

CINCINNATI CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

WEAR THE PANTS: DOCKERS ENGAGES IN A HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL
ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN THAT IS SOMEWHAT REMINISCENT OF
DEUTERONOMY 22:5

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When it comes to Super Bowl advertising, one can be assured of a high viewing rate, but one can also be sure that what the viewers are seeing is going to be pushing the limits. From just about any beer commercial to website domain hosts, something is not going to be right.

Controversy doesn't always come in a negative form, though. During Super Bowl XLIV, the 2007 Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow starred in a pro-life advertisement featuring his mother, who was advised to abort Mr. Tebow twenty-three years earlier. Apparently, the Super Bowl advertising controversies hit on a vast array of issues.

Somewhere in the middle, between morally degrading advertisements and God-honoring advertisements, is a thirty-second television spot that aired during the Super Bowl in 2010 that could theologically be rated as simply common (not bad, not worshipful, simply normal), yet it was highly controversial because in this Dockers advertisement, the company made a bold statement, namely that it is time that men wear the pants.

Finding the commercial on YouTube and reading the comments could show the reader a fairly good reaction to what it contained - some remarked with great enthusiasm, while others called it sexist and more. This provocative advertisement made two unstated implications: masculinity has been hijacked, and men must win it back.

Blurring the Sexes

In essence, the Dockers advertisement claimed that our Western culture has accepted a blurring of distinct gender roles as evidenced by clothing. Of course, one cannot push too far with this claim since Dockers itself, as a clothing and fashion company, is one of the culprits of gender loss in clothing in the United States and beyond. A quick look at the line-up of Dockers and Levi's (the parent organization) women's clothing proves to find "boyfriend leg" khakis (a "style borrowed from the boys")¹ and "501® Boyfriend Cut Jeans"² – clothing defined by mixing the "gender" of the clothing.

The simple fact of the matter is that for some time now, gender distinction in clothing has become more and more blurred. Actually, some fashion experts today not only acknowledge the blur, but they accept it and push for more. In a New York Times fashion article, Ruth La Ferla quotes Karlo Steel (a partner in Atelier, a progressive men's store) as saying, "Today the more successful designers are the ones that try to bridge the gap between the sexes rather than drive a wedge between them."³

It is hard to place when the blur began, but a good starting point could be during women's suffrage and the right to vote, which rightly opened the idea of gender equality, and now the blurring of clothing practices has since been seen as an outward portrayal of these

¹ Text taken from the Dockers Online Store, n.p. [cited 13 Dec. 2010]. Online: <http://us.dockers.com/family/index.jsp?categoryId=4390363&cp=2271558.3360909>

² Levi Straus, n.p. [cited 13 Dec. 2010]. Online: http://us.levi.com/product/index.jsp?productId=4231557&cp=3146849.3146879.3146884.3520905&AB=CMS_W_Header_Boyfriend_110110.

³ Ruth La Ferla, "It's All a Blur to Them," *New York Times*, November 18, 2009, 17, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/19/fashion/19ANDROGYNY.html?pagewanted=2&_r=2.

rights.⁴ It is interesting to note that Agnes Gerlach, German Chairwoman of the Association for German Women's Culture in 1934, wrote that she believed that destroying the distinction in women's clothing by making them more masculine in form was destructive to the population stating that the practice would be adverse to reproduction,⁵ so the issue must have been well under way by her time.

The modern changes to the gender-blurring movement seem no longer to emphasize women's clothing (though the changes are always abundant) but men's clothing,⁶ including form-fitting shirts, shortening the shirts to show the belly, tight jeans, etc. The point being made here is that the equality is not just a woman's issue; instead, unisex represents true equality.

Fixing the Problem

Now, Dockers has attempted to use the obvious male frustration over the issue of feminized masculinity to reintroduce the dominant, though often suppressed, Western concept of idealized masculinity, and it is doing so through the avenue of "wearing the pants."

So, we come back to the 2010 Super Bowl and the ordinary advertisement that stirred up chants of sexism and separatism. What we find is quite comedic. The commercial can be split into three noticeable pieces, two of which must be separated intellectually instead of chronologically: a display of trouserless men, energetic singing, and then finally the moral of the advertisement: men wear the pants.

⁴ Henry Samuel, "Women banned from wearing trousers in Paris," *The Telegraph*, November 17, 2009, 5, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/6583074/Women-banned-from-wearing-trousers-in-Paris.html>.

⁵ Irene Guenther, *Nazi chic?: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Berg Publishers, 2004), 146.

⁶ La Ferla, "It's All a Blur to Them," 9.

As most advertisements, the point up front is to gain the viewers attention, and so Dockers does this quite boldly, for the commercial opens with a sole man singing while walking through a field of tall grass. Within moments, the man is joined by other men, but they all have one thing in common – none of them are wearing pants.

Each man seems just a bit different; each is dressed differently and has a different build; even a plurality of ethnics groups can be seen. As they walk, they seem to migrate together, pointing to one another or smiling, so as to acknowledge that each of them seem to be in the same category – men without pants.

They walk through empty, rolling hills; nothing can be seen except tall grass, trouserless men, and maybe the occasional bird flying by. Of course, these men aren't lonely, for they have found each other and have come together in camaraderie and unison to sing, even dance a bit, as they walk – they are men without pants.

What makes the point even funnier is the fact that each man is smiling and seems to have an energetic aura about him - one man high steps through the grass, another man thrusts his arms upward as he sings, a faint “hoot” can even be heard, but they all, together, sing the words: “I wear no pants.”

