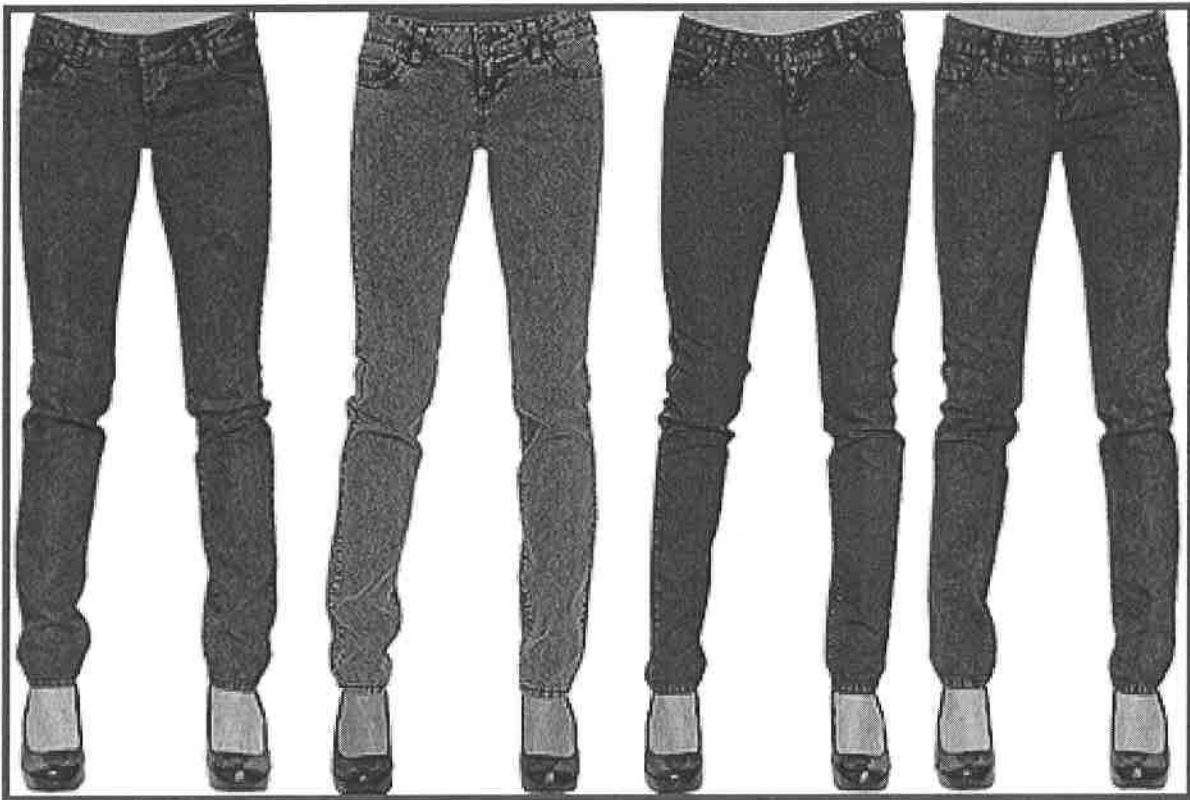


If your pants are too tight...

by Paul Barker | Dec 4, 2012 | Agency, Featured, Gospel Topics, Modesty, Mormonism, News | 62 comments



Recently in the news we got a little taste of a “Mormon moment” when on Valentine’s Day a male BYU student passed a note to a female student declaring that she was immodestly dressed and should think about how her appearance was affecting others. I’m sure he was just trying to do his duty as stated in the BYU Honor Code to



Skinny Jeans! Party time!!

“encourage others in their commitment to comply with the Honor Code”. Right? Well, she took a picture of the note he wrote along with a picture of what she was wearing at the time (you will love the floral print), and the story caught fire and even ended up on the home page of Yahoo. Why did it cause such a stir? Because there was nothing scandalous about her attire. At all. Just months ago we had another “Mormon moment” at the BYU testing center over skinny jeans (that weren’t really skinny jeans) where a testing center employee (an employed student) told a female student that she couldn’t take a test because her pants were too tight. Read about that one here. In both incidents it is important to point out that it wasn’t BYU imposing judgment, but students.



BUSTED! Oh wait, those aren't skinny jeans... insert foot in mouth.

