet you had no lust for her. Is there another reason in your mind for clothing that goes beyond a false sense of modesty. Do you think it has a good purpose in maintaining interest in the opposite sex?"

"Maybe, in a way," I admitted, a little embarrassed by the apparent contradiction in what he must have been reading in my thinking. I tried to explain it, "You see, without the normal use of clothing, the ordinariness of nakedness, even in a marriage, might dull a person's attraction to the opposite sex, and . . . well, I can't see how that could be God's intention either."

"Odd reasoning for a man like yourself," the old man contested. "But be honest. You have seen the unclad bodies of thousands of young women, some as lovely as this dear sister. Have you ever failed to appreciate their naked beauty, even after seeing so many? Has the repletion of such sights dulled you to the loveliness God put within the feminine form?"

I hardly knew how to answer. I was not used to discussing that aspect of my experience with anyone. In a way, it was embarrassing to talk about. Yes, I had assisted thousands of beautiful women fully exposed from their waists down for labor and from their waists up for skin-to-skin breastfeeding. Occasionally I helped them into and out of the shower. Less often, I worked with those who, for comfort reasons, chose not to wear any clothing at all during labor and birth. It was a constant source of personal relief and gratitude that my response to these familiar sights was always calm and without lustful thoughts or sexual stimulation whatsoever. Yet one thing was consistent: this ongoing experience never caused the slightest diminishing of a healthy enjoyment of what I was seeing. I've often thought that only when God made Eve did He really finish with creation. He saved for His last act the fashioning of His most spectacular piece of artwork. And personally, the sight of naked pregnant women, with their expanding curves and their enlarged bellies and breasts, appealed to me more now than when I first started seeing them so routinely as a labor and delivery nurse.

"What a shameful disgrace to think and talk of them otherwise," the old man broke into my thoughts again. "As I said, their beauty and our attraction to them are a divine blessing from a marvelous Creator. Of course, many women will say they admire the naked bodies of men in just the same way. I think they say it to be polite. But who knows? In the resurrection, their words may become more believable."

"So I guess you know what I've been thinking about. You knew that I could answer your question by reviewing my own experiences."

He stared silently at me with a faint smile, then he turned his eyes again to the river and to the naked bathers.

"You have no idea how strategically the Lord has placed you, brother. You actually know the truth even better than I could ever explain it. But I will add my own honesty . . . I have watched more scenes like the one before us than you have seen babies born, yet I still enjoy the sight of those women bathing over there. Do we ever get tired of starry nights, of blazing sunsets, of delicately fashioned flowers, of fluffy white clouds in a clear blue sky? Even if we did tire of those delights, the sight of naked humanity—the pinnacle of God's creation, the image of His Godhead, and the temple of His presence—will always attract the eyes of other humans, unless they have become blindly corrupted by evil. And even then, there is hope for healing."

Feeling now secure in trusting this ancient fellow, I didn't resist when he took my arm and

started leading me closer to the river. When near the middle of the large sandy beach, he made a sweeping gesture with both his arms.

"Just look at these lovely families," he continued. "When your missionaries met this same Eden-like beauty among certain tribes and clans, they ordered it to be hidden under clothing. Their commandment was not for protection or decoration, and certainly not for comfort. No, they preached it as a form of godliness, according to their 'knowledge of good and evil.' Such knowledge was the same promised to Eve by Satan. It was the same offered by the Gnostics to their disciples, promising that their eyes would 'be opened.' In the pride of this knowledge, your missionaries opened the eyes of those simple people to a law that closed their eyes to the goodness of their own bodies, just as it did with our first parents. It brought those tribes into a new kind of lust, the same lust that ravaged the lands from which the missionaries were sent. Our Lord stripped Himself of heavenly glory to become flesh and dwell among us. This wickedness could have been avoided, if they had followed His example by stripping themselves of clothing to become like the naked people they were sent to serve. Jesus had a bitter word for Pharisees and teachers who taught as laws of God the commandments of men: 'Woe to you who journey over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a child of hell as you are.'"

"That saying cannot be applied to them!" I retorted with some emotion. "Many of them laid down their lives to reach those lands with the Gospel. They were just trying to obey God's command 'to clothe the naked.'"

I felt compelled to say this in their defense, even though I knew how modern mission policies had changed. Missiologists had learned from the mistakes described by the old man. In many cases, along with the message of the Gospel, early missionaries brought into those cultures some of the same social bondage that plagued the West. Today's missionaries are trained to avoid importing into native cultures the customs of Western civilization, even the West's scrupulous enforcement of clothing.

"Legalism is hellish fruit," he replied. "It can make children of heaven look like those of hell. Yet, when these brothers and sisters finally recognized the devastating fruits of their legalism, those very words of 'woe' in our Lord's warning brought them tears that He Himself had to wipe from their eyes. They had not been trying 'to clothe the naked' poor, which was the goal of His command. Those tribes lacked neither warmth for their bodies nor fig leaves to hide them. The question God asked Adam and Eve is the same one their neighbors might have asked the first ones who took garments from the missionaries: 'Who told you that you were naked?'"

I made mental notes of all these points, hoping to remember them. I was especially excited about going back over the first three chapters of Genesis again very carefully. In fact, I wanted to start re-reading the whole Bible in a new way—envisioning ancient life realistically, instead of superimposing my own cultural assumptions, based on private bathrooms, inexpensive clothing, and the body shame I had grown up with.

The old man remained silent for a few moments. His eyes were surveying all the activity in the river and along its bank. Then he looked at me again.

"We came here today with a purpose, my son. It's to find if you are ready to be healed."

"Healed?"

"Healed of the wall that has divided your mind for so long," he explained. "On one side is a 'knowledge,' a *gnosis* taught to you all your life. It has told you that the naked body is an object of indecency and lust. Ever since you arrived here, that part of your mind has tried to reject the

truth displayed before your eyes. You were raised to reject it. You were brought up with an obscene view of the body, and your people have been passing it along to their children with a zeal that rivals their devotion to God Himself. That falsehood is the womb from which even more defiling imaginations about the body are conceived and born. However, on the other side of that wall, your mind saw these naked families in the same way you have seen nakedness in your midwifery and care of the sick. Your dismay, at first seeing us disrobe to baptize, came from the sordid side of your thinking. But then, the side informed by your long years of working with nakedness began to wish this scene to be just as it seemed, a time of innocent fellowship. Only one perception can be true, and you already know which one it is."

"The side of my mind which sees nothing wrong with my work," I confessed very slowly. As those words unloosened and were released from deep inside me, I felt a sudden dissipation of inner emotional tension. "If I, and other nurses like me, see nudity in the hospital without a problem, then our experience explains why these people here have no problem with it."