Okay. The advertisement has worked, all attention is now focused; the punch line comes at the end; a quick fade to a brick wall, a “real man” (with pants) standing beside it, and the words “Wear the pants, Dockers.”

The advertising campaign continues in various print forms. One of these is nothing more than text that begins, “Once upon a time, men wore the pants, and wore them well.” It reintroduces the idea of male chivalry (opening doors, helping old ladies cross the street, etc.) but

two key issues must be pointed out within this print advertisement, it mentions the “genderless society” and the need for “heroes.”

Again, Dockers may not actually believe what it states, but the point Dockers makes opens Pandora’s box. The Western culture has always believed in maleness and even in the idea that “pants” are, in our Western culture, masculine in form. The very idea behind “wearing the pants” is one of authority, a masculine concept still in the Western world. No matter how badly we may not want to acknowledge this, pants are seen as evidence of masculine authority.

Of course, the phrase “wearing the pants” is not the only cultural evidence of this fact. In almost every department store across America one can easily determine the “Men’s Room” from the “Women’s Room” simply by first finding the stick figure with pants. This, at a minimum, determines that the Western culture has a memory of “pants” for men and “dresses” for women.

I once tested this theory by asking my teenage Sunday School class from a middle American church (one without religiously conservative roots) to draw a stick family. Of course, the pictures came back with a father, and mother, a brother, and a sister, and each of these could be determined by the clothing the children assigned them – particularly the dresses for the female members of the family (which implies pants for the others).

Biblical Truth

As evidenced in both material culture and biblical mandate, gender distinction does exist and is shown by use of clothing.

An interesting fact on the topic of non-US cultures concerning the wearing of pants on women is that even today, in Paris, the law strictly forbids women to wear trousers unless they

are riding a bicycle or holding the reins of a horse.⁷ While strongly hilarious, this says a good deal about dress appropriateness and culture. Actually, in every society throughout history, from the ancient world⁸ to Ecuador's Waodani Indians,⁹ there has been an obviously male (to them) and obviously female (to them) distinction in clothing.

Of course, all this points not to the strange cultural customs (and both the Waodani and even the Scottish do have strange cultural customs) but to what is hidden behind these cultural customs, namely the fact that God has written His law upon our hearts (Rom. 2:14-15).

An often overlooked verse of Scripture that touches on this topic is Deuteronomy 22:5, which reads: “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor should a man dress up in women’s clothing, for anyone who does this is offensive to the Lord your God” (NET).

One excuse often cited by modern commentators is that the Hebrew words for “men’s clothing” could refer to an item or tool of warfare. Of course, the parallelism demands clothing, and as seen in our advertisement above, the idea of “wearing the pants” (at least in our Western culture) has an air of “manly authority,” so even if this does mean “armor” the connotation is that of manly authority is evidenced by what a man wears.¹⁰

The concept behind the text is quite simple: transvestism is illegal in God’s eyes, but what is transvestism? Our knowledge of proper Jewish clothing practices is non-existent. Sure,

⁷ Samuel, “Women banned from wearing trousers in Paris,” 3-4.

⁸ For an example of cross-dressing in the ancient Sumeria, see: Daniel Reisman, “Two Neo-Sumerian Royal Hymns” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969), 151–52; 168-169. A rather interesting Neo-Sumerian hymn “Hymn to Inanna” (fourth kirugu, verse 60) describes a male prostitute who is “adorn[ed] with women’s clothing.” Rather than show a specific style of masculine or feminine clothing, this hymn acknowledges that the ancient Neo-Sumerians at least had a division between male and female dress.

⁹ Steve Saint, “Thatched Huts and G-Strings,” in *End of the Spear* (1st ed.; SaltRiver, 2005), 71-84.

¹⁰ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament 1* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 1:945.

we have iconographic evidences of Judahites being taken into captivity, but what if clothing issues were a part of their disloyalty? Even if we could determine exactly what the early Israelites wore, would that really help us? Are we going to mimic them, tassels and all?

The truth behind the anti-transvestism clause is not a black and white issue; instead, it is one of those gnomic principles that must be properly applied according to one's own culture and time. If I were a Waodoni (excluding the principles of nakedness), I would be gender distinct wearing a G-string (that is what the men of that culture wear); if I were an Iraqi, I would be gender distinct wearing a long-sleeved one-piece dress that covers the whole body called a *dishdashah* or *thoub*, because that is what only men of Iraq wear. But what do I wear in America?

That question has been asked time and time again, but as we have seen, gender distinction in our culture has gone from biblically “okay” to biblically “inappropriate” in the past one hundred years – according to Deuteronomy 22:5 there *must* be some sort of distinction.

Conclusion: Dockers and Deuteronomy 22:5

Dockers rightly acknowledges in their “Wear the pants” campaign a continued existence in Western thought of a gender distinction in clothing as evidenced by a man's pants. Perhaps, then, Dockers has the answer. Perhaps the almost non-gender distinction in clothing today is an evidence of the loss of biblically accurate gender distinction in the roles. This, of course, is not an issue of equal rights, voting, or even pay, but an issue of the God-ordained roles of the man and the woman as seen in Scripture and as evidenced by clothing practices.

According to Dockers, the Western world has not yet evolved away from its previous gender distinction in clothing; the stick figures are about the closest to gender distinction we can find in our society. If Dockers is correct, should men begin to once again “wear the pants,” and if so, where does this leave women?

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