

STRENGTH vs. SAFETY

Spiritual Perspective Position Paper
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PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE A CHURCH

Clothes are a language. They communicate information about the individual wearing them in the context in which the clothes are being worn. As the context changes, the meaning might change as well. Example: The clothes that mark a young person as “cool” in youth circles would mark the same young person as “rebellious” in many adult circles, or, at the very least “more interested in being a cool young person than a responsible adult person.”

Should churches be allowed to have different expectations regarding styles of dress? Is it okay for a church that expects people to dress in their Sunday best to enforce or encourage their members to follow the rules of the church? The explanation might be that God is God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and when you come to church, you come to the House of the Lord. If you were coming into the White House to visit with the President, you would dress professionally as a sign of respect for the office. If you come to do business with God, you should dress respectfully.

On the other hand, what about a church in which people are permitted to dress casually? The rationale is often that we are everyday people coming before God just as we are. Sometimes it's that God is our friend, not just the King of Creation. Other times, it's about welcoming others into church so seekers are comfortable with the surroundings and accepted as they normally dress.

Some churches may not be completely comfortable with how casually people might dress, but they are more interested in reaching people where they are than they are worried about clothing styles.

What should a casual church do if someone from a more formal church shows up? What if there is someone from a formal church whose faith is being stumbled because he thinks that the behavior of others is showing that God isn't really the King, but only a friend? Would it be appropriate to tell others in the church who dress casually that they should no longer do so, or would it be more appropriate to educate the more formal Christian about the perspectives of this body of believers? If the person still struggled, what would be an ideal solution?

CHURCHES SHOULD HAVE A CHURCH TO WHICH THEY CAN SEND SOMEONE

If there was a nearby church that dressed more formally, it would open up an ideal solution. If the person believed dressing less formally showed less respect for God, he could either learn to accept that some people come before God best dressed casually, or he could be sent to a church that caters to his particular sensibilities. By networking with different churches, the Kingdom of God can be more effectively built. Each church can work to reach out to, share Christ with, and disciple those for whom it is uniquely suited. Should a church attract someone

for whom it is not well suited to provide care or discipleship, then that church can still help build the Kingdom by helping that person find a church that is best suited for helping that individual connect to God.

The issues might involve something like dress styles, the style or volume of worship music, standing or not standing during the reading of the Scriptures, whether sermons are teaching through the Bible or are topic based, or the exercise of various spiritual gifts (with which many nonChristians seem to be uncomfortable). It might include the version of the Bible being used (many argue, of course, that the King James is the only Word of God in English), the formality of the order of service (many ex-Catholics are more comfortable with a more rigid order of service and formal blessings), the type of Baptism practiced, the Communion practices, and how dissent is handled.

Because there are many issues that can get in the way of someone connecting to God, the less the church can be the obstacle the more the church can be the facilitator, the better the individual relationships with God can become. In many issues, individuals can be educated and can accept some changes in their belief system about what is and is not important. Something dearly held, or something that is meaningful to them, can be catered to not by compromising the identity of a given body of believers, but by helping that person find a body that closely resembles what will most help that person's growth in Christ.

SOME PEOPLE SHOULD NOT HAVE A CHURCH

Some issues would not be appropriate for any church, but that certainly does not stop church from accepting such behavior, even promoting it. The recent ordination of a homosexual bishop in the Episcopalian Church is such an example. Such behavior stands clearly against Scripture and should not be condoned. Similarly, a church should not form and call itself Christian that condones or supports fornication, adultery, drunkenness, drug addiction, pornography, child abuse, spousal abuse, or any number of areas of clear sin.

However, there are many others areas in which reasonable people who share a truly Biblical world view will differ, and it is those areas that are not clearly defined as sin, in which we should allow some variation provided the Bible is maintained to be the Word of God.

STRENGTH, NOT LIBERTY

A Strength theology is sometimes confused with a Liberty theology. Liberty would be a separate issue from Strength. If someone lives in complete liberty, they might actually still be living a sinful lifestyle and have accepted Christ. The demarcation point between a Christian and a non-Christian is what they have done with Jesus Christ, and not everything will get fixed instantly. In some people, certain struggles might continue for years, and certain temptations may

never be completely overcome - or should never be trusted as overcome

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with sins like child molestation being a prime example.

Is a carnal Christian still able to be saved by grace apart from works that no man may boast?

Of course. The genuineness of that conversion might reasonably be called into question if there is not apparent change in the person by his acceptance of Christ, and it should be the person himself who should ask how seriously he accepts Christ as Savior and Lord. However, many people, particularly those who are in “structural sin” might need a significant amount of time to change. Structural sin would include having one’s finances intertwined with a partner who is not a spouse, but with whom one shares many joint financial obligations that make it difficult if not impossible to separate financially. The structure and long-standing habit of the relationship might make change particularly difficult.

It may not be unusual for a church that focuses on liberty in Christ to ignore such things, believing that the Holy Spirit will deal with that person in His perfect time. Such a church might believe that pushing someone, particularly a new believer, is more likely to result in such a person leaving the church than result in changed behavior. If the person leaves the church, one may reason, then the church will lose the possibility to influence the person and the behavior will continue anyway - only the person will no longer have any meaningful Christian influence in his life. This approach to liberty might not be inappropriate provided there is some kind of meaningful effort made toward helping the person disentangle themselves from a sinful lifestyle, and providing support for the person when they are ready to try. Liberty can also be misused, of course. The Law of Liberty and the Law of Grace can lead to condoning even obvious sinful behavior and congratulating oneself for mercy and grace for accepting such sin openly. Paul rebuked the Corinthians for doing so.

STRENGTH, NOT DANGER

Strength is also different than Danger.

Danger can often be a problem resulting from either Strength or presumed Strength.