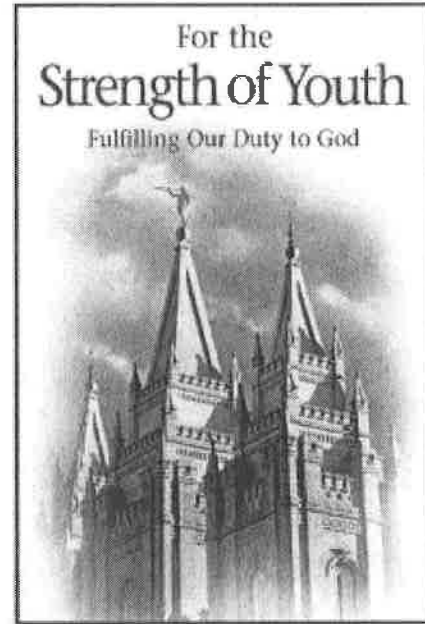
Let’s try to get a sense of where the complainants are coming from. First, the testing center flier posted in the testing center at BYU: “If your pants are tight enough for us to see the shape of your leg, your pants are too tight. If we can see the shape of your belly button, your top is too tight.” It goes on about “form fitting clothes” and blah, blah, blah (read the whole thing here). Toward the end you get to the really good stuff where they invite students to go home and pray about it and “recommit yourself to be a true disciple and abide by the Honor Code that defines your commitment to be a disciple” – a real gem there!

Next let’s look at the precious Valentine’s Day note from one BYU student to another:

You may want to consider that what you’re wearing has a negative effect on men (and women) around you. Many people come to this university because they feel safe, morally as well as physically, here. They expect others to abide by the Honor Code that we all agreed on. Please consider your commitment to the Honor Code (which you agreed to) when dressing each day. Thank you.

So according to both notes, we learn that a “true disciple” abides by the Honor Code and that not abiding by the honor code can have a negative effect on both men and women, morally as well as physically.

These are college-age students, mind you. I don't think this type of thinking develops overnight. For Mormons, modesty and its importance are taught at a very young age. Growing up Mormon, I remember when the church first came out with the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet in the late 80s. These were guidelines that went over basic LDS principles for the youth of the church: education, entertainment, media, family, friends, agency, accountability, and dress and appearance. When it was first introduced it was focused on extensively during youth Sunday school classes, and still today it remains a focal point. LDS youth are taught:



The standards in this booklet will help you with the important choices you are making now and will yet make in the future...We promise that as you keep the covenants you have made and these standards...you will enjoy increasing happiness.

To focus on the segment of the pamphlet dealing with modesty ("Dress and Appearance"), I am going to insert the exact text from the pamphlet and interject some of my own thoughts and opinions, which will appear italicized and in parenthesis.

Your body is sacred. Respect it and do not defile it in any way. Through your dress and appearance, you can show that you know how precious your body is. You can show that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ and that you love Him. (*So does not dressing "modestly" mean you don't love Him as much? Are you not a disciple of Jesus if you're not dressing modestly?*)

Prophets of God have continually counseled His children to dress modestly. When you are well groomed and modestly dressed, you invite the companionship of the Spirit and you can be a good influence on others. Your dress and grooming influence the way you and others act.

Never lower your standards of dress. Do not use a special occasion as an excuse to be immodest. (*What about BYU cheerleaders, the Cougarettes, the dancers at the church-owned Polynesian center, and my Ricks College P.E. issue shorts!*) When you dress immodestly, you send a message that is contrary to your identity as a son or daughter of God. You also send the message that you are using your body to get attention and approval.



Immodest clothing is any clothing that is tight, sheer, or revealing in any other manner. Young women should avoid short shorts and short skirts, shirts that do not cover the stomach, and clothing that does not cover the shoulders or is low-cut in the front or the back. Young men should also maintain modesty in their appearance. Young men and young women should be neat and clean and avoid being extreme or inappropriately casual in clothing, hairstyle, and behavior. They should choose appropriately modest apparel when participating in sports. *(I really do have emotional scars from those Ricks College P.E. shorts and*

the very thin, sleeveless tops that showed my nipples, especially when it was cold in Rexburg. Wait, it's always cold in Rexburg.) The fashions of the world will change, but the Lord's standards will not change.

Do not disfigure yourself with tattoos or body piercings. Young women, if you desire to have your ears pierced, wear only one pair of earrings.

Show respect for the Lord and yourself by dressing appropriately for Church meetings and activities. This is especially important when attending sacrament services. Young men should dress with dignity when officiating in the ordinance of the sacrament.

If you are not sure what is appropriate to wear, study the words of the prophets, pray for guidance, and ask your parents or leaders for help. *(Sound familiar? BYU testing center?)* Your dress and appearance now will help you prepare for the time when you will go to the temple to make sacred covenants with God. Ask yourself, "Would I feel comfortable with my appearance if I were in the Lord's presence?"