He gazed into my eyes with a sober intensity, as he instructed me, "Never forget this. The part of your thinking that hoped for this to be a wholesome gathering was true. This alone is the answer you have long sought as a way to explain your work to others. This is why seeing and working with nakedness has not caused you to lust. The answer is identical to our representation here today, where believers were baptized and families bathed together without the problems spawned and nurtured through a false view of the body. These, beautiful but ordinary bodies of your brothers and sisters in Christ, are just what they are, and nothing more. Only deceitful imaginations paint them otherwise, and such imaginations are demonic and hellish.

"The 'naked truth' of the Greek fable is a powerful liberator from falsehood, is it not? You remember how it began to set you free the very first time you bathed a woman in her sickbed. It continued to liberate you with every new occasion of seeing and working with women's bodies. Even if we had not come today—even if you could forget all I have told you from Scripture—your very own experience was sufficient instruction in the truth. It had the power to bring down that wall in your mind long ago, if you had allowed it to."

He gave me a few moments to consider this statement.

Finally he challenged, "How long did you really think you could waver between two opinions? Were you waiting for God to answer with fire from heaven, as He did with Elijah? He already spoke through your midwifery work. Now He has let you see a representation of your heritage in the ancient church. Our drama today is our own joy, whether you respond to it or not. But it will be our greater joy, if it enables your final cleansing from double-mindedness. It is up to you whether that wall in your mind stays there or topples."

I felt I was on the brink of cataclysmic change. Early on in my listening to this ancient preacher, there was something uncomfortable churning in the background of my mind. I was realizing, with every point he made, that such thinking was a dynamic departure from the norms of society. But I also knew that those norms were not always that healthy. Our culture's sexualized view of the body is pervasive and self-perpetuating. It was true that everyone from pornographers to church leaders spoke the same language about nakedness. The latter try to prevent its display as a sexual sin, while the former sell the sight of it for sexual lust. Both of them, and almost everyone in between, see it just as the old fellow described: *indecent*, *obscene*, *lustful*. I knew this was false, at least, I knew it on one side of the wall in my mind. If the wall collapsed, and that side took over, I would be left standing against thousands of voices that might misunderstand, contradict, perhaps even harass and persecute me. My sole consolation would be

that of standing on the side of the truth, 'the naked truth.'

"What matters in the end . . ." the old preacher broke into my thoughts, "the very end, when we face our true Judge, is whether or not our stand was one that stood with God. You already know His original opinion about our bodies. He has never changed it. You know that He makes our body His sanctuary, whether dressed or undressed. You know that we are not to conform to the world's pattern of thinking, as we present our bodies to the Lord. The world, its views, and its lusts will pass away, but God's view about everything will endure forever. We came today, my brother, only because the world's prevailing misrepresentation of the human body is an abomination to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

When he paused, I could visualize the wall in my mind. It seemed almost tangible.

"So, if I now fully adopt God's view, will the wall in my mind go down?" I asked.

"No, because you already have His view," he answered. "You have had it for years. You have lived with it for years."

"Then what?" I queried. "Is there more I need to know?"

"You will always need to know more," he grinned. "But for your double-mindedness to heal, you must give that wall a strong, steadfast push from the side you are now standing on."

"How?"

"Simply by doing what you came here to do," he smiled broadly. "But do it by joining us in the same way people have been swimming and bathing for most of this old world's history."

Skinny-dip with this group? That was my mental thought, and he overheard it.

"Not unless you can do so before the Lord in good faith. If you did so while still believing that your nakedness was obscene and sinful, your conscience would be wounded. The wound would be real because the faith would be real, even though misguided and weak. But I must tell you the truth. If you feel morally unable to bare your body to bathe beside us, then the dividing wall in your mind will stay where it is, despite your clear conscience while working in the midst of naked women."

I was sure I had already made my decision mentally. Now I was being asked to prove it by demonstrating it practically. I recalled the baptisms I'd watched earlier. There was a similarity between them and what I had to do now. If I really believed my experiences in the hospital, if I really saw the truth of the goodness of the human body, if I really knew that a shameful view of the body was not God's will, then I would have to enter the river naked to demonstrate it. It was not good enough merely to believe it in my mind, or even to verbally confess it with my mouth. If I was truly convinced, then like being baptized, I had to enter the waters of public testimony to proclaim my belief. I looked around again one last time at the many naked people, whether ghosts or hallucinations, or actors and actresses, it didn't matter to me anymore. The old man seemed authentic, and I wanted to believe that what he said about them was true, too, that these really were my Christian brothers and sisters. It would make it easier.

"If it helps," he said, then slowly pulled his robe off over his head. Before me now stood his slender, bony, naked frame. "I was thinking about needing a bath today anyway."

Without another thought, I just did it. Off came my shoes and socks, then shirt and jeans. I had on my swimsuit under them. After a pause of about five seconds, off came the swimming trunks as well. I had to catch up with the old man who was already at the water's edge. As I followed him, I kept glancing from side to side to see if anyone was staring at me. Everyone was still busy doing what they had been doing. Apparently I was not the center of attraction. But someone did notice me. A little boy ran up and addressed me in the language that I had been

unable to understand. He was holding up a crawfish he had caught. I thought he wanted me to take it, but I politely declined with hand motions. He ran back to the water with it.

"He was asking you if it was good to eat," the old man smiled.

I laughed, and I realized how nervous my laughter was. I was not yet at ease, even though I knew no one was staring at me. I took a deep breath, let it out with a sigh, and then really began laughing. Although still self-conscious about how I looked to those around me, I became immediately aware of the warmth of the sunshine on those areas of skin where, to my memory, the sun had never before shone. It was also a strange sensation to have the occasional rise and fall of a soft breeze on places the wind had never touched. After reaching the water and wading out, my friend squatted to bathe, as several other older people had done. I knew I would feel more comfortable if I became invisible, so, wading out as quickly as possible, I dived into the river. Again, it gave me an unfamiliar sense of freedom to glide through the water without swimming trunks. Was this, I wondered, what people in "naked cultures" got to enjoy every time they went swimming?

There were several reasons this was such a nice swimming location. One feature was the broad sandy beach running for quite a distance on the side where we entered the water. Another was how wide and slow-moving the river became in this vicinity. A third attraction was the many large rocks and deep spots in the water on the opposite bank.

Looking in that direction, I saw that a group of teens and young adults had discovered that area and were jumping or diving from the rocks with glee. That was also my favorite activity here, so I swam over to join in. Again, I understood nothing as these smiling young people spoke to me. Assuming their words were a greeting, I just smiled back as I lingered a moment, intentionally keeping my lower half under the water. I was still embarrassed about having them see my body the same way I was seeing theirs. I was also still a little skeptical. I carefully watched the eyes of both guys and girls in the group, to see if they were taking advantage of this open nudity to check out each others external anatomy. As far as I could tell, they weren't. They appeared to be acting normally and merely having fun together. It just seemed strange to me that none of them were as shy as I was about being without swimsuits. But the absence of "tan lines" on any of them was the obvious explanation. As the old man had told me, these young people had grown up always swimming this way. The only swimsuit they had ever seen was probably the one I had just left on the beach. If that was true, it would mean that these teens had watched each others bodies change during all their years of growing up, removing all the curiosity about the opposite sex that used to plague me during my own youth. That thought dissipated my lingering shyness and gave me the courage to climb up out of the water. When I did, they paid no more attention to my fully exposed body than they paid to each others.