Danger is facing something that one is not prepared to face, or facing risk with no reasonable potential of success. This may result in someone engaging in spiritual warfare with a demonic power without adequate knowledge, adequate faith, or adequate training. This may result in a dry alcoholic or recovering addict to walk into unusual temptation thinking he is ready to face anything in his new faith in Christ.

Likewise, this can be the result of “Walking by Faith” in which one is actually walking in presumption. It can include stepping out and taking a massive risk because of faith that something has been named and claimed, and the belief is that God is under obligation to deliver. It can include

denying medical treatment because the Elders have prayed, and the belief is that God is under obligation to heal. These are exposures to Danger. There are any number of manifestations of people walking into unusual dangers because they believe themselves to be safe.

The purpose of Strength is not to walk into unusual danger anymore than the purpose of martial arts is to pick fights. A skilled martial artist with a proper understanding of the role of his skill knows that he can lead a normal life, make normal decisions, help strangers, protect people, and accept help when he's stranded, and he doesn't need to worry much about whether someone attacks. It isn't about fighting, it's about living a normal life. A wise martial artist does not pick fights, does not go out of his way to get in fights except when necessary to protect others from criminals, and a wise martial artist is not interested in fighting. Rather, he is interested in peace, and his skill helps him face ordinary dangers that come his way with diplomacy and calm confidence because he does not feel threatened. Thus, he can better love his enemies because his enemies no longer make him feel insecure.

THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPETING TRUTHS

Sometimes there is Truth on multiple sides of an issue. One way this may manifest is competing sides "being correct in what they assert, but wrong in what they deny." Such is the case with issues like the Sovereignty of God vs. Free Will of Man in which both are true and supportable from Scripture, but they appear on their face to be opposed points of view. The views are each correct in their assertion that God is Sovereign or that Man has Free Will, but they are wrong in that they deny that Man has Free Will or deny that God is completely Sovereign. If both sides are reconciled, an illuminating truth is discovered about the nature of God. God heals, but God sometimes does not heal. Some who recognize that God heals deny that God does not heal, assuming that if someone is not healed it is only because of unrepentant sin. Some who recognize that God does not heal sometimes deny that God does heal, believing that the spiritual gifts, including healing, ended at some early point in church history ("when the perfect comes, the imperfect will be done away"), often when the Bible was completed. By simply understanding that sometimes God heals, sometimes God does not heal, the issue is often resolved. We pray for healing, and we trust that God will do whatever God chooses to do. One possible resolution to this issue is the idea that we should do our best to cooperate with God's Creation Design while praying to God for healing. We follow the Biblical mandate to pray, but we also explore all available avenues to cooperate with God. If we are able to find the healing through a physician - how does a physician accomplish anything? The physician can only make use of the laws of physics, physiology and biochemistry - as God designed them! That means that even when we find healing through "naturalistic" means, we praise God because He

designed the Nature from which we have discovered something of how healing occurs. It is God who receives credit because He is the designer. Conversely, when things go wrong, we can presume that God designed the system right, and somewhere along the way we (humans) introduced “user-error” (the first instance of which was in the Garden).

Within a single virtue, Truth can compete. If we assume the worship music is intended to bring us closer to God, the intended virtue of worship time in a service is to bring people closer to God through worship. However, does everyone approach God best with the same musical style?

Some people find the classic hymns to be the most effective means of connecting to God, and an alternative punk style of music might sound very nearly satanic to those people. On the other hand,

many people from the alternative punk style find that the easiest way to connect to God, and the classic hymns make them bored and make God feel distant and irrelevant to them, more like He is only the God of their parents and grandparents, not a God for them. The underlying principle is perfect: worship to connect to God. What operates to produce connection can be nearly opposite.

What do you do in such a case? The answer is simple: choose.

Other times, the issue is interpretation. Can women lead or not? There seems to be consensus that women can lead women, and a general acceptance that women can lead children,

even boys. But can women lead men? Some churches believe that a woman should never teach or

lead if any man is in the class or group being taught. Some churches believe that a woman can lead

generally, but only if she is under the authority of a man who has authorized her to do so. Some

believe that authority can only be given by her husband if she is married, or from her father if she is single - no matter her age.

Some believe that the verse only refers to the husband and wife relationship since the same words translated man and woman in 1 Timothy 2:12 is frequently translated as husband and wife.

Since there is also Scripture indicating a level of equality between men and women not known to the culture (Galatians 3:28), and since Paul took women with him on his missions trips, and since Jesus showed particular deference to women that was uncommon in the culture of the time, some support the view that this does not preclude women teaching. The consistent place of a hierarchy of responsibility/power which was affirmed was in marriage, and the command is that the woman would not “usurp” authority, but with her husband’s permission, she could have it anyway.

So which is the proper interpretation? The range has validity, so one must choose which one will be followed. In a case like this, does one allow a class

of people to teach that the Lord might not wish to teach? Some churches reason that they do not wish to offend God by allowing a class to teach when it appears God does not want them to teach. On the other hand, does one eliminate half the population as potential teachers if the Lord does not intend to preclude them?

Some churches reason that they do not wish to offend God by eliminating half of His children as teachers, and if He wishes to call a woman to pastor, then they will accept a woman as a pastor.

Most churches, I imagine (since I have not surveyed churches nor have I seen a study on this subject) seem to fall somewhere in the middle. Even those who might be more inclined to the position that women can be pastors and teachers, even over men, will allow women to exercise that authority only under the ultimate authority of a man. Sometimes it is a concession to the culture of the church, and other times it is a reconciliation of Scriptural positions.

THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPETING VIRTUES

Sometimes virtues can compete, with two virtues that best help different people. Going outside Scripture for a more obvious example, if someone wants to increase their fitness and build strength, do they need a hospital or a fitness center?

