



By Gordon Dalbey

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Miniskirts, Spandex, and Sunday Morning

God gave the law through Moses, but grace and truth
came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17TEV)

Soon after I began pastoring in a hip Southern California beach town, I discovered that warm and sunny Sunday mornings can stir far more than spiritual attention.

Deliberately seeking to be "culture current," our church fostered a casual style in an effort to model the accepting grace of God. Slacks and sport shirt were fine for the pastor; t-shirts, levis and sandals common among the worship band.

Among the larger, mostly single Sunday congregation, however, an even more broad interpretation of "casual" seemed to prevail. Young women sporting their well-toned tan in shorts or miniskirts made an appropriate oxymoron out of the term "barely covered." Skintight lycra "bottoms," small tank tops and low-cut blouses were common.

In my first months at the church, I was so grateful to be free of my old coat and tie that I told myself it didn't matter what people wore, as long as they came. God would turn their hearts, if we just made His house hospitable enough.

Then one morning as I was trying to gather my thoughts before getting up to preach, I leaned down to pick up a stray note and glanced down the aisle--and found my gaze lingering. *Lord*, I exclaimed, drawing back and sitting up straight, *Don't these women realize what they're doing when they dress like that?*

At once, it struck me: Yes, they know very well what they're doing: seeking masculine attention in a manner altogether current to their culture.

Suddenly, my dismay gave way to an overwhelming anger--and then, the announcements finished and it was time for the pastor to preach. Quietly, I cried out for grace, got up and ploughed my way through a sermon.

Clearly, we had an unacceptable situation at church, and something had to be done about it. But what? And how? And perhaps, most significant, by whom?

For weeks thereafter, a battle raged in my heart and prayers over the way the women of our church were dressing--or rather, undressing--for worship. Unspoken in my prayers, and shamefully hidden in my heart, was the realization that for me to mention the subject at all was implicitly to admit that I was noticing the women's bodies.

Anger was clearly the emotion of choice here. It was flat-out true, I decided, that the women were dressing seductively, out of fleshly motives, and needed to be called into account. A glance at a concordance afforded me an arsenal of Scripture aimed at sexual immorality, denouncing such sins of the flesh and exhorting holiness.

Even as I raised my righteous biblical hammer, however, I recalled stories of grace and mercy, of harlots' washing Jesus' feet and adulterous women forgiven.

Was I just being harsh, judgemental, and authoritarian?

Indeed, a congregation of young singles was already ill-at-ease together as men and women. To rebuke the women publicly about their revealing clothes could easily polarize the two yet more painfully against each other. Many of the women might just get angry and leave, without ever talking it over with me.

Or was I just wimping out, letting sin go unchallenged in our midst?

I considered a more relational, one-on-one approach. But talking to single women privately about their sexual attraction seemed improper for a male pastor and was therefore out of the question.

Wasn't there some way to bring this word of truth to the women of the church that would not shame them, but rather, demonstrate manly, pastoral respect for them as sisters?

At last, a seemingly brilliant idea struck me: I could ask my wife to talk to the women! A Christian counselor who had ministered healing to many women at church, she could just tell them to shape up and dress properly--end of problem!

When I explained to her my dilemma—and my humble desire to bring the women of the church into account—she listened graciously. When I excitedly presented my solution, however, she balked.

"Honey," she smiled, ever-so-thinly, "this seems like a real issue for the church, and probably as much for the men as for the women. But I don't sense it's mine to address. It really seems something more for the pastor to deal with. You're still a bit confused over it, so you may need to wrestle it out some more with the Lord."

With a frown and a sigh, I went into my prayer closet—and discovered that the Lord was not about to let me use my wife as an escape.

At that point, two voices contended in my mind: the classic extremes of "conservative" religious shaming vs. "liberal" universalistic tolerance. In my heart, however, I remembered how often over the years Jesus had delivered me from the world's dead-end polarities, into the freedom and adventure of real life in Him.

If I were to enjoy that freedom now, I knew this issue could not be about religion or ideology—nor even morality. Somehow, it had to be about Jesus, and a Father who loves His sons and daughters so much He sets boundaries for them, to protect them for their created

purpose. Painful experience over the years had taught me that, in order to escape the world's consuming extremes and access that place of freedom in my heart, I'd first have to go to the Cross myself and surrender.

And so I cried out at last for Jesus to show me the situation through His eyes. Soon, I realized that my great anger and readiness to judge and criticize the women was at root an effort to cover my shame. In fact, I was dumping my shame on the women instead of taking it to Jesus—who had already borne it on the Cross.

"Lord," I prayed, "I confess that I'm distracted in church by women's bodies. I don't want to be, but I am. I feel ashamed as a husband, as a pastor. Forgive me for wanting to unload my shame on the women instead of bringing it to you."

I hesitated. "Still, Lord, I have to say it's not fair! I've worked so hard on myself, and ministered so much to the other men at church to get healed in our sexuality. They're distracted, too. If you won't take this awful brokenness away in us men, then what in the world can I say or preach to help you heal us all as men and women together?"

