

A biblical theology of clothing

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In a [recent post](#), Richard Beck raised the issue of a theology of clothing. Clothing is an aspect of our existence that seldom occasions much theological reflection. When we look for theological significance, we tend to seek it in far more elevated and less physical matters. To the extent that we reflect on clothing it tends to be with the intention of opposing certain styles of dress that we deem ugly, indecent, or immodest. Within this guest post, I want to present a few notes that suggest the possibility and necessity of a positive and affirming theology of clothing.

There are rich scriptural resources for a biblical theology of clothing. The sheer wealth of material on this subject that surfaces when we start looking should cause us to wonder what else we might be missing on account of misguided expectations.

The usual starting point, but sadly often also the final word, for a theology of clothing is found in the connection between clothing and the account of the Fall. After the Fall, Adam and Eve seek to cover the nakedness and shame that they feel by sewing together fig leaves. Later, God fashions tunics of animal skin for them to wear. A common conclusion arising from reflection upon this passage is that the wearing of clothes is purely a consequence of sin, a conclusion that makes a genuinely positive theology of clothing unlikely.

The connection between nakedness, shame, and guilt is central here, and merits closer analysis. Nakedness is not, in and of itself, shameful. A significant proportion of our population can go around naked without feeling any shame whatsoever. Nakedness is characteristic of infancy.

One of the most helpful explorations I have read on this subject is provided by James Jordan, in an essay in the book *The Federal Vision*. Jordan argues against the idea that shame is to be straightforwardly identified with guilt. Shame refers to a loss or felt absence of glory. Shame is seen in the loss of 'face' or glory, experienced when we are abandoned, betrayed, or isolated. This loss of glory leads people to surround themselves with a new community. Those who are excluded from one social group will often seek to form a new group around themselves.

This loss of glory is the 'outer' aspect of shame. The inner aspect is loss of integrity. Integrity can be lost through failure and sin, but it can also be the result of violation. The victims of burglary or rape can experience such a loss of integrity, as their bodies or property are violated. Shame occasions a crisis for our sense of personhood and worth, and requires an appropriate form of 'clothing'.

The interplay of shame, glory, and integrity is expressed in the relationship between justification, sanctification, and glorification. Justification is the truth that in Christ Jesus we are no longer subject to condemnation, that the one who trusts in him will not be put to shame. As all is laid bare before the judgment throne of God, we will find ourselves covered in Christ. Sanctification is the truth that God has committed himself to creating true holiness within us, rendering us persons of complete integrity. Justification is not merely a deceitful 'cover-up', but declares the truth of what we will, through God's work, one day be in Christ. Finally, glorification refers to the weight of honour that we receive in Christ. The clothes of glory do more than conceal nakedness: they denote status and favour.

Adam and Eve sought to grasp at wisdom and glory before they were ready for it. As a result they felt shame, a shame which separated them from each other and from God. Adam lied to try to 'cover-up' what he had done, trying to get his wife to 'take the Fall'. Adam and Eve produced the clothes of fig leaves because they no longer felt able to be open and intimate

with God or even with each other.

However, more is going on here. The knowledge of good and evil is not a bad thing *per se*. It concerns wisdom and rule, and is a kingly and angelic quality. King David is described as one knowing good and evil like the angel of the Lord (2 Samuel 14:17). It is the knowledge of good and evil that Solomon asks of the Lord in 1 Kings 3:9. In eating of the tree Adam and Eve seek to grasp wisdom and rule for themselves (and we should observe that their eyes are opened: they do gain a form of wisdom). The feeling of shame and nakedness that results is not merely on account of their feeling of guilt, but also through their realization that they are not 'dressed for the job'. They experience something akin to the fear expressed in our nightmares of finding ourselves naked on stage while making an important speech.

They had stolen an authority that wasn't theirs yet and without some form of 'investiture' to represent that authority, they knew that they wouldn't be able to exercise it. To be aware of one's nakedness is to be aware of one's weakness and impotence. In fashioning them tunics of animal skin God covers up their sin and guilt through sacrifice, but also graciously invests them with clothes befitting the authority that they had stolen, equipping them to exercise the role that they had seized for themselves prematurely. The tunics that God made for them were tunics of office, signs that they ruled with his authority (elsewhere when tunics appear in the Old Testament they are frequently presented as gifts denoting the status and authority that the wearer enjoys by virtue of their relationship to the giver, e.g. Genesis 37:3; Exodus 28:4; 2 Samuel 13:18; Isaiah 22:21). The fact that they were made of animal skins also represents the authority that man was given over the animals.