Likewise, if someone needs healing from a particularly serious injury or disease, the sort from which we do not recover on our own, do they need a hospital or a fitness center? Which is better: hospitals or fitness centers?

If there are dozens

of hospitals, many of which can easily handle and would like more patients, but only a few fitness centers, which would be better to build, another hospital or another fitness center?

Sometimes stewardship and following God's leading can seem to conflict. Four out of five churches never become self-sufficient. Is there a time in which a supporting church should withdraw financial support? What if the money could be more effectively used elsewhere for discipleship, missions, or evangelism? Good stewardship would seem to indicate that limited resources should be used in a way that is most effective for the Kingdom - but how do we know?

How long should a supporting church provide support before a church plant is considered to have failed? Or should a supporting church plan to support a daughter church indefinitely, even if the daughter church is not growing? Is there virtue in stewardship? Of course. Is there virtue in

supporting daughter churches? Yes. What if those virtues conflict? What if you cannot send out ministry teams to the mission field because the budget you would otherwise use for ministry growth is being used by a daughter church that is not growing? You must choose a virtue. You must value one virtue over another.

STRENGTH VS. SAFETY

A Theology of Strength vs. a Theology of Safety is not a choice of which is best, but a choice between virtues. In a very real sense, they are simply different

sides of the same coin, since the ultimate goal is Safety in each case.

Example: If someone has a weak back (not an injured back, just a weak back), there are two opposite ways to deal with it. One is to avoid putting stress on the back so it will not be injured and therefore will not need medical or chiropractic care. Another way to deal with the exact same problem is to intentionally stress it through proper exercise to make it stronger.

Both techniques, done right, will protect the back. By avoiding stress, the back is less likely to be injured in the process of protecting it, but it will also grow weaker and more susceptible to injury from ordinary activity. By exercising the back, the back is more likely to be injured in the exercise, but it will grow stronger and be more resistant to injury from ordinary activity. Over time, a strong back might help the formerly weak-backed person do things he could not previously withstand, and he can do it with out risk of injury. Note that the purpose of a strong back is not to allow someone to do stupid things or dangerous things, but to do ordinary things and even slightly above ordinary things as the need may arise.

In Romans 14, there is a fairly lengthy account of issues. When some people teach or talk about this, only small portions about not stumbling others is cited and the rest is ignored. The

principle is that the strong in faith have much greater freedom than the weak in faith, and Paul repeatedly admonishes each side not to condemn or judge the other. Some will do things one way,

and some will do them another. We do not do something in front of others when we know or have reason to suspect that someone else will be tempted to do the same thing, a thing that to them is sin (“whatever is not of faith is sin”).

Some take this to mean that we should never do anything at any time or in any place that could possibly lead anyone to be tempted to do anything that might be sin. For this reason, some women will wear only long dresses, never pants, never anything above the knees, and will not wear makeup or make any attempt to be attractive to men. For this reason, some will never drink alcohol, never smoke, never play cards, never gamble, never go to a place where such things take place – even to the point of avoiding whole cities. Some in the middle see it as an edict against some public conduct, but not against their private conduct. Others see such a view as lacking integrity since you are being a different person in private than in public, while those who do such a thing see that they are not a different person - they are just tempering their conduct for the potential sensibilities of others.

Another middle perspective is that everyone should have the freedom to do a thing, but if someone with known sensibilities is present, then one of two things must take place. One option is that no one participates in a behavior that violates someone’s sensibilities. Another is that the person with the particular sensitivity must accept that not everyone else is subject to what restricts his conscience - but HE should not participate.

Example: Someone who firmly believes that God ordained His intended diet for Man in Genesis 1:29 (and even the Levitical dietary laws were merely a concession to a nomadic people)

will not be able to eat meat. Either everyone at a church, church function or Christian gathering can agree to the diet, or that person must be educated that others do not believe as he believes, and for them, eating meat is specifically permissible, perhaps citing Scripture to support that. However, a sometimes overlooked step is that the individual in question should be supported in HIS dietary restrictions according to HIS conscience before God. He should not do what he cannot do in faith before God.

Example: As a more concrete, real life example, there is a family taking classes at the Guardian Academy of Christian Martial Arts that have very different views from most of the families. As might be expected, the Guardian Academy generally teaches and trains people for a Theology of Strength. However, this family has family views that include some fairly common things like “no Halloween,” but also some more unexpected things like “no Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.” To them, such a pledge is idolatry. So they don’t do it. They are encouraged not to do it. The children are encouraged to follow the family standards and not do it.

They are expected to stand respectfully while the rest of us do it, but they are not required to participate in something that violates their conscience.

In time, they might learn that serious Christians in an intimate relationship with Christ can do such things, and they may participate then - but until that time they do not participate. They understand that for us, it is not idolatry. For us, it is patriotism and affirming that we follow the laws of a nation “under God.”

This is a perfect case in which our freedom in Christ is manifested in our allegiance to our country, but the show respect for God by specifically refraining from that activity. We do not see them as unpatriotic, and they do not see us as idolaters. We each recognize that our standards are simply different, and it provides each side an opportunity to discuss the issue. Each serves Christ in a way consistent with his or her conscience while respecting the right of others to do the same.

Back to the original example, would it be okay for the vegetarian Christian to serve only vegetables at an event he was hosting? Of course. Guests should not expect a host to violate his conscience to serve them any more than hosts should expect guests to violate their conscience to participate in a meal or event being hosted. A mature response would be for all sides to recognize the rights of the others, and so long as Christ was being glorified, the means by which it is done should not be disputed.

ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNERS IN STRENGTH

In a Strength Theology, one seeks Strength on purpose. A physical metaphor helps

illustrate this. If one seeks to build physical strength, first you must be in reasonably good health.