Even if they weren't staring, I still felt somewhat self-conscious. But it was extremely helpful, and sobering, to reflect on the fact that I was now in a situation similar to that of the women whose bodies were exposed during my nursing care. Fortunately, if my patients had any shyness at all, it usually disappeared within moments. This is what happened with me. In fact, after making several "cannonball" jumps into the water, I had the strange feeling that somehow I was still really dressed. It made me think about how the expression "wearing only your birthday suit" actually described a real sense of having something on. I was, in fact, wearing a very substantial, very familiar, and very long-lasting outfit: my bare skin. And the lack of interest paid to it by those around me, made it a very pleasant fit. To tell the truth, I was starting to feel tremendously more comfortable dressed only "in my skin."

I must confess something else. I felt a certain exuberance looking at all these youthful bodies. Seeing their slender anatomy in motion was fascinating. With their external musculature totally visible, I could see why artists down through the ages have been intrigued with the challenge of capturing the nude form in sculptures and paintings. The idea suddenly popped into my head that I ought to do something about my long fascination with art. Within a year after this event, I did start taking art courses to learn how to draw. I even took a figure drawing class where some of the nude models reminded me of what I saw this day.

The sight of these naked young people also reminded me of my own adolescence. The thought that my body had once been youthful like theirs stirred up a wistful, nostalgic longing. The older I get, the more sincerely I hope that God's future resurrection will restore us to a state like that of those young men and women. In fact, while looking at them, I was wondering about how we would be raised on Resurrection Day—dressed, or as naked as these youths in front of me? The old man described Christ exiting the tomb with His grave wrappings left behind. Not long after this, I saw the movie called *The Passion*, which was filmed in such a way as to depict Jesus leaving the tomb wearing nothing. If our Lord was really raised that way, as the Scriptures seem to indicate, maybe we would be raised that way, too.

Part 5 - Calling

"The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh Biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform."
— John Stott, in a *Christianity Today* interview

After jumping several times into the water, I decided to swim back again to find the old man. He was no longer in the river. When I reached the other side, I saw him spreading his robe on the sand and stretching out in the sun. My first thought, on leaving the water, was to find my pile of things and put on my pants, but instead I took my towel, spread it out, and laid down next to my elderly friend. My mind was racing with questions to ask him, but my formulation of them was effectively cancelled by an overwhelming distraction. It was my exuberant enjoyment of being totally naked and yet totally unashamed in the presence of all these other naked people. As usual, the old fellow picked up on my dilemma.

"The reason you have so many questions," he said, "is that this one aspect of being a creature of God, your physical embodiment, touches so many other aspects of what it means to be human. But your mind is also caught up in the joy of experiencing your body in the way God meant for you to know it, not with shame but with rejoicing."

That was true. I was feeling good about having no shame in my nakedness. I felt I could worship God that way, pray that way, sing praises to Him that way, and feel completely good about it.

"In a large measure," he explained, "the modern church, by an emphasis only on our spiritual nature, has ignored the uniqueness of our humanity. It is essential for obedience to God's purposes that the fleshly body participates in spirituality to the same degree that our human spirit does. God never intended that they be separated, either mentally, as in Gnosticism, or literally, as in death. He intended just the opposite, that body and spirit be so intimately wed together that human life is not recognizable without them both. We cannot wait for Resurrection Day to demonstrate a humanity that is whole and spiritually functional. God's presence in us sanctifies our bodies in exactly the same way it sanctifies our spirits. This acceptance of the body is crucial. Indeed, only by fully accepting our bodies do we even approach spiritual wholeness. Ignoring them, or worse, this Gnostic slandering of our fleshly nature, not only maligns our Creator but discards His original purpose for making us in His image as body-spirit beings. Elaborate efforts and disciplined energies expended to groom our human spirits will not compensate for such a departure from God's will. This is why such a simple act—taking off your clothes to bathe with us—has given this overwhelming joy to your human spirit. It is the same joy a husband feels when his wife is publicly honored, for in reality, the two have become one flesh. Acknowledging your true nature, your naked humanity, is a healing experience that your soul longed for, even if you never knew it. Your earthly, spiritual walk is crippled unless your soul stands in its full humanity, living out divine spirituality in your body as fully as in your spirit."

The joy he described was indeed real. It seemed to come from somewhere within me, as if from an ancient region buried deeply within my soul. At the same time, there was in my thoughts an unfriendly, intimidating shadow casting itself across that joy. It was like a haunting memory, creeping out from that old familiar place on the other side of my mind, the place that had been a stronghold for my double-mindedness. Like a ghostly presence, it gave me a chill."

"Evil spirits, once cast out, try to come back," he warned, clearly describing what I was sensing. "They seek their old home, and that is why you must see this new experience of your body as a spiritual reality, not just an exchange of a false *gnosis* for a new form of knowledge. If God does not fully indwell your discovery, then a *pride of knowledge* can easily usurp and control it. But shadows of darkness would be no threat, if your healing was complete, which it's not. There's another question you have. Your further healing lies within that area of your heart where an answer is needed. It's a pride of knowledge itself that makes the question difficult to form and ask. Try starting back where you began."

When he made this suggestion, I immediately recalled my original assumption, when I first saw the nude baptisms. I had jumped to the conclusion that these people were *nudists*. All I had ever heard about nudism was either in ridicule or denunciation. At one time or another I had participated in both those attitudes. To me, the word itself sounded "dirty." I declined even to contemplate what its practice fully entailed. Yet I was shuddering at the thought of its connection with what I was now doing myself. I ended up describing my feelings, instead of asking him a question.

"I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I'd ever go skinny-dipping," I confessed, "or ever be laying out nude like this in the sunshine. It's a great feeling, and there's no sense of guilt about doing it, but I do have a worry. I'm thinking about my reputation. What if anyone found out? They'd say I was behaving like a nudist."

"You have harshly judged those people, haven't you?" he remarked with a serious look in his eyes. "Without knowing them, you degraded them from the pulpit. While preaching the Word of God, you publicly denounced their character and their actions without even investigating them or their teachings."

Before he even said the word "pulpit" I was recalling a sermon where I had done exactly that, condemning the nudists. Without reading anything about their actual behavior, without researching their ideas or learning why they practiced them, I just *knew* that nudism was wrong. Even now I was afraid and trembling inside at the thought that my own nude swimming and sunbathing might associate me with such people.