Are you still with me? Okay, now let's look at a few parts of the BYU Honor code. Hang in there...

As a matter of personal commitment, faculty, administration, staff, and students of Brigham Young University, Brigham Young University—Hawaii, Brigham Young University—Idaho, and LDS Business College seek to demonstrate in daily living on and off campus those moral virtues encompassed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and will

Be honest

Live a chaste and virtuous life

Obey the law and all campus policies

Use clean language

Respect others

Abstain from alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea, coffee, and substance abuse

Participate regularly in church services

Observe the Dress and Grooming Standards

Encourage others in their commitment to comply with the Honor Code

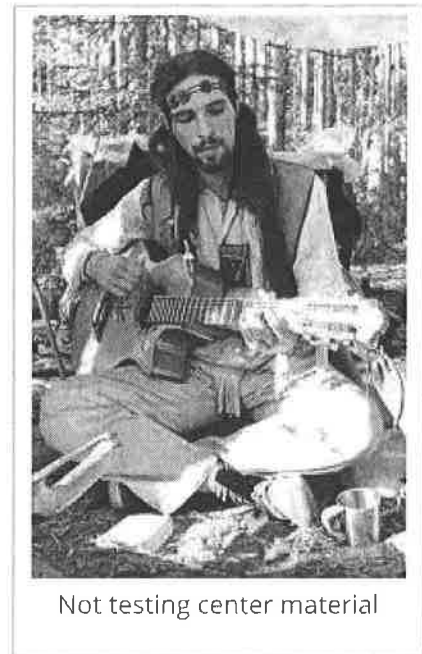
Dress and Grooming Standards

The dress and grooming of both men and women should always be modest, neat, and clean, consistent with the dignity adherent to representing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and any of its institutions of higher education.

Modesty and cleanliness are important values that reflect personal dignity and integrity, through which students, staff, and faculty represent the principles and standards of the Church. Members of the BYU community commit themselves to observe the following standards, which reflect the direction of the Board of Trustees and the Church publication *For the Strength of Youth*. The Dress and Grooming Standards are as follows:

Men

A clean and well-cared-for appearance should be maintained. Clothing is inappropriate when it is sleeveless, revealing, or form fitting. Shorts must be knee-length or longer. Hairstyles should be clean and neat, avoiding extreme styles or colors, and trimmed above the collar, leaving the ear uncovered. Sideburns should not extend below the earlobe or onto the cheek. If worn, moustaches should be neatly trimmed and may not extend beyond or below the corners of the mouth. Men are expected to be clean-shaven; beards are not acceptable. Earrings and other body piercing are not acceptable. Shoes should be worn in all public campus areas.



Not testing center material

Women

A clean and well-cared-for appearance should be maintained. Clothing is inappropriate when it is sleeveless, strapless, backless, or revealing; has slits

above the knee; or is form fitting. Dresses, skirts, and shorts must be knee-length or longer. Hairstyles should be clean and neat, avoiding extremes in styles or colors. Excessive ear piercing (more than one per ear) and all other body piercing are not acceptable. Shoes should be worn in all public campus areas.

Let's go over some facts. You do make an impression by what you wear and what you do to your body. You dress differently for different occasions, and for some, the way you are dressed can modify your behavior. If you are not a rock star, celebrity, or athlete, that neck tattoo will not help you get hired for a high-paying job. That's just the way life is.

The biggest beef I have with the Honor Code's Dress and Grooming standards is that they create an atmosphere where a person will look at appearance as a requirement for who is and who is not a "true disciple of Christ". This is wrong, very wrong. Hugh Nibley said this regarding the Honor Code:

The worst sinners, according to Jesus, are not the harlots and publicans, but the religious leaders with their insistence on proper dress and grooming, their careful observance of all the rules, their precious concern for status symbols, their strict legality, their pious patriotism... the haircut becomes the test of virtue in a world where Satan deceives and rules by appearances.

Gospel Principles Chapter 39 states: "Our Heavenly Father wants us to keep our bodies covered so that we do not encourage improper thoughts in the minds of others". It seems that in some ways, the more parts we cover, the more the covered parts becomes sexual! Here's an example: I remember in the movie "Far and Away" when Nicole Kidman's character's ankle is exposed on their boat trip to America, Tom Cruise's character gets mad at two men that stop to look at her ankles. That's right... HER ANKLES!

Dallin H. Oaks speaking in General Conference in April 2005 said:

Finally, do not patronize pornography. Do not use your purchasing power to support moral degradation. And young women, please understand that if you dress immodestly, you are magnifying this problem by becoming pornography to some of the men who see you."