If you have a crippling injury, you should not be doing any exercises that require you to risk the area of your injury. If you are injured, you need treatment first. If you simply have a hurt, you need to wait for it to recover. All these apply only if the particular problem is related to the Strength you intend to build. Example: If you only intend to work on your grip, then the only injuries relevant to your training are those that affect the hands and elbows.

Accountability Partners are sometimes used as a means of producing Safety through avoidance. Accountability Partners are there to see to it that you've avoided temptation, that you've done the things you've said you would do, and they often have no more power or authority than the right to ask the question. This can be a very effective way of helping people avoid temptation, accomplish intended goals such as Bible reading or quiet times, or attend classes. Accountability Partners in a Strength Theology would have similar goals, but some problems would be approached differently. Even when underlying issues are dealt with, sometimes surface habits continue. If a deep wounding exists, whether resulting in pain, bitterness or depression, it may drive a self-destructive behavior. Once the driving force is eliminated, complete healing may occur, or the behavior may continue as a conditioned habit.

An Accountability Partner in such a Strength scenario would act like a Spotter to a bodybuilder. Using drinking to excess as an example, the person would be encouraged to avoid all temptation when alone. He would be educated on the principle of The Point of No Return so he should be able to determine what level of temptation he can comfortably withstand. The Point of No Return is that point in any temptation in which you no longer have the will to say no, but become reliant upon outside circumstances or others to stop you.

Then the partners would get together to address the issue. In a hypothetical case of drinking, they might meet and talk at a place that serves beer and wine, but not order any. They would talk about spiritual issues, and may include discussion on how he feels and how he is getting used to have it on a menu but not ordering. When that is comfortable, like when a body builder can comfortably lift a certain weight, you make it harder. They might later go to a bar.

Eventually, they might order a beer and leave it sitting on the table untouched while the other person drinks. The goal is to "normalize" the presence of alcohol so the person can make ordinary choices or do ordinary things. The goal is to make the person able to attend sporting events, company parties, go to weddings and receptions, and eat at restaurants and not be tempted anymore. It takes time, but so long as the underlying driving wound has been healed, it is a matter of conditioning new surface activity and training a new way of thinking.

Obviously, this is more time intensive in the training department. The Accountability

Partner must be given the power to stop the drinker if he goes for the drink. He must be ready and willing to remove them from the temptation, and given permission to take drastic action if necessary, even intentionally spilling the beer out on the partner if he fights over the drink. With the power to do so and the clear willingness to do so, the partner being trained on that issue knows he has a clear safety net. If he is too tempted, he can ask that they leave and that will be respected. If he falters, the Accountability Partner will make sure that succumbing to desire will not result in action. This is just like a Spotter listening to a training partner when the weight is too much, or a Spotter taking the weight all by himself when the partner can't do another rep.

And the goal isn't to allow the person to make dangerous decisions. The goal isn't to allow the problem drinker to hang out in bars all by himself, buy drinks and stare at them. The goal is to allow him to function normally in modern society, a society in which alcohol is available almost everywhere and present at many events.

The principle can be used with many behaviors, but the key is to understand an accountability partner as a Spotter. Working out without a Spotter means you must train with much, much lighter weights, you must always make absolutely certain you can complete your reps by yourself, and you must be exceptionally careful because you have no help. When you have a Spotter than can handle the weight, that's when you can push yourself and your Spotter will help you by supporting some of the weight for you. If something is too hard for you, you can back off and your Spotter will help you. If your Spotter thinks you're pushing too hard, your Spotter can back you off and you listen. Your Spotter must be strong enough to bear the weight for you when you fail.

In Accountability, your partner must be strong enough to bear the temptation and go head to head with you to stop you from falling should you succumb. He's not there to do it for you. He's not there to keep you out of the gym. He's there to work out with you so you get stronger. You do

not take one person struggling with drinking and have him "train" with someone battling the same temptation. You do not take someone who struggles with lust, and have him work with someone struggling with lust. You do not even put people in a position in which they may end up "trading off" sins (you let me do mine, I'll let you do yours). A Spotter must already have enough strength to move the weight in question.

STUMBLING A BROTHER

Of course this brings up the issue of Stumbling a Brother. The above scenario would seem to fit the definition many people have of Stumbling a Brother, except, of course, for the fact that it is intentionally pursued with the agreed goal of producing Strength.

Romans 14:21 “It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.” The principle here appears, by later comment in the passage, to lie with the act of doing something that may be okay for you, but for whom it is a sin for another and you are tempting the other person to do what is wrong for them. If they follow your example, they will have sinned because they did not act in faith.

Clear teaching on the idea of Whatever is Not of Faith is Sin can clarify a great deal about this issue. Example: Halloween. For many Christians, they cannot participate in any way, shape or form. To do so, they feel, is a compromise with the devil, advocacy of witchcraft, advocacy of the occult, and support and celebration of the Devil’s Day. Many other Christians do not believe they can participate in Halloween the way it is celebrated, but will do Harvest Festivals as an alternative.

For some in the first group, they see that as a compromise. “Halloween Light” is still Halloween.

“Diet Evil” is still evil. For those in the latter group, it is an acceptable practice, one that sanitizes the holiday adequately so that the problems with the holiday are excised from the practice.

Yet another group has no problem with Halloween at all. They might place limits on costume choices - such as you don’t get to play a bad guy, but they otherwise do Halloween normally. Some are simply carnal - with their faith affecting very little of their lives outside the church. Some simply refuse to cede a single day to the Devil. Their faith in Christ is bigger than Halloween, and Halloween is no threat to them, their faith or their Jesus. To back down from the holiday is giving too much ground to the Devil, and they refuse to see it as anything more than a dress up day with costumes and candy.