As I sat there alone in my office with the Lord, thoughts came to me which I can only characterize as fearful and wonderful. In a word, I knew what I had to do, and next Sunday was none too soon.

As the announcements drew to a close that morning, I took a deep breath. *Father, help!* I prayed, and glanced nervously around. A bare midriff caught my eye, an angry impulse crossed my heart, and I knew the battle was on.

Moments later, I gathered myself behind the pulpit, and looked out over several hundred young men and women, their faces bright from worship and ready for the preacher.

"For some time now," I began, "I've been sensing that we need to deal with an issue together as men and women. It's not an easy thing to talk about, and even harder to agree on what to do about it."

Uneasily, I glanced down at the floor, took another deep breath, then raised my eyes. "Let me begin by saying to the women of the church that I appreciate how much those of you who are single want a godly man alongside you as a partner. You know very well how much I've ministered among the men to bring the Father's healing to us, to make us the sons we long to be and, yes, the men you need.

"I'm proud to say that the brothers here at church have been working hard at getting healed in our sexual issues. We're learning to see women not as the world wants us to, as just bodies, but as God wants us to, as real persons--sisters, in fact. We want to be real men, to come alongside you as trusted brothers, to honor your heart and spirit as well as your beauty. This is no easy task in a society that floods us on all sides with sexual images of half-naked women, from highway billboards to TV. But we're trying. Very hard.

"This morning, I want to tell you that we need your help.

"We all appreciate the way we can dress casually for church here. Many of us grew up as kids in churches where that wasn't the case. For us today, dressing casually feels like acceptance and freedom to be who we are and be real together. I, for one, enjoy that!

"We all long for the innocence to accept each other for who we are, not how we look. But we know all too well that we live in a broken world that doesn't always allow that. Until Jesus comes back, we have to learn to be not only innocent as a dove, but also wise as a serpent. Because when we're honest, we know that the world's brokenness is inside us all. The battle to overcome it is hard, and we need each other's support.

"And so, my sisters, I would ask a very important favor of you in behalf of your brothers at church. Before you come to worship next Sunday morning, would you please look at yourself in the mirror and then, look at your heart, and ask yourself and the Lord two questions:

"First, 'Does the way I'm dressed this morning encourage men to see and know me for my body or for my heart and spirit?'

"And second, 'Does the way I'm dressed this morning help my brother focus on You Lord during worship, or distract him from You?'"

"I respect your relationship with the Lord, and trust you sincerely to seek His word for you. As your pastor, I will not tell you how to dress. But I will invite you to be part of God's healing work among us as men and women."

I hesitated. I felt as if I'd done OK, but something still was missing. *Anything more you want me to say, Lord?* I prayed quietly. And then, I knew.

"Above all, sisters," I concluded, "I want you to know that I believe this issue of cleaning out our minds and hearts is our issue as men, and we take responsibility for it ourselves. I hope we've learned from Adam that blaming women for our sin only makes it worse. We're not here to blame you, but to ask for your help."

At last, I took another deep breath and waited. Murmurs, hesitating glances, then a few nods.

"I don't want to belabor the point, so I'll say no more, except that I hope you'll come to me later and talk over any personal feelings you might have on the issue."

With that, I proceeded with the service.

Afterwards, several women came to thank me. "When you first started talking, I wasn't sure whether you were going to jump on us women and tell us we're the problem," one said. "You know—the old craziness like, 'He raped you, but it was your fault for dressing sexy'.

"But you didn't do that. You owned it as men, and I felt respected. I'll think it over and pray about it before next Sunday."

Buoyed by many similar comments, I was about to gather my notes and leave, when another woman emerged from the side. "I'm glad you had the courage to speak to the whole issue," she declared. Deliberately, she set her jaw and narrowed her eyes. "But you need to know that it works both ways."

"Both ways'?" I echoed, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," the woman shot, gathering steam, "that the women aren't the only ones around this church who need to be talked to!"

Turning, she searched the crowd, then like a laser beam, her arm and finger shot forward, pointing across the room. "Have you noticed Bill over there in his spandex bike shorts?"

I drew up. "Well, uh, no," I confessed. "Actually, I...haven't."

"Well, Bill's not the only man here who dresses without thinking how it affects the women during worship. Men come in here with wide shorts, tight sleeveless T-shirts. If you're really sincere about helping everyone get healed, you'll talk to the men of this church the same way you just talked to us women!"

"Well," I said, gathering myself, "I...uh, I'll certainly do that."

And, indeed, I did. Over the next week, I called Bill, and several other men the woman had pointed out, and spoke personally to them. Next Sunday, I spoke from the pulpit once again, this time to the men.

Because singles are often more mobile than married members, such a congregation changes regularly, and a pastor may need to bring this message to the church again over the years. Each time, I enjoyed watching the Lord's grace and truth produce fruit of maturity and respect where my former law-and-shame approach would only have rotted the branch.###