



## Mirror, mirror on the wall

Once upon a time there was a beautiful girl called Cinderella. She had two ugly step-sisters who were very mean. Cinderella had to do all the work in the house, but she never complained because she was a good girl. Beautiful Snow White was the focus of anger for the ugly, evil Queen. Both heroines were rescued by a handsome Prince Charming. Our favourite fairy tales depict all the good and kind characters as beautiful; all the evil characters — witches, trolls, stepmothers — as ugly. Even most modern novels portray their heroes as both good and good-looking. Does this mean that beauty equals goodness? That is the implicit message. Each girl identifies with the beautiful Cinderella, not her ugly step sisters; each boy with Prince Charming, not some ugly, evil troll.

### **Infatuation with beauty**

Today's society is infatuated with physical beauty, especially as it pertains to women and girls. This beauty cult supports a number of multi-billion dollar industries: the \$33-billion-a-year diet industry, the \$20-billion cosmetics industry, the \$300-million cosmetic surgery industry. Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth*, Random House, 1990) includes in this list the \$7-billion pornography industry. Some might argue that pornography has little to do with beauty, yet Wolf claims that the objectification of women's physical attributes is a stepping stone toward using them as objects for sexual purposes. Regardless of what one includes in this list of beauty industries, one look in a modern shopping centre gives the message loud and clear. The newly expanded local mall boasts more than 100 shops. There are a number of department stores and smaller ones which cater to both men and women; however, there are 28 that are specifically aimed at women — lingerie shops, exclusive clothing and accessory boutiques, beauty shops that specialize in nails and lashes. The men have only three stores specifically addressing their fashion interests. Apparently, fashion and beauty are the woman's domain.

There are two separate yet intertwining issues at stake here. Is a person's physical appearance significant? And why does today's society put such a premium on women's physical beauty? Historically, how did we get where we are today? Does the Bible speak to these issues?

### **Has it always been this way?**

Undeniably, today's society is obsessed with outward physical appearance. Has it always been this way? It would be hard to argue that beauty has not had any role in history. Helen of Troy and Cleopatra had an impact in history, legendary or otherwise, largely because of their beauty. Yet there was a time in history when the emphasis was more on what women accomplished than on how they looked.

During medieval times, women and girls worked shoulder to shoulder with their husbands and brothers. Women were often responsible for supervising the workers and seeing to their wellbeing, as well as overseeing care of the livestock. The orchards, vineyards, and kitchen gardens of vegetables, herbs and flowers were the woman's domain. When the men were off to war, women would run whole estates on their own. Medieval guilds, which brought together merchants and artisans of similar trades, admitted women: the wives of masters and the *femmes soles*, the single women. Many widows were admitted as members in full standing.

Often women laboured at two or three crafts, selling home-brewed ale, fresh bread, poultry, cheese, fish and other market products in order to supplement family income. The whole family would be involved in these endeavours. There was no marked distinction between men and

women's work. Women and girls were appreciated for their skills at various crafts. The typical woman had little time or inclination to spend precious income on fashion and beautification. Of course, there was no mass media to convince her otherwise.

### **The Industrial Revolution: a major shift**

The Industrial Revolution changed society forever, for both men and women. The crafts practised proudly by generations of skilled families became a distant memory. Factories dotted the landscape. Assembly lines spit out products at previously unimagined rates. There was a shift from a predominantly rural society to an increasingly urban one. Family life changed. Work was no longer in the home, no longer a family affair. Fathers, sons and daughters left home in the early hours of the day to put in many grueling hours at the factory. By the late 19th century, only wives in poor families tended to work outside of the home. It was considered "a thoroughly unsatisfactory state of affairs" if the wife had to work to maintain the home. There developed a strict division of labour by sex: the wife as mother and homemaker, the husband as wage earner.

The 19th century also saw the growth of a middle class. These were the people with money. They were also quite clothes-conscious. The factory, the sewing machine, and the department store all helped reduce the cost and expand the variety of clothing. Middle-class women were particularly attentive to the fickle dictates of fashion. Because wives were in charge of running the households, they were the ones who, for a large part, determined how the family monies would be spent. Understandably, a fashionable wife was considered an asset to her husband, a reflection of his success. Women were prescribed a more ornamental role.

### **Tracing the trends — women's magazines**

In the latter part of the 19th century, the women's magazine entered the market, brought about by large investments of capital combined with increased literacy and purchasing power of many women.