For those for whom Halloween is a satanic holiday and practicing anything related to it is dealing with the devil, we say “Avoid Halloween completely.” For those for whom a Harvest

Festival is an acceptable alternative, we say “Enjoy your Harvest Festival, but avoid regular Halloween.” For those for whom Halloween is no challenge to their faith or conscience, for those who can and do celebrate “All Hallowed Eve” and stand firmly with Jesus, we say “Happy Halloween.” To all we say, “Follow your conscience, and do not judge or condemn others whom the Holy Spirit has not convicted on the same issue.” We use Romans 14 and the edict against condemning weaker in faith, and against judging the stronger in faith.

The clear teaching is that if someone will be tempted to follow you, don’t do it. Stop them. Let them know that not only is it okay for them not to participate in something - that they should

NOT participate if it troubles their conscience at all. We teach those who do Harvest Festivals to

accept that those who have nothing to do with any form of anything at that time of year should not be encouraged to participate. Rather, those who choose

to opt out because of their conscience before God should be encouraged to obey the stricter of the rule of Scripture or the rule of Conscience. The same applies to Halloween celebrants.

Without teaching of the principles and open communication, it seems that Paul was absolutely correct in his assumption that those who are stronger in the faith tend to condemn those who are weaker (“Look at him. He still thinks this idol is a god.”) and the weaker in faith tend to judge the stronger in faith (“Look at him. He’s worshipping Artemis!”). The Scripture is right, and two thousand years later, people are still the same.

We should not tempt others to cross their own lines, the lines of their culture, or the lines of Scripture - whichever is most strict. We cannot avoid doing anything that another thinks is wrong.

Even as simple a thing as celebrating our faith on Sunday is an issue for many, as is their celebration on Saturday for some who celebrate on Sunday. Dancing is an issue for some, and not dancing an issue for others. Facial hair has been an issue, smoking an issue, women’s clothing an issue (pants/dresses, length of skirts, swimwear, make-up), worship styles, legalism vs. freedom in Christ, etc., etc., etc. There is seemingly no end, so how shall the kingdom deal with differences?

DEFINING LUST

As we move forward in this discussion, we must address the definition of Lust. Matthew 5:28

reads “but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her in his heart.” (NASB) Commonly, lust is thought to be anything much more than a stray thought, or even just a stray thought, and for some, even a mere attraction might be thought to be lust. Most would agree that a simple recognition of a woman’s beauty would probably not constitute lust. When someone is to the point at which he desire and intends to commit adultery with a woman, few could argue that it is not lust.

Lust, as I understand it, is more than a recognition of beauty. Even seeing a woman’s body, whether in a skin tight outfit or seeing actual skin, and recognizing the beauty, attractiveness, or even the desirability of such a body I do not believe is lust. When an initial thought of adultery or fornication strikes, part of lust depends upon what we do with that thought.

If we entertain it, if we dwell upon it, if we reach a point in which we would like to act on it,

then I believe that’s lust. If the only thing stopping pursuit are consequences of doing so, including fear of rejection, then I believe that’s lust. If

she was available, willing, and “no one would ever know,” what would you do? If you would, you haven’t in your body, but you have in your heart.

Fantasizing about a woman would almost certainly qualify since one is actively imagining doing it,

and that damages the mind and how we think about that woman and women in general.

In fact, that's the basic definition for all heart sins or thought-life sins. If the reason we would "never" do a thing is because of the consequences of doing so, then we are guilty in our heart. If we are afraid we'd get caught, afraid of what might happen, afraid of our reputation, driven by a fear of losing our job, status or position, fear of someone else's reaction - then we probably have heart guilt.

If we stand with God and do not desire to follow through because it is wrong, and we do not do wrong things, then we are not guilty. Fortunately, heart sin does not have to lead to action if we intervene between the thought and the deed with confession and take whatever action may be necessary to eliminate the risk of follow through.

Very often, I believe the Holy Spirit will not deliver someone from a lust problem even if they pray for Him to do so. For many people, lust issues are the only or the most obvious symptom of an underlying problem, and God may not remove the symptom because we must find the actual problem. In such a case, removing the symptom would not be loving. Lust issues reveal other underlying issues, and those underlying issues must be dealt with. If the "lust" is ordinary appreciation and attraction, then it remains and a reminder of our humanity and the need to exercise our moral Will in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

MODEST DRESS, EXTERNAL ADORNMENT

1 Timothy 2:9 reads "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broidered hair or gold, or pearls, or costly array."

(KJV) "Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments."

(NASB)

The word here for "modest" (KJV) actually isn't talking about "well covered" or "conservative." The word here is kosmos, meaning well ordered, harmonious, decent, well arranged. The word actually is related to kosmos, and carries with it the implication of being harmonious with the world, an implication that whatever the fashion of the "world" in which the woman is, her style of dress should be about the same. Her dress should reflect what is acceptable and appropriate for the circumstances according to the culture in which she lives.

The "modest" in the NASB translation, shamefacedness in the KJV, is aidos. Aidōs also has to do with the standards as they relate to others. The "modest" here again reflects the circumstances and culture. It is modest in behavior, not unworthy or prideful, reflecting a demeanor. The sobriety or discreetly refers to being sound of mind, that one's dress reflects choice and order, self control. The references to broidered or braided hair refers to fancy hairstyles, with the context suggesting one appropriate translation of a fancy arrangement of braided hair as might be worn by women of wealth and status, reflected in the jewelry references and the cost of garments. All in all, the point seems to be that

women should not use fashion to try to make themselves look better than others by appearing wealthy. Perhaps the context of men and women or husbands and wives might also reference that a wife should not spend an inappropriate amount of the household money on her clothing and jewelry.

