

On Modesty and Male Privilege

The reason for rape is not V-necks and skinny jeans

by Luke Harms

Recently, a fellow blogger wrote a great piece about the problems with modesty rules in Christian culture. She rightly pointed out how these rules unfairly shame women into particular behavior patterns, often resulting in lasting emotional and psychological damage. It was an honest, personal story of one woman's struggle to reconcile her freedom in Christ with the rigid behavioral codes often handed down to women from the pulpit or from Christian culture in general.

It was a fantastic piece. And then there were the comments.

The basic premise that many of the commenters were defending was that women have a responsibility to dress modestly in order to keep men from sinning through lustful thinking. Most commenters were pretty forceful in driving this point home.

But here's the problem as I see it: If, as many of the commenters suggest, men (even, or perhaps especially, Christian men) are incapable of looking at a woman who isn't covered from head to toe without wanting to rape her (or at least mentally rape her), then this is decidedly not a problem that women can or should feel obligated to solve. Perhaps that bears repeating, and in simpler terms:

If men are perverse, then that's decidedly an issue for men to address.

Shifting the responsibility to women simply enables men to think and act like sexual predators, rather than demand that they do the hard work of being transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2). Men, we shouldn't be saying, "Her skinny jeans and V-neck are making me lust." No, you're lusting because your God-given capacity for sexual attraction has morphed into a distorted view of women as objects that you need to control.

Now, before we go any further, I should say that yes, I believe that modesty is a quality that all Christians should strive for (and yes men, that includes you), but Christians often reduce modesty to a dress code for women. The fundamental question many Christians are not asking is, "Why is this notion of modesty, and the moral obligations derived from it, so lopsided?" And, "Why do we make countless proscriptions on the behavior on women, but essentially ignore the behavior of men? To me, the answer is as simple as it is disturbing. Call it what you want: misogyny, patriarchy, institutionalized sexism. I call it rape culture.

It's the same culture in which college orientations teach freshmen women tips for not getting raped instead of teaching freshmen men not to rape.

It's the same culture that blames and shames victims of sexual assault into silence, instead of bringing the perpetrators to justice.

It's the same culture that sees women's bodies as objects to be controlled as means to men's ends.

In the end, it's about control. It's about maintaining male privilege and perpetuating patriarchy. As the mostly male commenters approached this issue of modesty on my friend's post, little space was given for the man's responsibility in this cycle, and when it was mentioned, it was an afterthought. "Oh, sure, men should be modest too, and they're responsible for their own actions, but women shouldn't cause them to stumble."

I may be wrong, but I think this might be one of those speck/plank scenarios that Jesus was talking about (Matt. 7:4-5). Perhaps instead of focusing on the culturally ambiguous standard of "modest dress" for women, we should worry more about our attitudes toward, and our objectification of, women. Maybe instead of trying to place the blame on women for our own shortcomings, we should do the hard work of re-wiring our brains in order to remove the influences that continue to perpetuate our distorted view of women. Maybe instead of writing off rape culture in the church as "living in a fallen world," we should recall that Christians live in the fallen world, but are not of it.

Christians, even those raised in a culture of rape, can be conformed to the image of their creator (Col 3:10). We should focus on what it means for men to partner with God in bringing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. I suspect the kingdom of God doesn't include rape culture.

What do you think? How do you define modesty? How do we balance our freedom in Christ with our responsibility to our brothers and sisters in a way that doesn't embrace institutional inequality? Do you think that rape culture informs church culture, or have I gone too far too fast with this argument?

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Luke Harms is a Christ-follower, husband, dad, amateur philosopher, and aspiring writer. He tries to live out the motto: Live Simply. Love Fiercely. Give Extravagantly. He often fails at it. Then he writes about it. Luke blogs at lukelivingthetension.blogspot.com.