

Nursing a Baby in Public: What is a Mother to Do?

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The Family Corner <http://www.fix.net/~rprewett>

(Issues and resources of interest to Christian families)

It happened when I was a young, fairly sheltered teenager--at least I was as sheltered as a public school student could be in those days. One evening at a church potluck in a conservative, mostly elderly church body, I was shocked when a mother across from me, with complete disregard for the sensibilities of any of us, unbuttoned her entire blouse in a most revealing way and began nursing her baby.

A few years later, I was in a situation where a young mother needed to nurse her baby and had no choice but to do it in a group setting that included a few young men. She was obviously uncomfortable and embarrassed as she draped herself and the baby with a large blanket. Then, for good measure, perhaps wishing she could disappear entirely, she even covered her head with another blanket! Needless to say, this is what really attracted attention. The young men probably wouldn't have noticed that she was nursing, but now they were asking, "What on earth is she doing under those blankets?"

When I became a mother, I decided there had to be some sort of middle ground.

There are a number of interesting reactions to public nursing within the Christian community. Some feel that nursing is part of God's wonderful design for families, that it is beautiful and natural, and that therefore nursing is appropriate in any setting. On the other extreme are those who feel that a godly woman should never nurse her baby in any setting except for her home--and that, even there, she must never nurse in front of anyone but her own husband and perhaps other mothers.

Modesty is an important consideration, of course. Some nursing mothers are, in general, less modest than others and consequently are not as sensitive towards onlookers. Others labor (or should I say, nurse) under the delusion that the "baby's head hides everything". Still others drape themselves and their babies under a variety of blankets and covers, or wear clothing especially suitable for discreet nursing.

What I find especially interesting is the often vocal condemnation of public nursing. Often these outspoken critics have been exposed--literally--to rather indiscreet and revealing displays. They do not realize that public nursing can be done in such a discreet and chaste manner that only another nursing mother (or

sometimes her husband) is aware of what is going on. There are other critics, however, who seem less disturbed about the possibility of immodesty; rather, they seem to find nursing--no matter how it is done--to be offensive in some way...an activity best carried out in private. For example, I have been in groups where one mother began covering herself with a blanket, only to have someone exclaim, "You're not going to nurse that baby here, are you?!" Modesty was certainly not an issue in this case: the mother would be covered by more layers of material while nursing her baby than she would be while not nursing. In addition, some men who denounce public nursing have no qualms about visiting public beaches or watching broadcast TV, with its plethora of scantily clad women and ubiquitous lingerie commercials. One such man even told me, on more than one occasion, that he frequently watches fashion shows of beach attire in order to see "just how bad the bathing suits are getting each year". Yet, heaven help the poor mother who dares nurse anywhere near him, no matter how many blankets might cover her!

Many mothers who have nursed discreetly in public have experienced the situation of having someone want to admire the "sleeping baby". When the potential admirer is told that the baby is nursing, he or she may react in any number of ways: "Oh, how sweet! I still treasure the memories of nursing my babies!" "Oh, how wonderful! I left my little baby at home and can't wait to get back to her! I should have known you were nursing." "I'm so glad that more young women are nursing their babies these days." "Can I get you something to drink?" "Oh." "Ugh." "Oh, I'm so sorry--I didn't realize--" while blushing and beating a hasty retreat. "You're nursing? Now? Here?!" "I can't believe you would do that in public." "The bathroom is right over there." "I think you had better leave."

It seems than, that as nursing mothers, we have a number of choices:

1. Never nurse in public
2. Nurse only in front of other women
3. Nurse only in your own home
4. Nurse only in front of your immediate family
5. Nurse only in front of your husband (and maybe your mother)
6. Nurse only in those setting where you, your husband, and others are comfortable
7. Nurse anywhere, but make sure you are doing it under several blankets
8. Nurse anywhere, as long as you are wearing clothing that enables you to nurse discreetly
9. Figure that it's just a cultural hang-up, that everybody else needs to grow up, and nurse wherever you please, whenever you please, however you please

As a Christian, I endeavor to turn to the Bible for answers for life's dilemmas. Unfortunately, the verses on breastfeeding do not deal with the issue of where

this activity is best carried out, who the audience should or should not be, and what the mother should be wearing. However, in resolving this issue for myself, I have been influenced by the following Scriptures.

"The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband; and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife." (1 Corinthians 7:4) While this verse is speaking to the issue of rendering "due benevolence" to our spouses, I think it speaks to a broader issue as well: our bodies belong to our spouses.

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more; but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean." (Romans 14:13) This passage speaks of weaker and stronger brethren and differing convictions. A woman might, in clear conscience, nurse her baby openly in public, without regard to what part of her body is exposed. However, she must be sensitive to those who would find this offensive or a cause for stumbling.

"In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel..." 1 Timothy 2:9

With these Scriptures, as well as others, in mind, I have reached the following conclusions:

Conclusion One. If My husband is not comfortable with my nursing in a particular setting, I will honor his wishes.

Conclusion Two. If, by nursing, I will knowingly offend someone, I will try not to nurse in that situation.

Conclusion Three. I will nurse in as discreet and chaste a manner as possible.

Conclusion Four. As a woman, I will encourage other women in their efforts to nurse discreetly in public. As an "older" woman, I will lovingly guide younger mothers if they need help or instruction in nursing more discreetly.

Conclusion Five. I will not act as if I am doing something strange, illicit, or shameful. (One friend of mine says that Christians should be more ashamed about bottlefeeding in public, since they are not following God's design for infant feeding and are being a poor witness to others.) However, I will recognize that just because an activity is created and blessed of God does not mean it should be on center stage in some sort of public display.

Conclusion Six. I will recognize that I do not stop being a mother when I am out in public. I am still responsible before God to minister to my baby in a way that is pleasing to my Lord.

My encouragement to other nursing mothers is to search the Scriptures for yourself, discuss the matter with your husband and with godly nursing mothers whom you respect, and allow the Lord to guide your convictions in this area. I am especially thankful for the women who gave me pointers on nursing discreetly...and the women whose design and sewing abilities have provided clothing especially suited to the comfortable and modest nurturing of my infants. My prayer for all nursing mothers is that we will view breastfeeding as what it is--God's wonderful and beautiful design for feeding our babies--and that we will not fall victim to any of wrong thinking that would seek to degrade God's design.