More light is shed on the subject by 1 Peter 3:3. It is a nearly identical verse. "Whose adorning let not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel." The "adorning" here is actually *kosmos*, which is nowhere else translated "adorning" but usually "world" or some variation thereof. In this context, it would appear that a "woman's world" should not be governed by externals of what she looks like, what she wears, how fancy her jewelry or clothing. Obviously Peter did not mean to say that she should not dress,

but in context it appears that he is saying she should not let her clothing be for showing off wealth and status.

It is interesting, of course, that this element of fashion still exists. People in general, not just women, will use expensive clothes, fine jewelry and wealth to try to appear better than others.

Today, it might extend to cars, electronics, and the newest, fanciest doodads that we do not need and may not even be more useful than what we had, but we gain a sense of status from having them and we like to feel better than others for our material belongings.

At least one female teacher was talking about the issue of modest dress, talking about necklines and hemlines in the sense of covering up, but she was wearing a sequined jacket and jewelry, a style of dress that is addressed more on point by the two verses than what is and is not covered.

None of this is to give women license to dress however they choose so long as their clothing is not expensive. For that matter, even expensive clothing might be appropriate in certain circles in which anything less would be considered disrespectful. The clothing should suit the culture and the circumstances. Culture defines the meaning of clothing, and pop culture may define the meaning of clothing. For instance, a turtleneck sweatshirt would cover a lot, but if it had a Playboy bunny logo on it, that would be inappropriate because that logo carries a meaning in an industrial and postindustrial culture.

DRESSING NORMALLY

All this is to say that women should dress normally for the culture and circumstances. What is acceptable for one place may not be acceptable in another. What is completely unacceptable in some cultures is perfectly normal in others.

Example: In Wahabi villages in Saudi Arabia, women must be covered from head to toe, and if they are married, they must wear black. Blue signifies a single woman, and a married woman wearing blue would be considered immoral even though she would still be covered from head to toe. The reason is because the color signifies her marital status. In Afghanistan when the Taliban was in control, a woman was arrested for indecent exposure even though it was because her

car had crashed into a waterway and she had become exposed while saving her children from drowning.

By our cultural standards, their dress standards are excessive, but their rationale is the same.

Men are tempted by female skin, so the solution is to cover all female skin. Should a married

Christian woman go to one of the Wahabi villages, she should dress in a full, black burkha because anything less would be a violation of the local culture.

She should never go anywhere without a male escort, either, because that also speaks to her morality. Even though covered head to toe, she must have a care to wear the proper color, black, because it is not skin that is the issue, but the message conveyed by the clothing worn.

Example: In a more concrete local example, on warm summer days, it is not unusual for women in Southern California to wear shorts and a tank top or spaghetti strap top. However, just a few miles south of the border, the outfit that is common and (for summer) still considered conservative, means something quite different. South of the border, shorts and sleeveless shirts on a woman indicate a woman of low morals. If a woman dressed in this manner is in a tourist section

of the country, it is recognized that she is a tourist and the local standards do not apply. If she is

away from the tourist areas where the locals are not familiar with foreign customs, they will make assumptions about her and respond accordingly.

So a woman can wear shorts and a tank top in San Diego, but they should wear sleeves and long pants in Mexico. If a Mexican woman from the interior of Mexico came to San Diego, our

local culture would make shorts and a tank top acceptable, but if her personal sensibilities still considered such clothing as meaning low morals, she should not wear shorts and a tank top. Her

presence does not mean no one else in a church could dress that way, but if she had a question about “why all the Christian women up here dress like prostitutes?”

someone would have to explain both the concept of clothing as cultural language, and the meaning of the clothing here.

THE BIKINI ISSUE

All this brings us to the issue that has been dubbed “The bikini issue.” The bikini issue is a manifestation of the Strength vs. Safety issue and the related issues expressed in this paper, and it is a concrete example because it can and would probably happen. If a church held a beach party, pool party or other swimming event, the swimwear of the women may be an issue. The question has arisen as to whether it would be acceptable for a church to allow a woman to wear a bikini, or if it should be disallowed. If allowed or disallowed, how would the issue be handled?

More specifically, the question is whether women should be allowed to wear normal

bathing suits. What would be normal is different from culture to culture and time to time. If Amish allow women to swim at all, their wading suits are likely a cotton gown. At one time in

history, American women were not allowed to swim at all, and doing so was considered evidence of witchcraft. Caribbean women were expected to swim. Different times, different cultures, but the same principle applies: What's normal?

In a culture in which a bikini is a normal bathing suit, can a Christian woman wear a bikini?

In Southern California, Florida, the Caribbean, and Hawaii, bikinis are not only normal, they are normal enough to be commonplace. Many of the various two piece variations, bikinis, tank-inis,

monokinis, string bikinis, low rise, and French cut are all fairly common variations.

However, there are also exceptionally revealing variations that are not common or normal, notably thongs.

In Brazil, though, thongs are common. In many of the world's beaches, toplessness is also common to the point of being normal. One American Christian discovered this when he was a

counselor at a Christian camp in Sweden and the women decided to go swimming. They completely undressed in front of the men and put on bikinis "to be conservative."

Obviously the standards and practices are different in different cultures and different times.

For Southern California, two piece bathing suits are common and normal. A visit to a local beach or pool will reveal that. Visits to higher end resorts the world over also reveals this same fact,

except for the fact that as you climb up the socioeconomic ladder, women are even more prone to wear two pieces.

Would this be enough to make it a reasonable choice for a church to allow women to wear whatever is their normal bathing suit, provided what is their normal bathing suit is also normal in the culture? What makes this a particularly important issue is the fact that so few churches would allow such a thing, even if they would not directly address the issue in any official manner.

Is it also reasonable for a church to specifically disallow such bathing suits? Of course.

