

The Fate of the Beautiful Swan (beauty part 2)

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Beauty is an outward gift which is seldom despised, except by those to whom it has been refused. [Edward Gibbon]

Most women fear death less than they fear getting fat. [Proverb]

We finished Part One of this briefing asking several questions about the place of beauty in the life of Christians. As we observe our circle of friends, workmates and family members we note several aspects of our response to outward appearance. Perhaps we could group the issues as follows:

1. **Physical appearance:** We have already noted in Part 1 the way we tend to gravitate towards certain types of physical appearance. We considered the way the Christian gospel gives us new ways to observe others.
2. **Interest in beautiful things/fashion:** Yet some people do seem to derive satisfaction in combining colours, observing fashion trends and expressing themselves through the wearing of handmade accessories. Are Christians to oppose their interest in the 'aesthetic' side of life?
3. **Self-perception:** Layered upon points one and two is our perception of ourselves. We can feel great insecurity because we think we are not beautiful.

These three aspects of beauty can become very tangled, especially for women:

"This environment can be a daunting one to navigate. Through every possible medium, the female consumer is urged to improve her image, enhance her beauty, change her look, develop herself in some way for the better. The message is always the same—buy this product and you will feel happier and consequently your life will be better. Nonsense? Yes, and we fall for it every day." [Alison Sweeney]

Our culture rewards attractiveness over plainness, and rates fashion and body image over most things, which leaves the Christian in a difficult position.

- On the one hand, we do want to try and live in the way described in Part 1: looking 'to the heart', and loving others in a way that is not prejudiced by their physical appearance.
- But on the other hand, there *is* a place to enjoy the abundant beauty of God's world. Apart from beautiful sunsets, beaches and works of human art, much beauty is found in beautiful people. After all, the reason that God reminded Israel of his 'looking to the heart' was because Saul was tall, and there is something delightful and even glorious about tallness.

Responding rightly, then, to God's good world will mean that there is an appropriate place for receiving beauty—even *other people's beauty*—with thanks. We can enjoy the way our friend loves to dress in colour. We can appreciate the beauty of her long, flowing hair. We can be glad that for her, God's kindness has included a petite face, or a slim waist, or a clear complexion, or being light in weight. We can give thanks for those things in her, just as we might give thanks for what God has given us. We can be glad for the good looks of our friend, and appreciate the different set of good things that God has given us.

But of course we cannot, can we. For many women in particular, such thanksgiving is an outright absurdity and an impossible dream. A survey of 1356 Australian women of all ages found that 68 per cent of teenagers believed they were less beautiful than the average girl. **One in four** of them would change **everything** about herself physically, if given the chance. Lest we think that such insecurities are to be expected of teenagers alone, the survey also found that a staggering **85 per cent** of women over 40 say they're not as attractive as the average woman. The younger women are being led by older women (and their men), who enslave themselves to

beauty.

We should note that these women were not even comparing themselves to supermodels – just to other *average* women. Clearly then, a certain soul-destroying obsession with body image and beauty has reached epidemic proportions in our community.

Indeed, this obsession with beauty is insatiable: according to a 1998 article in *She* magazine, supermodel Cindy Crawford wished she had the body of supermodel Kate Moss. If even a supermodel cannot be content, then we are clearly dealing with the kind of insatiable obsession where **if we do not break, it will break us**.

Christian women read biblical verses about inner beauty and nod in agreement, but in the hidden places of our hearts and minds, we remain suspicious. The woman who is both godly *and* beautiful—well, she has somehow scored more highly in life, and can at least *choose* where to pin her hopes; but the rest of us must placate ourselves with a sigh: ‘oh well ... at least God values what’s inside me’. Except, that is, when we are angry or sad that he hasn’t made us thin and beautiful. We may hear the good news that we are to value what is eternal most of all, but we are yet torn by the lie that outward appearance really does matter most of all. And it is not hard to find ourselves deeply envying the way beautiful people simply get ahead in life over and over again.

Is there a way out of this torment? Does the gospel really offer any resources for setting us free?

It is the purpose of this briefing to suggest that the Christian community—both its women and its men—*needs to commit again* to become light in a dark culture that has lost itself in obsessional idolatry of beauty.

Christian rules of engagement with beauty must be different to what is prevalent elsewhere in the world. We will need to rediscover the many ways in which people are beautiful, because our culture, of course, has an absurdly narrow conception of beauty.

But the path ahead will be long and hard, for changes to such deep, painful and erroneous beliefs do not happen overnight. Ultimately, we can only give ourselves in brokenness to the power of God, who strongly and gently breaks our deepest obsessions by the power of his Spirit. Changing the ‘inner person’ is a complex and long-term project, which the Bible speaks of as a ‘transformation’ to make us Christlike [2 Corinthians 3:18].

We can also see some other clues that offer *a new way of thinking*. Two clues are found in what the Bible says about ‘gifts’, and in what it refers to as ‘sober judgement’:

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.” [Romans 12:3-6a]

God gives people these various gifts to help build up his church [cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-31]; but we also gain some insight into how to think about the many other good things he gives to us.

The individual gifts are *not* for building up our own self-esteem. In this new way of thinking, we are freed to serve others; so we are also freed, frankly, to stop thinking about whatever we look like. Both the plain and the handsome person are freed to serve others with whatever gifts and skills they possess.

Also, ‘sober judgement’ is not *only* in having a humble estimate of ourselves, but is *also* found in an awareness and appreciation of God’s good gifts to us [Rom.12:6-8]. We are surrounded by an abundance of good things, given by a generous God [James 1:17]. Instead of comparing ourselves to others and feeling ripped-off, Christians are being schooled by the gospel to become people who thank God for the wealth of good gifts he gives each of us. A general principle of thanksgiving is found across the pages of Scripture, as a way to begin noticing all that is good

and right in our lives.

This new thinking and thanksgiving helps us to discover contentment, and can begin to renovate all areas of envy (such as when the single person erroneously and sadly views their single state as a consolation prize, against the first prize of a marriage partner). Christian theology frees us to be able to enjoy all that God has given us, and to rejoice in the beauty of others, recognising that everything is part of the goodness of **all** of God's creation.

We can also lift our eyes to see that our true hope lies in our eternal rest with God. Hence Jesus can speak of seeking his kingdom *first* [Matt. 6:25-34], because physical beauty will always fail. That is not to say it is unimportant. It is just a lousy place to pin our hopes.

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Sources and further resources:

Sweeney, Alison "Caught in a Trap – women and the beauty industry" *Online Opinion*. Found online at: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=2944>

Burnes, Holly, "Beauty myth ... 68% of girls think they're not pretty enough," *Sun-Herald* 15/5/2005. Online: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Not-pretty-enough/2005/05/14/116024405814.html>

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