"Who knows what they do at those resorts of theirs?" I responded, grabbing for some means to defend my judgmental attitude. "I know for one thing, they have turned nakedness into a form of recreation."

"Or perhaps," he suggested, "they have turned to recreation while in their state of nakedness, even as you see it being done here."

Smiling, he waved his arm in the direction of those playing in the river. Then, with that piercing gaze of his, he commented, "God knows very well exactly what they do or do not do in their gatherings. But 'he who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.'"

Nailed again by Scripture, I thought, from somewhere in the Proverbs.

"More than a century before this experience of yours today," he explained, "these very ordinary people rediscovered this same manner of enjoying God's blessings of sun and water and fresh air. In the records, they have never been known for lasciviousness, nor for any instability of mind, as you judged them to be. Indeed, they see and treat the body in the same way we did in the past, with much more respect and appreciation than your churches do in the present. They have a more godly view of the body, even with less reason for doing so than they could have had, if they only understood God's ultimate will for human flesh. One of their number, who helped bring their beliefs and practices to your own country, was a true brother in Christ. He was as devoted to

the truth as you yourself claim to be. But without really knowing these people, you fear becoming like them or being called one. Let me ask a question. Has your experience of swimming with us changed you? Are you a different man, now that you are naked and unashamed before your brothers and sisters?"

"I'm the same person," I answered, pausing a moment in reflection. "I guess there's a difference, though. Maybe it's not a personality difference, but a feeling of rightness or normalness. I guess, it's like having a new sense of purity and freedom. I'm starting to feel like this is how things always should have been, how things naturally ought to be."

"Truth," he whispered, as if giving me a hint.

"Yes," I agreed, "the same truth that's been in my face all these years in the hospital. But I couldn't mentally accept it as a reality of life, because I've been living with that wall dividing my mind. Until today, I had no theological peg on which to hang my experiences with nudity. What you've shared has been like a hammer driving that peg in and making the whole thing collapse. With that wall gone, the truth is clear. I knew the nude body wasn't indecent or obscene, but I still held on to an attitude that it was, an attitude imbedded in my mind since childhood. I guess, without realizing it, I already did have the truth. Today, the truth I knew for all those years was finally explained. Nakedness had a meaning I didn't understand. Now I do."

"You're beginning to, anyway," smiled the old man.

Suddenly he turned his head and looked back toward the area in the brush where I had come through on the trail. Then he said, "There's just a little time left, and you still have many questions. One important thing you're wondering about is whether all of this was arranged just for you. You should already know that nothing is arranged just for a single life. 'No man is an island,' as one of your poets wrote."

"That was John Donne," I thought to myself, but the old man overheard it.

"Yes, and his words are true, even about his own life and poems, which are still speaking in this world, long after his departure. That's how it must be with you. If your double-mindedness has ended, if you now stand only with the truth, then this blessing is not yours alone. You must share it with others. Multitudes of people have a greater need for healing than the need for deliverance from double-mindedness, which you brought here today."

"The actual experience of skinny-dipping was itself very healing," I confessed. "But I'm starting to see how this dualistic thinking of Gnosticism really has influenced the church. I grew up with that thinking. I'm beginning to see how it has affected the way we think of heaven, the way we do evangelism, the way we sing our songs and hymns about the Christian life. We've made leaving the physical world, this material world of dust and flesh, one of the major goals of salvation. But God is going to restore it to us in resurrection. Yes . . . even restoring His original creation with 'a new heaven and new earth' . . ."

". . . in which righteousness dwells," said my old friend, finishing my quote from one of Peter's epistles.

"I don't know if I would ever have seen this on my own," I admitted, "even though it's all about the body, something we're so intimate with, such an ordinary part of us. Yet we see and talk about the body as separate from us, almost as if it's foreign—just so much baggage to drop off at death and leave behind."

"This is the confusion of Gnosticism," the old man interjected, "and a confusion of God's purpose for making us body-spirit beings in the first place. Without our bodies, we are just like the angels, a spiritual state God meant for cherubim and seraphim. But humans need earth's dust

to make us truly who we are. Our bodies define our humanness. Without them, we are merely ghosts. Take a good look at your naked frame, my brother. Look at all these bodies of your family in Christ. These fleshly vessels have always been our home. When they are resurrected and glorified, they will be our permanent homes for all eternity. Shame about them, whether clad or naked, is a foreign idea from a fallen angel, and though our first parent believed his lie, it has never stopped being false. Humility, which is the true modesty we need, is the death of shame. It humbly and thankfully accepts what we really are— not feeling less than we are when naked, nor trying to appear more than we are when finely dressed. Bathing at a river like this, where nothing is hidden by apparel, can quickly unravel the immodesty of pride. At the same time, being accepted in your nakedness by friends and family and others, is a simple cure for the bondage of an ungodly shame about the body God has given you."

"I think I knew that already," I remarked, my mind racing with the implications of what he was saying. "For years I watched how that works with patients having to expose themselves to nurses and doctors, but I couldn't put it into words. Just knowing the truth from seeing the reality of nakedness wasn't enough. It should have taught me all this, or could have taught me, if I had really let myself think about it. But I truly *was* double-minded. Whenever I stepped outside the hospital after work, I lived with another mindset. It was almost schizophrenic, like living in two worlds."

"Truth knows only the real world," stated the old man. "Nakedness is simply the truth unveiled—reality uncovered. When seen for what it is, the body has unique power to unravel vain imaginings and illusions."

"I guess that's the whole trouble," I concluded, "a vain imagination."

"Deception, more accurately," he explained. "Ending yours was our first purpose in coming to the river today, but only one of them. Your own peace of mind is a small matter, my brother, when weighed against the larger need. It will be easy now to explain to doubters why your work with nakedness causes you no stumbling. But to halt the deception behind the doubts, you must confront the Gnosticism that has warped a godly view of the body. As long as the churches embrace that view, God's image will be maligned, no matter how often it is praised as 'fearfully and wonderfully made.' It is mockery to hear that phrase on the same lips of those who in their next breath call God's temple a lustful enticement. This is why God withholds His hand of deliverance from believers who get entangled with images of lascivious nakedness. He cannot liberate their minds when they believe that the defilement itself resides in the beauty of His handiwork. 'You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' Tell me, how well has this falsehood about the body's shameful delivered those trapped in this corruption?"

"You mean addiction to pornography?" I asked, and he nodded. It was true. Until I became a nurse, relief from pornography's attraction through prayer and confession was usually temporary. In the hospital, observing the simplicity of actual nakedness destroyed the duplicity in its exploitation by pornography. My ongoing double-mindedness allowed me to sympathize with Christian men who confessed their struggles with porn. But my own realistic dealings with nudity itself had dealt pornography's place in my mind a deep wound, although not a fatal blow. Porn could still be a bother.

