

SUBVERSIVE HOPE: A THEOLOGY OF THE BODY THAT SPEAKS TO THE
ISSUE OF BODY IMAGE IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN

by

Rachel Baker, Bachelor of Theology

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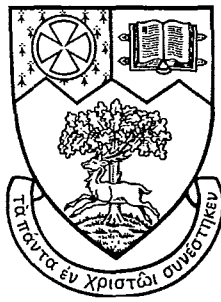
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AUTHOR: Rachel Baker

SUPERVISOR(S): Dr. Phil Zylla
Dr. Cynthia Long Westfall

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Upon the recommendation of an oral examining committee, this thesis by

RACHEL BAKER

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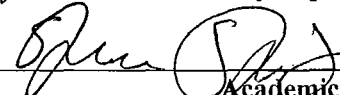
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Secondary Supervisor



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ABSTRACT

“Subversive Hope: A Theology of the Body that Speaks to the Issue of Body Image in the Lives of Women”

Rachel Baker
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
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The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the pervasive and critical issue of body image that deeply affects the lives of many women in order to help the Canadian evangelical church articulate a theology of the body as it seeks to provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to and for women. This thesis drew upon an approach to theology called practical theology as transforming practice, which is rooted in human experience and seeks to help people to reflect theologically on their experiences. The results of this thesis affirm the vital role that formulating a theology of the body plays in a ministry to and for women who struggle with the issue of body image in contemporary culture. This thesis concludes by presenting church leaders with ministry initiatives to implement in their ministry contexts in order to foster change that offers women the subversive hope of the message of the Gospel.

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&
DEDICATION

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Sincerely,
Rachel Baker

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INTRODUCTION

Many girls and women struggle with negative body images and self-esteem. That this is the case is evident from the language that they use on a regular basis to describe their thoughts and feelings about their bodies. In fact, one would be very hard pressed to find a woman who is completely satisfied with her body. Women are continually bombarded with the ideal body image and limited definitions of beauty. These images or ideals come at them from a variety of locations: Television, magazines, diets, and other people's expectations. These images exert pressure on all kinds of girls and women to conform to regardless of religious background, sexual orientation, or family background. Writing from a Christian perspective, Dannah Gresh, in an article entitled "Sexual Purity Starts at Seven," highlights how widespread this issue is, even among Christian girls. She writes, "By the time she is sixteen, a Christian girl has a 50/50 chance of surviving life without the experiences of sexual sin, eating disorders and depression."¹ Body image is a pervasive and critical issue that deeply affects the lives of many women, and as such it is imperative that the Canadian evangelical church articulate a theology of the body as it seeks to provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to and for women.

In her book *Ophelia Speaks*, Sara Shandler provides a collection of poems and stories written by adolescent girls. Her intention is to give young women the opportunity to speak about those issues that deeply impact their lives and to give voice to their thoughts and struggles. One poem, written by a young woman named Charlotte Cooper, offers insight into some of the thoughts and emotions that women feel about their bodies,

¹ Gresh, "Sexual Purity Starts at Seven," 1-3.

in which this thesis is rooted. Her words are powerful because they articulate the hate, ambivalence, rejection, and longing that women feel toward their bodies. She writes:

“Mirrors”

...

I can't torture myself physically
 I'm not dedicated enough to be
 Bulimic
 Anorexic
 Exercising all day
 Starving myself
 I read all the stories.
 And I know, while saying out loud,
 “How could anyone do this to herself?”
 That I still wish to be like them.
 I like me too much to mutilate,
 But not enough to accept.
 I am jealous of anorexic women
 I know,
know
 That anorexia and bulimia are diseases.
 I know they are destructive.
 I know they are deadly.
 But I want to join.
 Where do I sign up?
 If risking my mind, my sanity, the body I hate to inhabit,
 Is the price for thinness, I am willing to pay.
 I laugh, because even as I am willing to pay,
 I can't.
 I lack commitment.

So on go the long, silent talks with the mirror image
 The image I dread to look at but
 From which I can't tear my gaze away.

...

...

As a girl who hates herself in the body
 I know I deserve nothing
 And I should get it.
 It froths.
 I feel my blood hurtling.
 But I can't stop looking at myself.