The complex relationship between clothes, shame, nakedness, and glory is displayed at even greater length in the descriptions of the clothes of the High Priest (Exodus 28). The clothes of the High Priest were designed to cover nakedness (Exodus 28:42), but were also designed for glory and for beauty (Exodus 28:40). The descriptions of the manner in which such clothes are constructed, first worn, divested and reworn are immensely detailed. For instance, the clothing instructions on the Day of Atonement (or, more literally, the Day of Coverings) in Leviticus 16 are significant here. Simple linen garments are worn for the atonement (or 'covering') ceremony and then divested, for the glorious garments of office to be put on again when all is done. As sin is dealt with, the glorious clothes can be worn again. The investiture with the garments of office also presumes the offering of sacrifices and washing of the person (the priestly garments are only put on following the 'baptism' of the priests – Exodus 40:12-15).

The clothes of the High Priest are a means by which he wears the natural creation and the nation (most especially in the breastplate) upon himself. The bottom and most basic layer of holy clothes to cover nakedness are vegetable – linen – garments. The outer layers of the priestly garments include animal fabrics (woollen yarns) and then metals and minerals (precious stones and gold).

In this connection we should pay attention to the description of Christ's clothes in the context of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension: his divided garments, his seamless undergarment, the thorned crown of the curse worn on the cursed brow of man, the linen clothes left after the resurrection (like those of the High Priest following the Day of Atonement ritual), the glorious appearance of the ascended Christ, etc.

Clothes are important motifs in several stories. One can think of the tunics, robes, and other badges of authority in the Joseph and Judah narrative. One could argue that the entire account is [a story of many garments](#): Joseph's tunic of many colours, the torn robes of Jacob and Reuben, the signet and cord that Judah gave to Tamar, the garment taken from Joseph by Potiphar's wife, the signet, garments, and gold chain given to Joseph by Pharaoh, the torn robes of the brothers when the cup is discovered in Benjamin's sack, and Joseph's gifts of

garments to his brothers.

Clothes also play an important role in the story of Saul and David. Robes are torn on two key occasions. In 1 Samuel 15:27-28, Saul tears Samuel's robe as he departs. As in the account of the prophecy of Ahijah, the torn robe of the prophet represents the tearing of the kingdom (1 Kings 11:29-33). In 1 Samuel 24:4 David secretly cuts off a corner of Saul's robe. God instructed his people to have wings or tassels on the corners of their garments (Deuteronomy 22:12). The corners of the garment of the king or husband represented his taking of the nation or bride under his protection and love (Ruth 2:12; 3:9; Ezekiel 16:8). The union of marriage is expressed in coming under a single garment. By cutting off the corner of Saul's garment was a sign of rebellion and divorce, which is why David was so conscience-smitten afterwards, and repented of his action (1 Samuel 24:5-7).

The prophet's mantle of Elijah is another significant garment. It is with this mantle that he covers his face when coming before God at Horeb (1 Kings 19:13). He throws the mantle upon Elisha to call him to follow him (1 Kings 19:19). He crosses the Jordan using the mantle, and it is the fallen mantle that represents Elisha's full prophetic initiation, authority, and enjoyment of the firstborn portion of Elijah's spirit in 1 Kings 2.

Clothing is an important theme in the New Testament too. We have already spoken of the clothing of Christ in his death, resurrection, and ascension. Descriptions of clothing can have typological significance. For instance, the clothing of John the Baptist in Mark 1:6 reminds us of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8. The white and glistening robes of Christ feature prominently in the transfiguration accounts. The white robes of the saints, washed in the blood of Christ, are an important theme in the book of Revelation. The new covenant is compared to new fabric and the old covenant to an old garment (Luke 5:36-37). The old garment is roll up and changed (Hebrews 1:11-12), and the new one takes its place.