"This is why the modern church's struggle against this trade is endless," affirmed the old man. "God will never bless the deceit of body shame, nor cease to bless our flesh as a sanctuary for His presence. He will never call what is good *evil* nor sanction the lies that even His own children have preached about the body. Such preaching itself is the true stumbling block. It has

led multitudes to trip and fall into the very pit it warns everyone to avoid. And since the church is guilty of adopting this perverted view of the body, spreading it as though it were part of the Gospel itself, then it is the church's duty to repent of her sin, and to make restitution."

"But how?" I wondered to myself, then said aloud, "This is no small matter, attempting to undo what's been held for centuries as a matter of Christian conscience."

"No small matter indeed," he exclaimed, "not when so many wrestle with a wounded conscience because of it! Both believer and unbeliever labor under this heavy burden, laid on them by teachers and elders who cannot lift a finger to remove it even from themselves. The conscience echoes only its instruction. If taught the truth, it makes whoever transgresses the truth uncomfortable with guilt. But if fed with lies or half-truths, the conscience is pricked with a phantom guilt for breaking laws that God never established. Study the history of the churches. You will find that a deceived conscience is the fountainhead of legalism."

"I hate to sound pessimistic," I protested, "but what you're talking about is impossible. Society, and I guess the church, too, is thoroughly immersed in this kind of thinking. Trying to reverse it would be like trying to undo history."

"Tell the truth!" he challenged me emphatically. "We spoke the truth, and they accused us of 'turning the world upside down.' By telling the truth, we were turning a misled world right side up! Our loyalty to the truth brought the whole Roman Empire under the message of the Gospel. Truth is the only weapon that can succeed against deception. The light of truth is the death of darkness. Speak forth the truth, brother! And when falsehood tries to silence you, shout the truth more loudly!"

"Many good believers wouldn't call this the truth," I persisted in rebuttal. "They'd oppose any message that could lead Christians to participate in a scene like this. Most people accept my work as a nurse in the hospital. But as a pastor, if I shared what I've learned . . . no, let's put it this way . . . if anyone found out what I've been doing here today, skinny-dipping with a crowd of naked people, I might get myself defrocked."

"Whose servant do you claim to be?" the old man taunted. "Does your ministry belong to God or to men? If you lost your station with men, would you lose your position with God?"

"In losing my position with men, I would lose my ministry to them."

"Would you?" retorted the ancient preacher. "What is your ministry other than to minister truth to those who need it? You are happy today to be set free from false thinking. That is what the truth does. What you have learned yourself has the power to liberate many more people, people who live under this false Gnostic thinking, people who are bound in slavery to this damning trade of lasciviousness. If you know the truth, but hide it from those who need its freedom, what ministry do you really have?"

"But this is a minor truth," I pleaded insistently. "What people need is salvation. They need the Gospel and a new life in Christ. That's what's important for us to preach."

"Supremely important," the old fellow agreed. "But must you bring Christ in and leave Him standing just inside the threshold or lingering in the hallway. Every room in the whole house needs His cleansing. This is a very large room of the heart where believers should be living abundant lives, a place where they must learn to think and act with a pure mind. It is much bigger than you realize. Those caught up in a false view of the body often feel its turmoil overflowing everywhere else in their lives. The truth that has set you free today has the same power to deliver them. Preaching manmade scruples may please men, but it delivers no one. 'Are you trying to win the approval of men,' my brother, 'or of God? Or are you trying to please men? If you are still

trying to please men, you would not be a minister of Christ."

I recognized that he was quoting from Galatians, the epistle in which Paul was trying to preserve the Gospel from the inroads of Jewish legalism. I saw the direct connection my aged friend was making. The pornographic addictions in society, and in the church as well, were founded upon this false view of the body. The church had adopted and enforced that error legalistically. Even with my long history of dealing pure-mindedly with nudity in the hospital, I was occasionally susceptible to pornography's allurements. As I propped myself up on my elbows and looked around at this scene at the river, I wondered if I would ever again be led astray by this vile plague that ravages our world. Now that the wall in my mind had fallen, maybe the last vestige of a pornographic view of the body was gone. Would it or could it come back? Instantly, the thought came up to my mind, "Only if you return to it, 'as a dog returns to its vomit.'" I somehow knew that I was hearing this graphic Scriptural phrase being quoted into my thoughts by the old man beside me. When I looked at him, he grinned back knowingly.

The sunshine was so warm and relaxing that I kept lying there lazily soaking it up even after I was dry from swimming. I stared straight up at the sky, thinking about the strangeness of this scene I had walked into. I was also thinking about the past: how I had grown up with such a shyness about my own nudity; how undressing for the doctor had been so hard to do when I was an early teen; how stripping down for gym class in high school took some time to get used to. Then I remembered a few other incidents of embarrassment, when I had been "walked in on" while dressing or undressing. I wondered if those experiences would have been different, if I had been brought up without a shameful view of my body.

During this relaxing reverie, I recalled two specific people I had callously judged when I learned they had become "nudists." With one of them I no longer had contact, and to the other I started planning to write a letter asking for forgiveness. In another situation, as a leader over a Christian ranch ministry, I had dismissed a fellow from our community for skinny-dipping with two naked girls he met on a nearby beach. That recollection was painful, now that I was "guilty" of an identical transgression. For that, and for judging those others without knowing their reasons for becoming nudists, I whispered a short prayer, asking God's forgiveness. Then I thought about how, on "clothing optional" European beaches, families were freely allowed to swim and sunbathe in the nude. In the past I had verbally berated those countries for allowing that kind of thing. But now, here I was, laying out in the sun just like those Europeans. Then there came to mind a web article I had read some time ago. It was about "top-freedom" in the State of New York, where, back in the 1990s, a court overruled a statute that kept women from going topless in places where men were allowed to. At the time, I had mentally condemned that court, but now I pondered how breastfeeding-friendly it would be for every state across the nation to adopt that policy. My mind's amalgamation of all these wandering thoughts led me to close my eyes.

The last thing I recollect was thinking about a vivid dream I had years ago. I was on my way to Heaven, flying through the sky naked with a large company of naked saints and holding hands with my naked wife, who looked as young as when we were first married. After that dream, I had written a very descriptive poem about it, called "Dreaming of You." That was the last thing I remember thinking about before dropping off to sleep.