And I can't stop hating myself
Sometimes I just cry.²

While this is only a brief, and albeit limited, illustration of the role that “dieting” and body image plays in the lives of one woman, it does serve to introduce the topic of body image and its importance in women’s lives. Charlotte Cooper’s poem is offered as an example of how profuse the mindset of seeking an ideal body image is in the lives of women.

This thesis draws upon an approach to theology called practical theology as transforming practice. In an article entitled, “Transforming Practice,” Elaine Graham argues that “the discipline of practical theology, reoriented for a postmodern age of uncertainty, provides a method for connecting theory and practice in a reconception of faithful identity.”³ In other words, practical theology is rooted in human experience and assists Christians to practice their faith in “authentic identity.”⁴ Graham argues that human experience must have a voice in the process of practical theology because “experience is the origin, not the application, of theological formulation.”⁵

This thesis will follow Graham’s proposed definition for practical theology while following Don S. Browning’s steps for doing practical theology. He proposes four “movements” in the task of practical theology: First, describe the context in which people are located. Second, examine Scripture and theology to determine what these say about the issue. Third, interpret the context in light of the insights provided by the examination

² This poem was written by an eighteen-year-old girl named Charlotte Cooper (Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, 8–10). Sara Shandler writes of this piece, “...Charlotte Cooper speaks with such emotional nakedness that she exposes the truth for many of us. When I shared Charlotte’s poem with friends, all were stunned by its accuracy” (Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, 5).

³ Graham, “Practical Theology,” 105.

⁴ Graham, “Practical Theology,” 106.

⁵ Graham, “Practical Theology,” 109.

of Scripture and theology. Finally, the findings from step three will be applied to renewed practice, in what Browning refers to as “strategic practical theology.”⁶

In light of the importance of experience for practical theology, chapter one sets the stage for the paper by defining body image. In order to understand the importance of body image in the lives of women, this chapter identifies what body image is and the reasons why it is such a crucial topic for the Canadian evangelical church to address. It will be argued that body image is a critical issue in the lives of women because body image is a multifaceted issue that deeply affects women in a number of areas of their lives. The fields of psychology and sociology will be drawn upon as they both provide relevant sources of information that aids in defining body image and revealing its prevalence among women. Body image is a complex issue and as such a number of different dimensions of body image are studied in order to illustrate how great of an impact it has on women. These include the physical, social, relational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of body image.

In this thesis a broad category of ages is incorporated in the study of females and body image. Rather than continually distinguishing between women and young girls, the term “women” will be used to refer to both women and young girls. The reason why such a broad category of ages is incorporated is because body image affects many women regardless of their ages. For example, girls as young as five years old are being affected

⁶ According to Browning, “strategic practical theology” refers to the “church disciplines of religious education, pastoral care, preaching, liturgy, social ministries, and so forth” (Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 8).

by the body image ideal and, although the aspects of the image that they wrestle with may change, this struggle continues with them through all of life's phases.⁷

Chapter two deals specifically with contemporary culture because it is within this context that Canadian women's lives are located. Thinking theologically about an issue such as this cannot be done apart from considering culture. Indeed, Stanley Grenz recognizes the impossibility of doing theology apart from culture. He writes, "[E]vangelicals who seek to construct a culture-free theology are attempting the impossible. We simply cannot escape from our cultural context into some transcultural intellectual vantage point."⁸ For this reason, any study on body image must address cultural norms and perceptions about the subject in question.

Furthermore, in order to be faithful witnesses to the Gospel message, Christians must contextualize a theology of the body and this requires interaction with the contemporary context in which women are located. The significance of culture can be seen in Debra Gimlin's book *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture*, where she writes, "More important, though, the body is a medium of culture."⁹ Chapter two will seek to answer a number of different, but interrelated, questions: What then, do women's bodies say about cultural norms, or what does contemporary culture say about a woman's body? What is the cultural ideal or standard of beauty? How is this message communicated to women? How does contemporary culture's message impact women's lives?

⁷ According to Lilian Calles Barger, "The obsession with weight starts early, with 42 percent of girls in first to third grades expressing a desire to be thinner" (Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 19). Older women, for example, are faced with the pressure of attaining the body image ideal that idolizes youth. Signs of aging, such as wrinkles, pose threats to women who seek to fit the ideal. While the topics of aging (as well as ageism) and death are important aspects of body image and informative of a theology of the body, it is beyond the scope of the present study.

⁸ Grenz, "(Pop) Culture in Theological Reflection," 308.