Elder Mark E. Petersen addressing Relief Society officers in 1962 said:



Do you know what tempts the boys to molest the girls today more than any other one thing? It is the mode of dress of our girls... thus setting him [boys] on fire with an unholy desire. When the boys are coming into their teens and reaching maturity, and such sights are placed before their eyes... can you blame them?

The Lord says we are to garnish our thoughts with virtue unceasingly. Can a boy's thoughts be garnished with virtue while he is looking at the plainly outlined form of a beautiful young woman? Are the girls' thoughts garnished with virtue when they wear revealing clothing? Mothers, unless you take a stand, your daughters will not take a stand. You must set the requirements, you must make the decision.

So who carries the responsibility of controlling a man's sexual drive – the covered, shapeless woman or the man? Are we trying to stop sexual urges or control them with these standards? Those urges are there and they are there for a reason. God created those urges so that a husband would "cleave unto his wife" that they might "multiply and replenish the earth". It is natural and good to have those urges, but we have the power to control them as well. Does it make sense for a man to blame the woman for his lack of self-control? And at the same time, does it send the message to women that their bodies are something to be ashamed of? That their curves are bad or evil?

Are we teaching people to be victimized and to be victimizers? "Because I was wearing this dress he was forward with me", or, "I couldn't control myself when I saw her in that dress". This is a very dangerous way of thinking. It is out of line with everything I have been taught about accountability, choices, and consequences. If someone is to stand naked in front of you, do you still have a choice? Joseph of Egypt had a choice – he ran and got himself out.

Rabbi Dov Linzer says:

The Talmud tells the religious man, in effect: If you have a problem, you deal with it. It is the male gaze — the way men look at women — that needs to be desexualized, not women in public. The power to make sure men don't see women as objects of sexual gratification lies within men's — and only men's — control.



Jewish tradition teaches men and women alike that they should be modest in their dress. But modesty is not defined by, or even primarily about, how much of one's body is covered. It is about comportment and behavior.

One of my favorite quotes from Joseph Smith is found in the Articles of Faith: "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression." You are responsible for your decisions and actions. Don't try to blame it on anyone else, including Adam or Eve for that matter!

I believe that in our culture we seek out the battle – carnal vs. spiritual. We tend to think that carnal pleasure subtracts from our spiritual endeavors:

"For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever..."

"See that ye *bridle all your passions*"

"But I *say to you*, that whosoever *shall look* on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart."

"Watch your thoughts, words and deeds"

Although these scriptures are correct in their intention, we have interpreted them incorrectly in most cases and have applied them to modesty: "You need to cover up so my thoughts won't get carried away!" We use scriptures like these to look down on sexuality, but what should be taught is that the body is beautiful and God-like and that our sexuality is a part of that. Having a body is necessary for progression.

So in regards to sexuality we are taught "no, no, no" throughout our youth, and then we get married and it's "yes, yes, yes". Well, some (I'm willing to guess that perhaps the majority) will interpret that as "bad, bad, bad," and then "good, good, good."

Negativity associated with our bodies creates negativity about sexuality, which creates anxiety. When we try to keep our kids away from sex we can easily paint a negative picture of sex. What methods are we using to teach them about sexuality and modesty? Wanting is bad? Pleasure is bad? Desire is bad? How do we create that bridge from shunning sexuality and then making it okay under the bonds of marriage? A lot of times guilt will be associated with feelings of desire even in marriage! Pleasure and desire are good and are gifts! We are that we might have joy! That capacity is God-given and good, and how we use it is what makes it even better.

To me, one problem with modesty lies in how it is taught. So how then should we as Mormons teach modesty? We should, in fact, teach that modesty and cleanliness are important

values that reflect personal dignity, respect, and confidence. From a very young age kids should be taught to love and respect themselves. And self-respect in return can be the key to successfully teaching about modesty and appearance. Kids should clearly understand that in all situations, not just modesty-related, they are responsible for their own actions and thoughts and



nobody else's. You cannot *make* someone else think or do something. We are our own free agents. I also think that we should teach our kids to love themselves just how they are, including physically. They should never feel bad about or be ashamed of their bodies, for any reason. Instead of teaching kids that sexuality is bad and shameful, we should teach that sexuality is natural and good *in the proper context*. Sexuality provides the opportunity to create a profound connection with someone, a deep and meaningful way to express your love to someone, and an unparalleled way of knowing someone and being known to someone. And most importantly, our children need to know that they are loved, regardless of their flaws.

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