Churches and schools can disallow spaghetti straps, disallow skirts above the knees, disallow shorts, disallow pants, disallow short hair, disallow jewelry or disallow makeup. In short,

organizations can set their own standards for reasons they consider appropriate.

Agathos Ministries would be a church in which whatever is normal would be allowed. So long as a bikini is normal swimwear in the culture in which an Agathos church was located, it would be permitted at events.

Likewise other fashion issues. If spaghetti straps were common formalwear, then they would be allowed at formal events. The issue would be one of the Language of Clothes, a language that varies from culture to culture. So long as the local cultural meaning of a style of dress was not immoral, the style of dress would not be specifically disallowed.

CLERGY PORN

40% of pastors admit to use of pornography, and even a higher percentage of clergy use or admit to frequent and recent use more than laity. It appears that the problem clergy have is a more severe fall, not just because of their position in spiritual leadership, but because as a pastor they may feel they can confide in no one. Lay people who have a problem are much more likely to tell their spouses than pastors are likely to tell their spouse. In many couples, wives and husbands may look at pornography together, which may reduce or eliminate the “betrayal” element of doing so - but it does not resolve the moral implications.

This may be evidence that should call into question the validity of the technique used by pastors to avoid such problems, and the ability of even pastors to implement the very defenses they promote from the pulpit. If something fails 40% of the time, it would not be entirely inappropriate to consider that another method might be able to produce even slightly better results.

If the goal to avoiding such problems has been to dodge temptation, that may have been effective when men had to be proactive to find porn. Anyone with a computer who uses the internet does not have to go look for it, it comes to find you.

Relatively speaking, it is easy to resist the temptation to buy a magazine someone might see you buy, go to a store that specifically sells those products where you might be seen, or own something that someone might find, than it is to avoid clicking on a link sent to you in an email. It is far easier to resist going to see a movie at which you might run into someone than it is to resist an easy click. Again, the action of having to pay for something is often not an issue since the porn sites come find you and offer much for free, presumably to try to get you to pay for the rest, and given the income of the porn industry, they are obviously successful.

When porn comes to find you, you need a different level of resistance and skill. When women are more readily available, and when they might even be the pursuers, a different skill set may be required.

Pastors have frequently fallen for women whom they have counseled or secretaries. When this leads to inappropriate relationships, it is not likely because a woman showed up for a counseling session or work wearing an outfit that revealed skin.

It is not likely that until that moment the Pastor was fine, then in a moment of flashed skin, he fell. More likely, a connection was formed, a relationship developed, and it was permitted to pass the appropriate bounds of friendship to something sinful. At least one pastor who faced temptation even went so far as to tell the woman he was counseling “We’ve lusted for one another, so we’re already guilty!” That was

the excuse to take the next step. It SHOULD have been the warning to stop counseling that woman, get backup in his sessions with women from then on, and go to God for forgiveness. If

pastors can make such rationalizations, how are we training our youth?

The main point is that the number of pastors that fall to adultery and other sexual sins,

including addiction to pornography, should indicate that there is an underlying problem that should be dealt with in some more effective way. Maybe the problem has always been this bad, but it used to be a better kept secret. Maybe the problem is worse than ever before. Regardless, it is a problem and something should be done.

If what's being done isn't working, you can get more extreme. The ultimate ends of that approach are practiced in radical Islam today. In the Christian past, it was practiced in the Victorian era in which women were covered from neck to floor, and even piano benches and tables were skirted because the shape of the leg might incite lust. Men and women did not socialize except under strict formality, and then they separated, with the wives and older single women retiring to one room and the husbands and older single men retiring to another. I do not believe anyone would advocate a return to such extremes, but the point being that heading in this general direction from where we are is one legitimate way to address the issue. Many actually advocate the idea that women should not, and in fact, cannot, be friends with members of the opposite sex, and married women in particular should never have male friends. Some believe that men and women should not work together, and some will avoid jobs that create that need.

Another option is to explore what else might work.

The issue of Clergy Porn is not to say that clergy are particular susceptible, though some statistics would indicate they are slightly more susceptible than the laity, but mostly to show that even clergy are susceptible. If even clergy fall in this area on such a routine basis, then something of the process they use that results in so many falls needs to be examined. If relevant variables can be discerned, then they can be addressed.

One way is by a Safety theology, which is legitimately practiced by a number of churches that stand more toward a Victorian approach than local culture.

Another way is to normalize current fashions, normalize the female body, and gain respect for women and their bodies as a wonderful creation of God, not just a sex object.

NORMALIZING NORMAL

Normalizing is a term that refers to something becoming normal. It is most often used in political and sociological discourse when talking about the efforts of homosexuals to "normalize"

their behavior and other negative behaviors. It is the same process that gives us the idea of democracy when most of human history had some form of monarchy, that women could vote when for most of American history it was not thought women could make political decisions, that men did not have to wear hats, and that women could wear pants. Once something is normalized, it is considered a normal part of society.

Not all normalized things are good, of course. Sin is normal, but it is still sin. Some sins are seen as "normal sins" and other sins are seen as shocking. Lying is thought to be a fairly normal sin, and these days fornication has been so normalized

that few people are shocked when they learn a couple living together is not married. Divorce is common enough that people are not shocked when children do not have the same last name as the parent.

Many normalized things are useful. It was once shocking to think of lay people with an actual copy of the Bible in their own language. Tyndale translated the New Testament and nearly all of Old Testament History into English, a job that was later finished by other scholar-soldiers and filled with extra commentary.

The Geneva Bible was the first completed Bible in English, and once the people got used to the idea that they could have and read the Bible for themselves (it was normalized), they would not hear of the crown taking it away. The English crown had a problem with some of the Geneva Bible, particularly the commentary and wanted to get it out of circulation.