⁹ Gimlin, *Body Work*, 3.

By looking briefly at the various beauty ideals that have been promoted throughout history, the significance of the contemporary ideal is made evident. As technology has advanced over time, the diverse ways in which cultural ideals can be passed on to women has increased. Within current culture the message about the ideal beauty type has been communicated through the mass media using the mediums of television, magazines, and dieting fads. By studying these media influences, this chapter also demonstrates how powerful an influence the media has on women and what message is being conveyed. Finally, the magnitude of the crisis of body image in the lives of women is made evident by addressing the thought patterns that women have formed about their bodies, as well as by studying one of the consequences of having an unhealthy body image: eating disorders. The purpose in paying so much attention to defining body image and illustrating the contemporary context is to give voice to the experience of women. It is only by doing so that practical theology is able to assist Christian leaders of the Canadian evangelical church to provide an authentic response to this issue.

While practical theology originates in the lived experience of people, it does not remain there. The next step in the process of practical theology then, is to correlate the experience with a theological understanding. In order to do this a theology of the body must be articulated. As such, chapter three addresses a number of concepts. First, the idea of *imago dei* is explored, which seeks to answer the question, “What does it mean to be created in God’s image?” The creation account in Genesis explains how God created people with bodies and that these bodies are good. In addition, the narrative of the Fall is also studied because the Fall illustrates that, as a result of sin, people either place inordinate worth in their bodies or disregard them completely. A study of the creation

narrative provides insights into the significance of being created with bodies, while a study of the Fall provides illumination into the ways in which it has negatively affected peoples lives as human beings, with special regard to women.

Another concept that is explored because of its impact on a theology of the body is the incarnation of Christ, including the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Mary Timothy Prokes identifies the significance of the incarnation for a theology of the body in her book *Toward a Theology of the Body*. According to Prokes, Jesus Christ is the “perfect fulfillment of body-meaning.”¹⁰ Such an understanding of Christ’s incarnation proves to be illuminating for a theology of the body because it determines the significance of the human body for experiencing and living life in all of its dimensions.

Finally, chapter three also discusses what it means for people to be embodied beings and the role that their bodies play in being human. In “Toward a Theology of Human Embodiment,” Gregg R. Allison notes, “The human body is an essential aspect of human beings during their earthly existence and, following Christ’s return and the resurrection of their body, in the age to come.”¹¹ Life is experienced through bodies. People know one another through their bodies. Life cannot be lived apart from a physical existence. As such, what is the significance of being embodied beings, especially for women? This theological understanding of the body provides insights into how leaders should respond to the issue of body image in the lives of women.

The next step of practical theology is to return to the experience with an informed theological understanding with which to interpret the experience.¹² In other words, a conversation must take place between the current situation in which women are located

¹⁰ Prokes, *Theology of the Body*, 57.

¹¹ Allison, “Theology of Human Embodiment,” 5.

¹² Schreiter, “Theology in the Congregation,” 23.

with a theology of the body so that new insights and perspectives might be discovered. This is what Thomas H. Groome calls a “dialectical hermeneutic.”¹³ As such, chapter four applies a new theological understanding of the body back onto the lived experience of women. This chapter sheds light on the experience of women and provides new ways of viewing and treating their bodies. It also identifies possible points of contact between contemporary culture and the Canadian evangelical church.

Graham provides a helpful word of caution for those engaging in practical theology. She argues that any articulation of practical theology must be provisional in nature. She writes, “I would argue that an adequate model of practical knowledge will exhibit a bias towards alterity, diversity and inclusivity.”¹⁴ Practical theology must recognize that people are different from one another and that there is a vast amount of diversity in the world. This necessarily impacts the limited conclusions practical theology can come to. In other words, as Carol Christ writes, “We should think of our ‘truth claims’ as the products of embodied *thinking* not as eternally or universally valid *thought*.”¹⁵

In light of this word of caution, it is important to recognize that what is offered in chapters three and four is only provisional. This thesis does not claim to have all the answers to a very complex issue. It simply seeks to provide some illumination into a very difficult and painful area of women’s lives in the hopes that it will encourage church leaders to take this issue more seriously with regard to the women in their congregations and ministries, as well as encourage women to begin a journey towards healing and fully embodied living.

¹³ Groome, “Theology on Our Feet,” 73.

¹⁴ Graham, “Practical Theology,” 111.

