

How Women Can Make Church a Safe Place for Men

When we dress provocatively, we dishonor God and display a lack of regard for His holiness. We can also become a distraction for our brothers in Christ.

I'd been traveling all weekend, and my flight from California to the East Coast got in at midnight. All I wanted to do was go home, drop my suitcases and hit the sack.

But the story my husband had waiting for me made me drop my jaw and want to hit—well, not the sack!

"She was just visiting our church service this morning," he began haltingly.

He didn't notice her at first, he said. But then came "greeting time."

"Bob, I'd like you to meet John's cousin," a friend said as he introduced her.

That's when my husband's mind began to whirl. He'd heard about her. She was the one with the perfect—well, let's just say she qualified to be a fitting model for Victoria's Secret. You figure out what was perfect!

Through the rest of the service he was restless. Intrigued. Annoyed.

He wasn't the only one; I asked.

Many of our friends were introduced to her that day, and like us, they had heard about her unique career. I asked all the men the same question: "What did she look like?"

The funny thing is, none of them could quite remember her

face. But they all remembered her skin-tight leather pants with the lace-up fly.

Please understand that my husband, Bob, is a godly man in full-time Christian ministry. Like most men, though, he is subject to visual temptation.

Christian psychologist Mark Laaser estimates that 30 percent of Christian pastors and leaders struggle with pornography. Among Christian men in general, more than 60 percent are estimated to struggle with continual sexual compulsions of some type.

Those are scary numbers. I wouldn't share them with you if they hadn't been substantiated repeatedly.

My husband's ministry involves helping men of all ages live lives of mental purity—a battle he himself wages daily. Bob gets into the faces of other men and asks them to name the specific distractions they need to remove from their lives in order to live in sexual integrity.

You'd expect them to name temptations such as the Internet, R-rated movies, magazine covers, even the giant Victoria's Secret display ads in the mall. But sadly, they often point to a surprisingly different pit—and they fall into it every Sunday.

"I'm struggling with the way women dress in church," they groan. They are specific in adding those two words—*in church*—because the location is what makes them feel so vulnerable.

After all, isn't church supposed to be a place where they can go to be free from temptation? What's a guy to do when the woman in his Sunday school class keeps showing up in a tight shirt and miniskirt, announcing it was a little cold in the parking lot?

I suppose he could sit on the front row every week. But come on, sisters! It's time we accept some responsibility for this predicament.

Many of us are sinning where the men in our churches are concerned—and in the process, we're sinning against God.

As Christian women, our greatest desire should be to please God in everything we do. First Peter 3:3 reminds us, "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment. ... Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight" (NIV).

But some of us are getting up on Sunday mornings and adorning ourselves in ways that aren't pleasing to God. The outfits we choose are intended to cause all eyes—especially men's eyes—to be on us.

For the sake of our brothers in Christ, not to mention the health of our personal relationships with God, we need to do four things:

1. We need to understand the power of certain kinds of visual images. Have you heard of the Gestalt theory? It's a visual design theory that teaches designers to control the attention of their viewers by forcing the viewers to mentally complete a visual image.

According to the theory, the challenge of completing an image that is incomplete intrigues the human brain. Our minds will always pause to finish an unfinished picture.

Try it yourself by checking out this trio of circles. What else do you see?

You think you see a triangle, don't you? That's because a triangle is the most common image that your brain can come up with to complete this picture.

Now let's apply the Gestalt theory to the issue at hand. What happens when a man sees a woman walk by wearing a low-cut blouse or a long, tight skirt with a slit all the way up the sides? He pauses—maybe even does a double take—because he sees something in part, and his brain wants to complete the picture.

He can't help it. It's a simple fact of visual science!

2. We need to understand the special weakness of men for a woman's beauty. The power of the Gestalt principle is multiplied by the fact that men have a God-given craving for a woman's beauty. Proverbs 5:18-19 says, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always. May you be ever *intoxicated by her sex.*"

I italicized two of the last four words in that verse because I changed them to better reflect the actual Hebrew meaning of the passage. The God of the universe looks down at woman, created to be a physical masterpiece, and man, created to enjoy the view, and actually encourages man to be fully intoxicated by her sexuality. Wow!

When a guy gets "intoxicated," his body can't help but react. Physiologically, many of our bodies' responses are activated by something called the autonomic nervous system (ANS). This system is controlled not by the will but by the environment.

For example, have you ever lost one of your small children at the mall, if only for a moment? Do you remember the sick feeling in the pit of your stomach? The rapid pulse?

Your body reacted automatically to the situation. You cannot control such reactions by choice. That's how the ANS works—it forces the body to respond to the environment.

Sexual arousal operates the same way. Certain things in the environment—what we see, what we hear, what we smell—work together to tell the brain that the time is right for sexual

response. The ANS takes over, and the brain reacts by sending specific chemicals through the body.

In a man this reaction is particularly strong since God created him to be visually stimulated. If he sees a woman walk by wearing revealing clothing, his pulse may increase; his body temperature may rise. Other changes may take place as well.

Of course, all this is beautiful and even celebrated by almighty God when the woman responsible for the arousal is the man's wife. But too often that's not the case.

Our culture constantly bombards us with sexual content in movies, magazines, advertisements and more. It's enough to overwhelm even the most godly man.

And though he can choose how to act upon this arousal, he frequently cannot control that it occurs. The environment controls it.

Exposing a man to continual visual stimulation is like hanging a noose around the neck of his spiritual life! Yet many Christian women contribute to the hanging Sunday after Sunday.

3. We need to call immodesty what it really is. The Bible is emphatic: We must never do anything to cause a brother or sister in Christ to stumble (see 1 Cor. 10:32). That's an uncomfortable challenge for those of us who've been lulled into thinking, "What's the big deal? It's just fashion!"

We may squirm even more when we read Ephesians 5:3: "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people."

Get that? Not a hint of sexual sin! But aren't we hinting at sin when we wear a low-cut blouse, a tight T-shirt or a super-short skirt?

According to its Hebrew and Greek definitions, sin means missing God's intended purpose for our lives. So what is God's purpose when it comes to our sexuality? Proverbs 5:18-19 says that it's to intoxicate one man with our beauty.

We are no doubt quite capable of getting many stares. But God says that the unique characteristics of our sensual beauty are to be treasured secrets—secrets kept for one man. When we dress immodestly, creating arousal in many men, we miss the purpose of the carefully crafted masterpiece that is our body.

Is it just a matter of fashion? No. Immodesty is sin.

4. We need to develop a righteous response to the crisis immodesty has created in the church. As you read this, maybe you feel a twinge of guilt. I know I felt one as I worked recently on a new book for teenage girls on the subject of modesty. Perhaps you need to clean a few things out of your closet, as I did.

Maybe you see a reason for concern in your church. Don't be afraid to ask a women's Bible study leader or perhaps even your pastor to address the issue. God's call for purity in the lives of His people is worthy of the tremendous effort it will take to break through the strongholds of denial in this area of sin.

If you're married, be ready to help your husband walk through a visually tempting world. When I came home to the news that a Victoria's Secret model had unexpectedly visited my husband's mind, I didn't condemn him or react with jealousy or hurt. Rather, I thanked him for sharing his struggle with me.

We talked about it until 2 in the morning. As Bob opened his heart, I was able to erase the shame that had been caused by this woman's indiscretion. We agreed to work together to make sure visual temptation is treated with a zero-tolerance policy in our home.

Whether you are married or not, it's important to set a good example. Make certain the clothes you pull out of your closet on Sunday morning—and every day of the week—are a statement of your commitment to live a godly life.

Read a companion devotional.

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