

Whose Sin Is It Anyway?
By Pauline Dillard
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As I stood on the front steps of my church one of the men in the congregation approached me. “The way you dress is creating a problem with lust for me, and for some of the other men in the church,” he said.

I looked down at myself. I was wearing a round-necked white blouse and a straight, blue, wool skirt that ended just above the knees. I was stunned.

I went home shaken. Nothing like this had ever happened to me. When I told my husband about the conversation he got angry. “You dress within the limits of social propriety,” he said. “What’s his problem?”

I agreed with him for the most part. But, even if lusting was this man’s problem, as a Christian woman did I have some responsibility to my Christian brother? And if I did, what were they?

I took counsel with several Christian people, both men and women. The consensus was that the sin of lusting was essentially the man’s, but I have some responsibilities, although no one could really outline exactly what they were. No one knew what to do about the fact that no matter what I wore there would be a man that would find it attractive.

I knew I couldn’t go around trying to constantly dress for everyone else, but I didn’t know what to do. When Sundays rolled around and I needed to dress for church I felt lost. If I wore slacks instead of a dress or skirt would some people think that was inappropriate and disrespectful? What if they were slightly too tight? Would I then be causing someone to stumble? Would it look like I was giving in to the pressures and desires of a man for how I should dress instead of listening to my own God-given wisdom? If I wore my skirts would it look like I didn’t care that this man had shared his difficulty with me? My husband said that I should be myself and continue to dress as I always had. But, was he right?

All the fun of getting up and going to Sunday school and worship were gone. No longer did I look forward to presenting myself in the best way that I could before the Lord. I was filled with doubt and worry, and all I wanted to do was go back to bed, pull the covers up over my head, and let Sunday pass by. I wondered if this man realized that he had infringed on my joy and zest for the Lord’s day.

As I struggled with what was the right way to handle this situation—not just for now, but in the future as well—questions kept forming in my mind. Do Christian men have the right to ask their sisters in Christ not to provide temptation? Do Christian women have the right to dress as they please? If skirts are a problem for one man, and slacks are a problem for another, and yet again another finds long flowing skirts attractive, does that mean that I should now wear no clothes?!

I wondered if this man’s urgings to “confront” me were from God or Satan. It was obvious that the man had a problem with the sin of lust, which Satan could easily use against him. Was Satan somehow using it to get at me?

I knew that I had the right to wear whatever I felt was acceptable because I will be held accountable before the Lord.

So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Romans 14:12

Along with rights comes responsibility.

Therefore let us not judge one another any more, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.

Romans 14:13

This is where things get sticky. I am not to put a stumbling block in the way of my brother, (i.e. wearing clothes that are tempting to him), and he is not to put a stumbling block in front of me, (i.e. causing me to feel unworthy of worship, and unacceptable as who I am).

Yet it is my Christian brother’s responsibility to point out to me that I am offending him, but in a way that is informative, and not insistent that I conform to his definition of what is *appropriate* attire for Christian women. I am sure that this was his intent: to challenge me to explore Scriptures.

So I took up the challenge, with the help of some educated friends. The basic principles seem to be outlined best in Romans chapter 14. First, I am not to regard my Christian brother with contempt, nor he me, even if e disagree with one another.

Verse 3: ***Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him.***

We are each responsible for ourselves before God.

Verse 4: ***Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls: and stand he will for the Lord is able to make him stand.***

As I ponder what I can or cannot wear I go on to consider verse 5b: ***Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.***

My Christian brother has fulfilled his obligation in telling me. Now I must fulfill my obligation by making prayerful study of the Scriptures. Once I have done that I stand alone before God (vv. 10-12), because he alone passes judgment (vv. 6-8).

So, he, my Christian brother, cannot demand that I dress a certain way. I cannot look down on him for not being able to handle certain temptations. As Romans 14:13 explains, “Therefore let us not judge one another any more, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.”

I wasn’t quite sure how to apply this to my life. As the weeks went on I tried to consider the position of the man at church as I prepared for worship. I found that I was dressing differently. I didn’t feel like myself. I felt like a fraud. As a result I was not enjoying myself, and this was starting to be reflected in how I related to other people. I felt like my light was not shining as brightly as it could or should. I still needed to come to some sort of personal conclusion...and I needed to do it in a way that would be considerate of my Christian brother. I had to make a decision that would serve Christ, be acceptable to God, be approved by men (Romans 14:18), and be in accord with verse 23: “pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”

In thinking about those guidelines I outlined ten considerations:

1. Men are responsible for their own lust before God, no matter what women wear.
2. I must prayerfully study Scripture to determine if there are any restrictions on what I may wear.
3. Based on this, I may determine what I am free before God to wear.

4. If my clothing freedoms cause my Christian brother to stumble he may not condemn or judge me.
5. My Christian brothers don't have the right to tell me what to wear.
6. I do need to be made aware somehow of his need or weakness.
7. Because of my love for Christ, I should love my brother by doing my best not to place a stumbling block (temptation) before him.
8. I cannot push other women into the same freedoms or restrictions I have.
9. If I do my best, in love, not to cause my brother to stumble, and he still does, he needs to realize that the world cannot be completely free of temptation.
10. If he must blame something other than his own mind it should be his eyes. (He cannot cut off his Christian sister, but he can cut out his eyes! Matt. 5:29)

Based on this knowledge, each of us will have to come to our own decisions as to what we will do about our dress. As for myself, after prayerful consideration and discussion with this man, I have gone back to my original way of dress. I feel happier, and more able to share the loving acceptance of God if I am myself. I am not doing this without compassion for my Christian brother. I pray for him daily, and I am determined to show through my actions that I am not intentionally trying to cause him to stumble. But, if I am not myself, then I am unable to do that which I believe God has guided me to do, and I then will not be functioning as the best Christian I can be.

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