¹⁵ Christ, “Embodied Thinking,” 15.

The final step in practical theology is to apply the insights gathered in this study to praxis. As such, chapter five offers practical suggestions for churches to adopt in order to provide pastoral care to women of all ages, both within and outside of the church. Practical theology must empower others to bring change in the world. The direction of this change must be towards “humanization and liberation for all of God’s people and creation.”¹⁶ An articulated theology ensures that God’s Word is brought to bear on the issue of body image, while a focus on cultural awareness makes certain that the church’s ministry is relevant and contextualized. Rene Padilla, a Latin American theologian, writes:

To contextualize the gospel is so to translate it that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not an abstract principle or a mere doctrine, but the determining factor of life in all its dimensions and the basic criterion in relation to which all the cultural values that form the very substance of human life are evaluated. Without contextualization the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant.¹⁷

A contextualized theology of body image is essential if pastoral care is going to be faithful to the Gospel and effective in affecting change in women’s lives. Additionally, as it is made clear in chapter two, women experience unique challenges. A church must be able to name these challenges and ensure that their ministries provide help that is relevant. In order to do any of this, open communication needs to be taking place. It is through conversations that the environment for change is fostered. Finally, a church must seek to provide pastoral care to women both within and outside of the church. As such, in chapter five suggestions are made as to how the church can serve as embodied witness to women.

¹⁶ Groome, “Theology on Our Feet,” 63.

¹⁷ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 93.

Understanding practical theology as transformative practice is useful for generating and verifying the conclusions reached in this thesis because it begins by locating the issue of body image in its contemporary context. This ensures that the conclusions that are drawn remain relevant and applicable to contemporary women. In addition, in using the methodology of practical theology which sees it as 'transforming practice,' proper attention is given to 'alterity, diversity and inclusivity.' For women, the focus of this methodology on these three aspects is very significant because it assists in preventing a theological construction that negates a woman's individuality and unique beauty. Contemporary culture has identified the ideal woman and presents a limiting ideal that most women cannot attain. Yet, God's creation reflects that beauty is found in diversity. The added benefit of employing the methodology of practical theology is that it provides a framework for "captur[ing] glimpses of Divine activity amidst human practice."¹⁸

¹⁸ Graham, "Practical Theology," 113.

CHAPTER 1: AN ISSUE WITH A VOICE - DEFINING BODY IMAGE

Numerous studies have been conducted worldwide that illustrate all too clearly that women suffer from negative body image. Over the past twenty to thirty years, there has been a growing awareness of body image and body image dissatisfaction among women. In 1983 the death of singer Karen Carpenter from anorexia shocked people all over the world and served to draw attention to a disease with which most people were unfamiliar. Rather than decreasing, the number of women and girls who struggle with their bodies has increased over the years so much that it has been deemed a “global crisis” among women.¹⁹ The studies of those who are dedicated to understanding the endemic number of women who suffer from body dissatisfaction provide helpful insights into what body image means and how it affects women. Body image is a pervasive and critical issue that deeply affects the lives of women, and as such it is imperative that the Canadian evangelical church articulate a theology of the body so that it can provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to and for women. Body image is a critical issue in the lives of women because it affects the physical, social, relational, emotional and spiritual aspects of women’s lives. As will be discovered in what follows, body image infers something about a person’s morality, it determines a person’s sexual attractiveness, it determines whether or not a person receives acceptance, and it is an issue of control. As well, it will also be argued that body image as a spiritual issue is closely connected with self-esteem and self-worth, and the achievement of life satisfaction or general life

¹⁹ Edut, “Introduction,” xxi.

happiness. Body image is a multifaceted issue that is deeply interconnected, and thus it is a vital part of a woman's life that needs to be ministered to.²⁰

In order to understand the importance of body image in the lives of women, body image must be defined. In her book, *Body Image*, Sarah Grogan defines "body image" as "A person's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about his or her body."²¹ At first glance, this definition seems to provide a simple answer as to what body image means. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that this means that the issue of body image in the lives of women is just as simple, or that body image can be so easily defined. Body image distortion is not merely the "symptom of vanity suffered by bored, middle-class white girls" as it is commonly assumed.²² Rather, body image is a complex issue and has many facets all of which impact a woman's life in a number of ways. A woman's body says a lot about a woman, and behind that statement, are the feelings that that woman has about herself as a person and about her own body.