Part 6 - Encounter

"In order to swim one takes off all one's clothes—in order to aspire to the truth one must undress in a far more inward sense, divest oneself of all one's inward clothes, of thoughts, conceptions, selfishness, etc., before one is sufficiently naked." — Søren Kierkegaard, in *Journals*

It was the shouts of the swimmers, jumping off the rocks across the river that awakened me. But what startled me was that they were the only ones left at the river. The rest of the group had disappeared. I looked one way and the other. All the robes and tunics were gone from the tree limbs and bushes. There was no sign of anyone except for two young couples on the rocks across the river. I quickly looked back at them. They looked different than those I had been with earlier, maybe a little older, but all four were just as naked and having just as much fun jumping into the water. I stood up.

"Hey! Where are the others?" I shouted loudly to them. "Where did everybody go?"

The four stopped their activity, blankly staring at me. Then they turned to each other in a brief discussion. I'd forgotten that they didn't understand my language. Then one of the guys, who was standing high up on one of the larger rocks, yelled back an answer.

"Wait there! We're coming over!" he cried out in perfect English, then all of them dived into the water.

I was disoriented and bewildered about what had just transpired. Had it been a real experience or only a vivid dream? If a dream, then how could four of the "dream phantoms" be left behind? Looking down at my bare body, I asked myself the next obvious question. If it was just a dream, how did I go to sleep on the beach naked with no memory of undressing? Had I done so in my sleep? While pondering this, I suddenly noticed that in a spot not too far away from me there were a few beach towels, backpacks and clothing on the sand. These surely belonged to the four who were now swimming toward me. When they were near enough to shore to stand up and wade the rest of the way in, I realized that these were not part of the group I had just been with. Both the girls had short hair, and one of the guys was wearing a cross on a gold chain around his neck. Among those I had just been with, all the women had long hair. No one wore any jewelry.

"Hello there. My name's Jason," said the young man wearing the cross, the one who had called to me from the rock. "We'd seen you sunbathing, so we thought this might be a place for skinny-dipping."

"Hi, I'm Rhoda," the first girl introduced herself, then stammered apologetically, "We hope it's okay. We assumed it was, when we found you asleep in the sun."

"We thought you were alone," said the second girl. "My name's . . ."

"Hold it!" I interrupted her quickly, and asked, "It wouldn't be . . . Prisca, would it?"

"How'd you know that? I bet you weren't asleep at all," chided the girl. "Priscilla's my real name, but I always go by Prisca. You probably overheard us talk about doing this."

"Doing what?" I asked, trying to piece this together. Those were the names the old man mentioned in my dream, if it was a dream. I tried to recall any other names that had come up. Just when I remembered how he had quoted from John Donne, the second young man answered my question.

"Skinny-dipping," he replied and was the first to offer me a handshake. "I'm John. Jason

and I are cousins. We thought it'd be okay . . . you know, skinny-dipping and all."

The first girl, Rhoda, hesitatingly added, "We *did* think you were alone. If your friends come back, I hope it's okay with them, you know, us being here, too . . . naked, I mean. When we saw you asleep there like that . . . well, we didn't know there were others around."

"Um . . . yeah, sure . . ." I stuttered in response, still trying to orient myself to these new circumstances. "I guess this spot's about as private as you can get for swimming naked. As far as the others, I guess I don't really know. It's strange. I was taking a nap . . . and now they're gone. I'm pretty positive they won't be coming back. But, I know for sure I was really out. Somehow I must have gotten your names in my sleep. They were like part of a dream."

As I fumbled around for what to say to them, I could not help watching the eyes of both girls. They had each been flitting glances below my waist. When the girl named Rhoda realized that I had noticed them doing this, she started to giggle.

"I'm sorry! I'm really, really sorry!" she apologized, as both she and Prisca simultaneously burst into laughter. "I'm not used to seeing guys . . . I mean, you know, that part of a guy's body. This is our first time ever doing this skinny-dipping thing . . . really!"

"I'm sorry for staring, too," Prisca piped in. She also turned to the cousins and said, ". . . and at you guys. I know I was gawking. I couldn't help it. It's not at all like what's in biology books. All three of you guys look so different down there."

"Yeah, well the same goes for you two up higher," chuckled John. "Everybody's different. Get it? Every *body* is different. Every *body* . . ."

"We get it, we get it!" Prisca exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

"It's true, they're new to this," explained Jason. "I've done it before, so it's not such a big deal for me. But I think you understand how it is your first time. Seeing you asleep there gave us the courage to join you, in a way. We'd been talking about it on the hike here. Even though this place is pretty secluded, we probably would've forgotten about it. But then we saw you and thought, 'maybe that's what he's been doing.' So we decided, 'Hey, skinny-dipping it is!'"

Their frankness seemed to make their story plausible. But, if some of them were not really used to this kind of thing, they had certainly transitioned more quickly to being comfortable together with their nudity than I had in my dream, or vision, or whatever it was. Yet, even if imaginary, the experience had left me with a real sense of already making the transition myself. I felt no embarrassment about being naked in front of these young adults. While I was pondering this, I glanced again at their belongings on the beach. I saw on one of the backpacks some permanent-pen artwork that included images of a cross and a dove and the words, "JESUS is REAL!" written in bold letters. Since they looked college-age, and since I knew there was only one college in the area, I made an educated guess.

"Are you from the Bible College?"

Sudden, somber silence fell on all four. Any former light-heartedness immediately vanished from their faces, and all eyes gravitated to the ground. It was Jason who first looked back up at me to respond to my question.

"Yes. I guess we didn't think about that," he said solemnly, looking around at his friends. The three others were also glancing up for brief eye contact with each other. Then, still searching for his words, he continued. "I hope this won't reflect on the school. This whole thing is entirely on our own. We don't want you to think anything bad about the school."

Now it was my turn to pause and search for words. I was still more or less stunned from coming out of a long conversation with an extravagant hallucination or some kind of visionary

ghost. Even now, while fully awake, I wanted to believe it was real—that my experience with that crowd of apparitions, or angels, or maybe even authentic, first-century Christians that had somehow been transported in time, was not just a fantasy. But whether it was or not, these four young people standing in front of me, as naked as I was, were very real. They had been caught not only in displaying their external anatomy to each other and to a stranger, but also in showing signs of guilt for letting their youthful curiosity get the better of their upbringing. Yet, even if the girls had been curiously staring at what had forever been a visual taboo, all four appeared innocent of acting upon society's sexual expectations about what being nude together in a social context was bound to lead to.

"I'm sorry for not introducing myself," I told them, grinning freely. "I'm David. And you can relax about being from the Bible College. I'm an ordained Christian minister, and also an RN. This is my first time, too."

This immediately brought to their faces puzzled looks that quickly turned to smiles.

"Hey, this is a real coincidence!" Prisca blurted out.

"I'm not so sure it is," I surmised, wondering again about the content of my dream. "Who knows? This might have been arranged. 'The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord.' I'm glad the word 'good' isn't there in the original Hebrew. It gives me more confidence that God's still directing me, even when I don't feel worthy of it."

I bent down to gather up my things.