King James solution was to commission a team of scholars to translate a new version and he managed to supplant what he could not just take away. The Bible has been available in English ever since.

Once we get used to something as normal, it loses its shock value. Of course, entertainment tries to push the boundaries, but after a while even “shock value” attempts become so normalized that they appear stupidly silly, not shocking, and becomes more likely to create a backlash than popularity. When we get used to new fashions, they cease to be shocking or tempting. When “flappers” first started wearing dresses above the knee, it was scandalous. Now it’s normal in church. When the waltz was first introduced, it was scandalous because men and women would be dancing together arm in arm. Before long, the waltz was one of the more conservative dances.

Likewise, if we normalize normal women’s fashions in our own psyche, we cease to be shocked or tempted by it. The more we hide, the more it catches our attention when we do see it.

WHO CHANGES

One of the issues that has surrounded this issue is the question of “who changes?” If someone lusts because of a bikini, but they insist that they would not lust if she wore a one-piece, is that enough to make a woman change? What if he finds he lusts in the one-piece, but he believes he would not lust if she wore shorts, should she change again? One school tried having the girls cover up with T-Shirts over their bathing suits, but they found that they ended up making the swimming event look more like a wet T-Shirt contest.

Some women find it problematic that they must change from normal to more conservative because someone else is entertaining wrong thoughts. They find it interesting, and troubling, that it is not the person who lusts who is asked to change, since it is his thoughts and intents that are wrong, it is she who must change because someone else is doing something wrong. It isn’t even to protect herself or protect him, since the context of a church event would not allow anything to happen anyway - it is because this other person entertains a sinful thought life that she must change. Also, many of the same women do not see how a

one-piece automatically does not promote lust, but a two-piece automatically does. Finally, they do not see why it would be appropriate for such a person to attend any beach event or swimming event anyway, since the presence of others not connected to the church would likely mean he would end up seeing female skin anyway - so if that's the case, such a weak person should not be at the event anyway.

FAMILY RULES

In another issue related to normalizing, we are often more casual with our bodies around family. Men and boys might see a mother, wife, sister or daughter wrapped in a towel or in her bedclothes, but we do not consider that innately sexual. Why is that? Part of it is the family familiarity and the normalizing of that individual in that style and level of dress. Does incest happen? Of course. Does that mean all family members must always be fully dressed or be in private behind a locked door? That does not seem to be the rule.

One way to create this kind of normalization is through constant exposure. That to which we are constantly exposed becomes our baseline - our normal. It does not shock us to see a young, beautiful woman wrapped in nothing but a towel walking from the bathroom to her bedroom because that's "just our sister". We see her all the time like that.

It practically becomes invisible.

We might even stop her to ask a question or even chat, and it would not even occur to us that she is only wearing a towel.

A church family will not live together like that, obviously, but some of the rules of extended family may be useful. "That's my sister" is a good way to think to deal with normal dress.

JUDGING NORMAL WOMEN

When a church makes a declaration such as "women should not wear bikinis because they are innately sexual," they invite judgment on the women who dress in such a manner. When

similar declarations are made against any fashion style, whether it is bikinis, bathing suits in general, whatever the latest fashion trend may be, a significant percentage of the congregation will believe they have license to discuss such women as "unchristian" or "seductive" or "sexual."

Many women who normally dress in such a manner, and honestly do not understand why such a big deal is made of it, will not do so at a church function or with most of the church family because they know they will experience judgment. They may be welcomed, or at least not sent home, but it is the kind of welcome given to sinners who have not yet come to know Christ well enough. This is a common perception, one of which it seems many pastors are unaware.

CONDEMNING VIRTUOUS WOMEN

Likewise, by the way the issue is frequently addressed, it creates division. Christian women who read their Bibles every day, who pray every day, who are submitted to their husbands,

and who are moral and pure are judged. The other side of that is that the Christian women who think the whole issue is silly tend to condemn those who do not and cannot, in good conscience, do what they do. There is a tendency for one to see the other as unrighteous, and the other to see the one as weak, silly, and works oriented. Paul talked about this in regards to Meat Sacrificed to Idols in Romans 14.

STUMBLING A SISTER, REVISITED

Suppose a Christian woman from Hawaii and a Christian woman from an Amish community met on a Southern California beach. The Hawaiian is wearing a string bikini. The Amish woman is in what appears to be a long cotton dress. They meet one another knowing that one another are Christians.

The “fleshly” response would be for the Hawaiian woman to condemn the Amish women for the silliness of walking around on a California beach with a cotton dress on, when a bikini or one piece would be much more appropriate. The fleshly response of the Amish woman would be to judge the Hawaiian woman as ungodly, unchristian and overtly sexual for wearing such a skimpy outfit in public.

What I believe would be a more Christian response would be for the women to think in this way. The Hawaiian woman should understand that the Amish woman is from a community in which her dipping suit is normal and proper, and the more common bathing suits found in Southern California would make the Amish woman feel virtually naked in public, and would definitely be a violation of her moral upbringing and a sin for her before God. The Amish woman should understand that the Hawaiian woman is from a different culture, one in which morally pure, Christian women nearly always dress that way at the beach, and even a one piece is unusual unless you are overweight and need the additional support, and even then it is only optional. The Amish

woman should understand that God loves the Hawaiian woman and if the other woman can stand before God in good conscience dressing that way, then it may not be a sin for her. If the Amish woman tried to get the Hawaiian woman to follow Amish standards on a California beach, that would be legalism. (Actually IN the Amish community It would be different.)

If the Hawaiian woman tried to get the Amish woman to wear a bikini on the California beach in violation of her conscience, that would be stumbling her sister. In fact, the Hawaiian woman should encourage the Amish woman to wear her dipping suit to remain upright in her conscience.