The magazines reflect the shifts in women's status in society. They also dictated what was expected of women. They have consistently glamorized whatever the economy, their advertisers, and during wartime, the government, needed at that moment from women. Victorian magazines catered to women in the domestic sphere. During the World Wars, they glamorized the world of war-production, while still preserving a socially acceptable feminine image. A Pond's cold cream ad of the time read: "We like to *feel* we look feminine even though we are doing a man-sized job." The 1950s marked a return to the domestic sphere of good wife, mother and homemaker.

The post-war economy of the 1950's depended on a spiraling consumerism. As advertising revenues soared, advertisements began to form the major focus for women's magazines. In the 1950s women were urged to become perfect housewives, using all kinds of new scientific cleaning products in order to combat hidden dirt. Modern magazines centre on beauty "work" rather than on housework. Today's advertisers are selling diet products and "specialized" cosmetics and anti-aging creams. In 1989, the cosmetics ad revenue offered \$650 million to the magazine industry. Add to this the impact of T.V. commercials. True, they are "just" commercials, but if they did not affect people's behaviour, the advertisers would not produce them. Their goal is to sell a product. We can find these products in the local malls that cater overwhelmingly to women.

The message is pervasive. Women need to be beautiful to be successful and worthwhile. Unlike the medieval times, in which women worked side by side *with* their husbands, on the farm or in a cottage industry, today women are expected to compete on the job market *against* men. Naomi Wolf maintains that women are now required to be professional housewives, professional career women, and professional beauties. Wolf is undeniably a feminist, with scant regard for God or His Word. Yet we can learn from her evaluation of modern society and woman's place in it. We should realize how much we are affected by the pervasive influences of our time. We are not immune to the mass media advertisements depicting beauty and success. Perhaps we are fooling ourselves. Perhaps both Christian men and women need to thoroughly re-examine what they truly believe is of value, the inner or the outer person. We have God's word, and it tells us a very different story.

## **Beauty ... a snare?**

Debra Evans (*Beauty and the Best*, Focus on the Family, October 1993) argues that while beauty is evident everywhere in God's creation, the Bible warns against beauty as a snare. Nowhere does it instruct women or men to desire it. It does not necessarily depict beauty as a blessing for those who have it. Think of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Beauty is simply a physical attribute which God occasionally uses to further his purposes, as in the case of Esther. Physical beauty is never used as a metaphor for goodness or counted as any kind of moral virtue. Unlike the fairy tales of our culture, the Bible never suggests that beauty has the power to make bad people good.

The New Testament contains no reference to *women's* physical attractiveness, yet we often picture Priscilla, Lydia or Mary, Jesus' mother, as beautiful women. (If you are honest, when you picture Mary and Martha in your mind, who do you think was more attractive? Busy Martha, bustling around the kitchen, or gentle Mary, quietly listening at the Lord's feet?) Evans maintains that the omission of beauty as a measure of a woman's worth in the New Testament is not an oversight. By emphasizing the women's inner qualities, personal relationships and love for the Lord, rather than stressing their appearance, the New Testament gives a uniquely Christian perspective on which to build a valid identity for women — one that doesn't measure worth by the beauty of a face, the shape of the body, the hairstyle, the brand of cosmetics or designer labels on the clothing.

The New Testament's only discourse on beauty proclaims this truth. *"Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair, the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfailing beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."* (1 Peter 3:3-4)

If we believe what the Bible says, physical beauty is a non-issue for Christians. Yet we continue to pay homage to it. How many people who claim that "it's what is inside that counts" truly believe it?

Dr. Paul Brand (and Philip Yancey, *In His Image*, Zondervan, 1987) goes so far as to say that physical attractiveness may raise a barrier against reflecting the image of God in a person's life. He argues that any quality that a person can rely on makes it more difficult for that person to rely on God.

## **Be a mirror**

Should we try to look ugly? Of course not, but let each one be content with the physical form that God has given. He is the potter. We do need to take care of our physical bodies. They are important. They are temples of the Holy Spirit. Christ died so that also our physical bodies would be raised in perfection.

Let's not make life difficult for each other, but let's accept each others' physical differences as God-given. Teenagers take heed; do not ostracize your classmates because they don't look quite right, according to the current standards.

Rather than running to the "mirror, mirror on the wall," to see "who's the fairest of them all," let us be mirrors, reflecting the image of God to everyone around us. For a pattern to follow, we need only look at Jesus. The qualities he showed — humility, servanthood, love — became the model for His Body also. Let us focus our lives on showing forth this image. What counts for great success in popular culture — strength, intelligence, wealth, beauty, power — means little to that image. *"Let him who boasts boast about this; that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness, for in these I delight."* (Jeremiah 9: 24)

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