"If you have time to sit and talk, there's some interesting things about nudity that you might like to know," I announced with confidence, to which they all responded affirmatively. I motioned toward the place where they had dropped their belongings. "Can we go sit down by your things? That gives you a chance to get dressed, if you feel more comfortable. But unless it bothers any of you, I'll just stay undressed."

When we were all seated in a circle, no one had put anything on. I began immediately.

"When I started encountering nudity of the opposite sex as a nursing student, I got two big surprises. First, I found there was more in my imagination about women's bodies than there was to see in reality. Second, I discovered that female nudity didn't excite me sexually, as I thought it might. All my life I was brought up to think of the naked body as a sexual thing. Maybe you were taught that, too. But those two surprises opened my eyes to the truth about nakedness. The nude body of the opposite sex is basically something normal, not mystical, and it's definitely not the mental sex-trap I was led to believe it was."

"I have to ask you," I said looking around and gaining eye contact with each one, "I guess to test what I think I've been learning. Did any of you have either of those surprises, when you got undressed in front of each other?"

After silent smiles from them all, Jason was again the first to speak up.

"Both before, when I went skinny-dipping, and now, it's exactly like you said. What you imagine is never really there. I could imagine the girls' bodies turning me on, but then when I really saw them, it's different. Nothing happened."

"Nothing!" snickered Prisca, teasingly slapping his shoulder. He turned to her.

"Hey . . . it's not that you girls aren't pretty. You both look great! I mean it . . .," he flattered, smiling at them. "And girls' equipment . . . well, that's something really, really special. And I'll admit it . . . I've had trouble not staring, too, and you both probably know it. That's because your bodies really *are* great to look at."

Rhoda blushed, dropping her eyes, and Prisca's face was beaming. Then he turned back

toward me.

"But their bodies don't affect me the wrong way," he explained. "I was always taught they would. Now, it does make me feel guilty looking at porn on the web. But the first time I went skinny-dipping with girls, and this time, too, I've had no problem. In fact, seeing their bodies without having dirty ideas about it makes me feel like praising God!"

"Yeah, same here," John broke in, catching the enthusiasm in Jason's last few words. He spoke mainly to the girls, but kept glancing back and forth from them to me. "I'd be a liar if I didn't say I liked looking at both you girls. Your bodies *are* amazing! But thank God they don't cause me to fantasize. I really like you girls. You're my friends and my sisters in Christ. I worried about those kinds of thoughts coming up. Even after hearing Jason's story, I still expected I might get physically stimulated. That would've spoiled a fun day. But it never happened. That was a plus, a really big plus."

There was a short silence.

"Okay, I'll be honest, too," Prisca confessed. "Tight swimming trunks turn me on. All the way here I was imagining you guys in them. Before Jason told us his story, I never heard of skinny-dipping. Then I thought, 'Wow! Not just seeing you guys in your Speedos, but seeing what's under them.' So when you took them off . . . it changed everything. No offence, guys. Your privates are . . . well, sort of cute, in a way, but more appealing covered up. I guess it's a kind of a mind-trip. I know I need prayer about that 'tight trunks' thing."

"I thought the same thing about breasts," agreed John. "They catch your eye in a bikini top or when a tight bra and a low-cut dress shows cleavage. But here, out in the open like this, they become more . . . well, more down-to-earth. They're still really attractive, but they're normal and pretty at the same time."

"Exactly!" Jason nodded in agreement, and after a short pause, they all turned to look at Rhoda, who seemed to be in deep thought.

"I thought you were pulling our leg," she began, directing her gaze at Jason. "I said we'd end up getting embarrassed, if we ever tried this. Then, when we did it, my shyness lasted about a minute, if that. I was really surprised. And I tried to be in tune with my conscience, to see if God would give me a guilty feeling about this. But all I felt was a good feeling . . . a pure feeling."

Here, she turned to address me, "It's like you read my mind, or something. Before we swam back over to you, I was already thinking about those two surprises you brought up. I think both are true: our naked bodies are normal, and nudity doesn't have to be sexual. That's where the pure feeling comes in, instead of guilt. And I don't feel guilty at all right now—not about seeing you guys, or you seeing me. In fact, it's amazing, but I don't feel like I'm really naked. It's like I'm still dressed somehow. Isn't that weird?"

"Wow, Rhoda, that's cool!" laughed Prisca, giving her an affirming pat on the shoulder. "I felt exactly the same way, like I was still wearing something. I feel that way right now, even when I look down and see I've got nothing on. Yeah, that *is* a weird feeling! But a good one!"

"I still felt dressed, too," I smiled. "Maybe that's how Adam and Eve felt before they sinned. Maybe that's the way birds and fish and other animals feel. When Jesus said not to worry about clothes, He told us to look at how God dresses the lilies of the field. Flowers, and everything else in creation, are dressed in their birthday suits. Humans must be the only creatures who cover up out of shame. But I see nothing shameful in these birthday suits we're wearing, although it's a shame the sun never got to shine on these pale areas all of us have."

When the chuckling subsided from my reference to our "tan lines," I turned to Jason and

asked him if he would mind re-telling the story he had told the others.

"About three years ago, a friend invited me to a weekend youth camp," he began. "The first night, I found our dorm was co-ed. Girls bunked on one side, guys on the other, so we all dressed for bed right in front of each other. In the morning, a bunch of nude girls walked in on my friend and me in the shower. They got in right with us and started talking about normal things, as if it was no big deal. I just watched my friend's response and followed his lead. During the day we swam at the lake or went canoeing or played volleyball, all without our clothing. A few girls kept their bottoms on, but even the men and women chaperons went nude most of the day. Yet, throughout that weekend, there was no fooling around—nothing sexual going on. People treated each other with lots of respect. In fact, what really impressed me was how no one made fun of anyone else's body. That was a big 'no-no' there, especially since a couple kids in the group had some physical challenges. One girl was in a wheelchair. But, all that time, I never heard one dirty joke. Nobody made a comment about the way another person looked."

"When my cousin first told me his story, I was like Rhoda," added John, gaining my attention, "I thought he was making it up. But his attitude about the body had really changed. He even got on my case a few times when I was being disrespectful. I knew this had to be real."

Jason continued, "After about an hour at the lake, that first day, I felt like something was happening inside of me. I felt like my mind was being cleaned out. After that youth camp, I knew I'd never think about girls' bodies the same way again. I never again wanted to be ashamed of my own body either."

"That's a good way to put it—having your mind cleaned out," remarked Prisca to Jason. "I envied you for getting to spend a whole weekend at it. And I started thinking how stupid I've been with my imagination, like with the 'tight trunk' thing. Seeing the real thing makes the imaginary ideas seem pretty silly. It's totally awesome the way it makes your mind feel. Yeah, 'clean' is a good word for it. I never want to look at guys' bodies the same way again either."