The Christian is instructed to wear the armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-20; 1 Thessalonians 5:8). These garments are the clothes of the priestly warrior, the armour that God himself wears (Isaiah 59:15-17). Unlike Saul with David (1 Samuel 17:38-39), God can equip us to bear his weighty/glorious armour when we do battle with and crush the head of the serpent. As in numerous other cases in Scripture, the armour of God is clothing that we are given as a sign of an authority that we did not win or earn for ourselves, but is received as a gracious bestowal from the hand of the one to whom it properly belongs.

In Galatians 3:27, baptism is presented as a moment of investiture, the time when we 'put on Christ', as the priests first assumed their official garments following their baptism (Exodus 40:12-15). Christ is the bridegroom who takes his people under the wings of his garment of the undivided Holy Spirit with which he is clothed. He is the great High Priest who dresses his people as a kingdom of priests. He is the king who grants us the robes of authority. He is the prophet like Moses who in ascending passes his mantle to his people. The clothing that Christ is for his people covers up all nakedness and shame, and renders us glorious and beautiful.

In 1 Corinthians 15:53-54 the resurrection body is described as a piece of clothing that will envelop our current mortality in life. Our present mortal bodies are garments or tents (the house as a form of garment) that are waxing old and will be put off in death (2 Peter 1:13-15). The resurrection and the present clothing of the Spirit that we enjoy are the assurance that death will not leave us naked and ashamed, but that we only take off our present mortal garments to assume glorious ones that will never fade or wear.

For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed,

having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. – 2 Corinthians 5:1-4

Many more things could be said here. All of the above is merely a gesture in the direction of what would need to be a far more detailed theological account of clothing. However, in conclusion, I think that it is worth stepping back a little and reflecting on some of the more general insights that could emerge from a theology of clothing.

1. Bound up in a theology of clothing is a theology of God's relationship with the world. God wears the creation like a garment and later discards of it when it is old to replace it with a more glorious one (Psalm 102:25-26; 104:1-2). The world is the veil that both hides and enables proximity to God's presence. In Christ, God assumes the garment of the creation most fully, clothing himself in flesh, filling that garment with his glory. In Christ, mortal human flesh itself becomes the clothing of God, his tent. In the Church, Christ is fashioning us into a perfect and spotless garment.
2. A theology of clothing also teaches us about man's relationship with the world. Implicit in our understanding of clothing is an ecology. The High Priest's glorious clothes are a 'world-wearing' akin to God's world-wearing. Peculiarly among the animals, human beings are nude – we are the naked apes. We do not have the coverings of fur, feathers, and scales that other creatures enjoy, nor do we have the glorious raiment of the lilies. Man, alone upon the animals, is called to fashion the creation to himself, tailoring the world around himself in a manner that glorifies both him and the creation, just as God's wearing of the creation both declares his glory, and glorifies the creation. Clothing relates us to the world, and the world to us.
3. Clothing is a way that God has granted us to accentuate the meaning and variety in the world that he has created. Clothing reflects a sense of occasion; for instance, wedding garments must be worn for the wedding feast. There are clothes for work, for festivity, for mourning. Different cultures have different clothing styles. Clothing expresses and celebrates the differentiation that God has built into the creation (e.g. Paul's teaching on sexually differentiating clothing in 1 Corinthians 11). Clothing serves to highlight and express identity, character, and role, such as the simple clothes of the priest that mark him out as a man in God's service. Clothing celebrates the beauty and variety of human bodies, in all of their colours, shapes, and sizes.
4. Finally, perhaps one of the most interesting things to notice in the Scriptures is how many of the references to clothes refer to them as gifts. While clothes can be bought or sold, in Scripture clothes are primarily given as signs of favour. The broader gift character of clothes is something worth reflecting upon. In our clothes we 'present' ourselves to each other. We use our clothes to honour and receive the 'presence' of others. We can dress for others. The gift of garments is bound up with the gift of status. Clothes make the man or woman, and we form each other by giving clothes for new office. Our cultural phenomenology of clothing is one that approaches clothes chiefly as private possessions rather than received gifts, as signs of self-asserted importance, ostentation of material wealth, and the flaunting of autonomous bodies. Such an approach can easily render clothes as a means of glory-grabbing. As Christians it might be worth thinking of practical ways in which we can recover a sense of clothes as means of loving reciprocity, learning what it truly means to dress for each other, and not for our own glory. We can also seek to identify ways in which we can be those who 'clothe' each other, precisely in the rich and multifaceted sense of that word that a biblical theology of clothing suggests.