“You’re what?” “Are you kidding?” “Is that some sort of a joke?” “How do you make that work?” “Aren’t you a walking contradiction?”

These are the typical responses I get when folks find out that I’m an evangelical male college professor who teaches feminist studies.

I’ve been teaching courses on history and gender for over a dozen years now; I’ve also spent most of that time as a volunteer leader with my church’s senior high youth group. Both in my career and ministry, I am committed to reconciling what many think can’t be reconciled: feminist principles and Christian faith.

I was raised by a single mother who was a devout atheist and an ardent feminist. When she was a freshman in college, my mother read Bertrand Russell’s *Why I am Not a Christian*. She has rarely questioned her non-belief in the five decades since then.

I first came to Christ as a college student in what my family considered an odd act of rebellion. Even though I rejected my mother’s atheism, I still held on to the basic feminist convictions I learned from her. I have remained convinced throughout my academic career and spiritual journey that on the most important issues, I can still call myself a “feminist” even as I define myself as a Christian believer first and foremost.

My feminist background has made me a more effective pastor to the young men and women with whom I work.

When you’re an evangelical man doing gender studies work, of course you’re a real curiosity to both feminists and Christians. Many feminist women, often with good reason, are suspicious of the motives of men who work for the cause. (Men in the feminist movement are usually called “pro-feminist,” because calling themselves “feminists” strikes many as presumptuous.) Many evangelicals are simply bewildered; why would a Christian man devote his career to a cause that seems so opposed to biblical principles?

One of the most important ways pro-feminism and Christian faith are indeed compatible is in their shared commitment to helping men become more radically-loving human beings. Both feminism and Christianity oppose current cultural messages that objectify women. In my work as a professor and as a youth group volunteer, I’ve seen this compatibility in practice. My feminist background has made me a more effective pastor to the young men and women with whom I work.

Here’s an example:

It was May. The weather was getting hot. “Janae” (name changed, of course) wore short shorts, flip flops, and a tiny top to youth group. When we split up into single-sex groups for discussion, some of the boys started talking about what the hottest girl in the youth group was wearing.

One of the boys said “Dang, when I look at those shorts all I think is how much I want to ‘hit that’!” (The meaning of “hit that” ought to be clear even for those of you who don’t hang out with the younger set these days.) The other boys all laughed and concurred, and then turned toward me with sheepish grins. Yes, their youth minister was with them, but he was also a man. They assumed that it was okay to objectify women and girls as long as only other men were around — even in church.

A younger me would have rebuked them sharply. I could so easily have given them the “Janae is your sister in Christ, boys!” lecture, and tried to shame them. An even less mature me might have validated what they were saying by agreeing about Janae’s attractiveness, if for no other reason than to affirm my own manliness by showing them that I too was, after all, “just another guy” who enjoyed looking at pretty girls.

But since the discussion topic for that evening was supposed to be sex anyway, I figured I’d use Janae’s shorts as a teaching moment. So I asked the boys: “What’s it like when a girl like Janae is showing a lot of skin? How does it make you feel?”

The replies came fast and furious: “Dude, it’s so awesome!” “I love it when you can see so much!” And, of course “I can’t stop looking!” I let the boys share and laugh and get squirrely, and then I quieted them again. I asked: “When you say you can’t stop looking, what does that mean? Do you really have no choice?”

Silence. One boy, “Aaron,” blurted out “No way, dude. No choice. Girl that fine, can’t control my mind.” Other boys laughed and agreed. I waited and then followed up: “Do all of you feel like Aaron feels?
None of you think you can control where your eyes go and where your mind goes?"

More silence. Then “Roger” spoke up: “I guess it kind of is a choice. I mean, when you first see a pretty girl, you can’t help looking. But you can choose whether or not you keep staring at her legs or her chest. You don’t have to make the girl feel uncomfortable.”

Several other boys quickly agreed, and Aaron found himself on the defensive: “I don’t know dude, I don’t know how you can say you really like girls and not be totally distracted by something so fine.” Aaron, bless his heart, was trying to bully the other boys by threatening their masculinity if they didn’t take his side.

To my delight, what followed was a serious discussion lasting fifteen minutes. (That may sound short, but getting eight to ten boys in mid-adolescence to have a serious discussion for even that long is, I assure you, a significant achievement!) With a little prodding, the boys discussed their responsibility to control themselves.

In the end, even Aaron grudgingly admitted that he too could choose where his eyes went. Roger, his foil, high-fived him and said “Hey, Aaron, welcome to reality!”

I said something like this to the boys: “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with noticing girls. I do think there’s something very wrong when your focus on their bodies makes it impossible for you to also see them as people, as friends, as human beings. When you find yourself noticing a girl’s body and staring at her skin, I don’t want you to beat yourself up. But I don’t want you to make her uncomfortable either.”

“Next time you’re looking at Janae’s legs, Aaron,” I said, “I want you to remind yourself that she may be ‘hot,’ you are strong enough and good enough to never forget that she is a human being worthy of your respect. You’ve got it in you to always remember that.”

Aaron nodded solemnly. I don’t know if he really heard me or not, but other boys did. A couple of them thanked me for what I said and wanted to talk more about the topic.

Here’s where Christians and feminists can stand in at least partial solidarity with one another: boys in our culture are rarely told that they have choices about where they ultimately direct their eyes and their thoughts. Both faith and pro-feminism speak prophetically against the myth of inevitable male weakness and the myth of the uncontrollable adolescent male libido.

Christians and feminists aren’t in denial about the fact that young men can have very strong sex drives; we do deny that that drive is so overwhelming that it makes it impossible for adolescent boys to see the awesome, priceless humanity of even their most scantily-clad female peers. My goal is to reach young men “where they are” with a message about their sexuality that is realistic, loving, and both authentically pro-feminist and Christian.

Whether Janae is wearing sweats or in short shorts, how the boys treat her is ultimately their responsibility. Of course they’ll be more easily aroused by her in short shorts! Yet even if she were to wear a burka, plenty of her male peers would find themselves stimulated by a mere flash of ankle. The teenage libido is a powerful thing, after all.

Ultimately, I don’t want anyone, male or female, to feel acutely ashamed of their desires. I don’t expect them never to experience a moment’s lust for one another. But what pro-feminism and Christianity both insist on, even for young men, is that sexual desire, no matter how powerful, cannot be used as an excuse to rob our brothers and sisters of their humanity.

We do well, I think, when we don’t fear all of that raging sexual energy. We do even better to acknowledge it, celebrate it, and then ask that it always be tempered with a recognition of the other’s essential humanity and a deeper understanding of God’s great plan for our sexuality. That’s a far more effective strategy than either demeaning boys for lustng or asking girls to cover up in order to prevent the boys from doing so.

Secular feminism and Christian faith view many key issues of morality and identity very differently. But those differences do not preclude the possibility of finding significant areas of common ground, particularly around issues of male accountability, sexuality, and the shared conviction that our mothers and daughters, our sisters and wives, are entitled to be seen as fully and completely human.

I don’t hide my feminism from my fellow Christians; I don’t hide my faith from the feminists I work with in the academic world. Sure, there are folks in both camps who continue to be bewildered by my apparently contradictory spiritual and sociological commitments. But the teens in my youth group don’t seem to have nearly as much trouble reconciling the two.

Hugo Schwyzer is professor of history and gender studies at Pasadena City College. He’s a popular speaker and workshop leader on issues ranging from sexual harassment to the role of men in the feminist movement. Hugo also serves as a volunteer youth minister and confirmation class instructor at his church.