When she ended, Rhoda and John verbalized the same hope for themselves.

"Then I'm going to assume," I summarized, "that none of you, when you undressed and looked at each other's bodies, saw them as shameful or pornographic."

All shook their heads, and Jason said, "No way!"

"Right, because they're not," I concurred. "They never have been. They never will be. In fact, they're just the opposite. Our bodies are the good creations of God—awesome and amazing and beautiful, not indecent, not obscene, not pornographic. But when people, even well-meaning Christians, teach that the human body is lewd and shameful, it creates fertile ground for pornography. This is why porn addiction is so strong in our own culture. We live in a society where a sexualized, pornographic view of the body is rigidly taught, and you and I both know that the Christian church has been a major factor in spreading that view. Until today, that thought might never have crossed your minds."

"Wait a minute!" Rhoda protested. "I have a lot of respect for the church. You say it teaches a pornographic view of the body. How can you say that? The church is trying hard to fight pornography!"

"Yes, the church is trying hard, but it's trying to fight fire with gasoline instead of water," I replied. As soon as she had raised her protest, a clear illustration came to my mind, then an even more striking one followed. I almost said "thank you" out loud to the Lord for allowing these answers to her question to come so quickly.

"Instead of answering you directly," I explained, "I want you to think carefully about two

situations that I'll describe. Try to figure out how you'd deal with them. They're both situations where you might be trying to explain the Gospel to a non-believer."

"Personal evangelism?" queried Jason.

"Exactly," I replied. "Here's the first one. You're witnessing to a well-informed history professor. He says he won't believe in a Gospel preached by hypocrites, and you ask him what he means. He says, 'The church sent missionaries to lands where people wore no clothing and needed none. But they preached their gospel of shame and forced clothing on them anyway. Afterwards, the same pornography problems that plagued the lands the missionaries came from took root in those cultures. When modern missionaries recognized this as a cross-cultural error, they stopped preaching *body shame* and let the natives dress or not dress as they wished. But the churches here who train and send those new kind of missionaries are hypocrites. They have never confessed their past sin of corrupting those tribal lands by making clothing a part of their previous message. The simple reason they won't confess it is that they refuse to stop doing it here at home. They continue to preach *body shame* as part of their Christian gospel. They won't give up their longstanding commitment to a pornographic view of the body.'"

I paused to let them consider how they would respond to such a situation. A frown of concern puckered on Rhoda's brow, and the other three had the distant stares that told me they were thinking hard about the scenario.

"So, how would you meet his argument?" I asked.

"I'd just admit that Christians can be hypocrites and sinners, too," answered John. "I'd tell him that the Gospel belongs to Jesus, not to the churches . . . that even the churches need forgiveness through the Gospel."

I persisted, "What if he asks, 'But how can the churches be forgiven if they won't repent and give up their sin?'"

"You could tell him what Jesus said from the Cross," suggested Jason. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

"Excellent response," I conceded. "But do you see my point about the church? If that fellow did become a Christian, how could you convince him to join the church? He and you both know the church is still spreading lies about the human body. According to your own reply to his question, even Jesus might be saying, 'they don't know what they're doing.'"

Rhoda admitted, "I see what you're getting at. It's a sure thing the church would call what we're doing here today pornographic. But if today's missionaries saw natives sitting here talking like this, they wouldn't see anything wrong with it."

"Or if they did call it wrong just because we were Americans," reasoned Jason, "they'd be inconsistent in their thinking."

"*Double-minded* is a better term," I agreed. "I lived with a divided mind on this whole thing for about 25 years in my nursing job, where nudity is very common."

"That's right!" interjected Prisca. "I never thought of it that way. Doctors don't get in trouble for looking at your naked body. And most Christians seem to think it's okay for medical people to see them nude. But if anybody else saw them that way, the church would call it a sin."

"I have one more situation for you to deal with," I proceeded. "You are witnessing again to another skeptic. He tells you, 'Hey! I just got back from a European vacation with my wife. We were on this beach where half the people weren't wearing a stitch of clothing. Along with lots of ordinary people, we saw some really shapely women with absolutely nothing on. Never once did I have any lustful thoughts, even when my wife and I joined them by taking off our own

swimsuits. The whole thing gave me a good feeling. But the church had told us that looking at naked people of the opposite sex was a sin. We were strictly warned that it would cause us to lust after them. Well, I say the church lied to us. The Europeans weren't having a problem with it and neither were my wife and I. It's clear that the church didn't know what it was talking about. All these years it hasn't been telling us the truth. And here you are now, telling me what the church has preached for centuries about Christ. The church can't even get it straight on something as simple and insignificant as our naked skin. How can you ask me to trust it's message about something as tremendously important as my eternal soul?"

Again, I let the illustration sink in, before asking, "How about that fellow? How would you respond to his reasoning?"

"That's not just about his situation," John immediately replied. "That's about ours."

"It *is* our situation," I affirmed. "To answer that guy, we would have to show him that, while the church might be against what he did on his European trip, the Gospel is not. But right now we ourselves are on a vacation similar to his. The church would denounce what we're doing here, just as he described. To defend our behavior against the church's attitude, we'd have to show that its attitude isn't Scriptural, but merely cultural."

"This is a double dilemma," Jason reasoned. "After I went to that youth camp, I looked up the name of the resort on the Internet. It was a 'naturist' campground. Their website had all sorts of photographs of naked groups of people. I got scared I might be in one of them. If my parents or pastor discovered those photos, they would call them 'pornographic.' But those photos are exactly what we would look like, if our picture was taken right now. My first problem is how to go about witnessing to those 'nature' people. They probably despise Christians for judging their recreation as pornographic. Secondly, how do we tell other Christians about discovering that our body is not pornographic. You'd be 'between a rock and a hard place.' You'd be rejected both by the church you want to have fellowship with, and by the 'naturist' campers that you're trying to reach with the Gospel."

"If you went nude to witness to them," I surmised, "the 'naturist' people might not quickly write you off. But I think there's also a solution to the problem with the church. If you know your church history, you know that, when the church was wrong about something in the past, the only way it got straightened out was by *reform*."

"Like the Reformation in Europe," asked Jason.

"Yes," I explained. "Somehow the church needs to have a public mirror held up to its face, so it can really see the truth about what it's been teaching. There must be a radical reformation in its view of the human body, if it's to get that view back in line with Scripture."

"How?" questioned Jason. "Where would we start?"

"Christ warned about false teachers that would come to lure Christians away from the truth," I declared with conviction. "In your studies at Bible college, have you become familiar yet with the history of the early church and the heresies that threatened it?"

All seemed to give me blank stares. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"There's a falsehood that's been around for a long time," I began. "It's as old as the Garden of Eden itself. Have any of you ever heard of something called Gnosticism"

The END, or the BEGINNING