

Editorial: How do evangelicals enable ‘locker room talk’ about women?

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What was more surprising: The disgusting way Donald Trump spoke about women in that leaked “locker room talk” tape? Or how many people were surprised by the disgusting way Donald Trump spoke about women in that leaked “locker room talk” tape?



Marv Knox In the past few days, Americans have heard and read words we never expected to hear or see. But discovering Trump says them wasn’t as surprising as watching the reactions of people who were surprised he says them.

Even before the Washington Post broke the story, anyone who has followed this presidential campaign knew Trump objectifies women. We read excerpts of his book, where he bragged about seducing married women. We heard segments of his appearances on Howard Stern’s radio show, where he spoke lasciviously about women’s bodies. From the campaign trail, we heard him describe women as barnyard animals. Most creepily, we heard him speak suggestively about his own daughter.

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No shocker

So, the tape was no shocker. Maybe Trump's raunchy words shocked. Maybe Trump's description of his sexual predatory tactics scandalized. But they weren't surprising. Not if you've been paying attention.

The secondary surprise in this seamy episode has been how many evangelical leaders are unable to condemn Trump and distance themselves from him. We haven't heard this much jibber-jabber doublespeak since the last time some "prophet" predicted the Rapture.

These evangelicals' problem springs from deep theological roots. It's grows from Old Testament patriarchy, mixed with male-enhanced misinterpretations of the Apostle Paul, but very little of Jesus and liberating grace.

Evangelicals excel at pointing to the earliest passages of Genesis and insisting all people possess value, because all people are created in God's image. That's the foundation for human rights, and it's both theologically correct and noble.

"Biblical" models

But when they structure gender roles and sexual identity, they focus on less-than-divine models of Old Testament family. "One man and one woman

for life” sounds biblical. But one man and one woman and a couple of concubines, or one man and two wives and several concubines, or one man and seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines was the Old Testament model.

Of course, evangelicals don’t advocate polygamy. But the male-dominated patriarchal model remains strong. Patriarchy treats women as objects and, practically speaking, limits their worth.

An obvious example is how evangelical congregations often treat females. Women are the backbone of the church, but in most congregations, they are not allowed to exercise leadership equal with men. Few allow women to be deacons; fewer still allow them to be pastors.

So, no matter how many times they tell their daughters, “God made you, and you can be anything God wants you to be,” they don’t mean it. Girls and women have their limits.

To be sure, that’s not the same as treating women as sexual objects, parroting the language we heard from Trump. But it’s still treating women as objects, not as independent, fully autonomous, valuable-because-they-bear-the-mark-of-creation human beings.

Closer to home ...

This idea hits closer to home. Many men who felt repulsed by Trump’s language—and, to be fair, Bill Clinton’s treatment of women—placed their revulsion in context of the role women play in their lives. “How would you feel if Trump did that to your wife, or your mother/daughter/sister?” is a good question. But it’s only partially good.

In that context, the worth of the woman derives from her relationship to the man. “What if she were your wife/mother/daughter/sister?” The woman is an object—a revered object, but an object. And what about the woman who

is not your wife/mother/daughter/sister, who maybe is nobody's wife/mother/daughter/sister? She, too, is infinitely worthy and due complete respect.

This is why rape culture flourishes in our society. No, rape does not flow from churches. But when even the church treats women as objects, then precious few voices remain to champion the intrinsic value of all women.

While the ministers who won't condemn Trump's language might not speak that way themselves, their refusal to speak at all empowers the dreadful behavior of young men who grow up with no role models. Their slut-shaming—"What did she expect, dressed like that?" "What did she think would happen at that hour?"—places blame on victims instead of perpetrators.

When victims shoulder the blame done to them, justice is nowhere to be found.

So, Christians first must treat all people—women and men alike—as creatures of infinite worth who bear the image of their Creator. Then, we must refuse to describe others as objects, whether they are the objects of reverence or lust. And we must speak forcefully to a society that treats people as objects to be owned and commodities to be controlled.

See also ...

["Lord, make our world safe for women,"](#) a Texas Baptist Voices column by Meredith Stone.

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