According to Pruzinsky and Cash, "there is really no singular term 'the body image.' Extant research clearly indicates that body experience encompasses the perception of and attitude toward appearance, body size, body spatial position, body boundaries, body competence, and the gender-related aspects of one's body."²³ More recently there has been a push to use a new concept called "body equity" in place of "body image." According to health professionals, Russell and Rice, the term "body

²⁰ For example, the issue of control overlaps with the sexualization of women's bodies. Feminist theologian, Lisa Isherwood writes, "It has been strongly argued that it is the sexualisation of the anorexic body that is affecting girls at a younger and younger age. When three-year-olds are being targeted for strapless bras and shiny lip gloss it is no wonder that by the age of nine or younger these girls are over-conscious of their bodies as candy for the male gaze" (Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 17).

²¹ Grogan, *Body Image*, 1.

²² Edut, "Introduction," xxi.

²³ Pruzinsky and Cash, "Integrative Themes," 338. See Russell and Rice as mentioned in Small, "Addressing Body Image," 3.

image” is “decontextualized” and does not address “oppressive cultural factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and physical ability.”²⁴

The main focus of this paper is on weight as a central aspect of body image; however body image is not concerned solely with weight. In fact, as Russell and Rice make clear, body image or body equity refers to a number of different physical traits such as shape, colour, hair, facial features, ethnicity, etc.²⁵ All of these traits are included in an individual’s definition of body image. Although it is generally agreed that weight is a central issue for body image, these other aspects of body image also impact women’s lives.²⁶

In *Body Outlaws*, a number of different authors provide narratives of the struggles that they have experienced because of their bodies. Mira Jacob, for example, writes about how her Indian heritage has affected her life on a daily basis and what it has done to her self-image. She writes:

My deep brown eyes and skin, the thick line of my black eyebrows and the slant of my cheekbones have always been described to me as exotic, haunting, elusive. From the day I hit puberty, my Indian-ness has labeled me a box full of secrets, left me wrapped as a package of woman labeled ‘the other.’²⁷

As Mira Jacob recounts her story, she shares with her readers how she has been labeled by her ethnicity. Men define her according to her racial heritage alone, and see in that ethnicity exactly what they want to see – an “exotic myth.”²⁸

For Mira Jacob it was the color of her skin, but for other women, their body image is determined by the texture of their hair.²⁹ Michelle Graham, for example, notes that in

²⁴ Russell and Rice as quoted in Small, “Addressing Body Image,” 3.

²⁵ See Frost, *Young Women and the Body*, 42.

²⁶ Grogan, *Body Image*, 30.

²⁷ Jacob, “My Brown Face,” 4.

²⁸ Jacob, “My Brown Face,” 12.

black and Latino communities “good hair” and “bad hair” do not refer to having a good hair day or a bad hair day; rather they are labels “for how closely one’s hair texture resembles the Caucasian beauty standard of smoothly flowing locks.”³⁰ These are only two examples but they illustrate how body image is not limited to size and weight. Although weight is central to the issue of body image in the lives of women, it would be misleading and inaccurate to assume that body image only refers to weight.

To complicate matters even more, Thomas F. Cash argues that the psychology of physical appearance can be divided into two perspectives: Firstly, “the view from the outside” and secondly, “the view from the inside.”³¹ With the first perspective, people are viewed as social objects, where their physical appearance influences “social perceptions, interpersonal interactions, and human development.”³² Cultural ideas are imposed on an individual who is expected to measure up to those ideas. In other words, people’s perceptions of a woman and her interactions with them are impacted by how she looks.³³

The second perspective, “the view from the inside,” refers to an individual’s own subjective experience of her physical appearance. This perspective identifies how a woman views her body as well as how she feels about and responds to her body. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but are deeply interrelated. Cash’s identification of these two perspectives clearly demonstrates that body image is a complex matter that goes beyond an individual and her own dissatisfaction with her body.

²⁹ In another narrative one woman discusses her struggles with having a ‘Jewish’ nose (Jervis, “My Jewish Nose,” 62–67).

³⁰ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 67.

³¹ Cash, “The Psychology of Physical Appearance,” 51.

³² Cash, “The Psychology of Physical Appearance,” 52.

³³ Fallon, “Culture in the Mirror,” 80.

In light of the two definitions that have been offered here, it is important to ask how body image impacts women?

1.1 Body Image and Morality

First, body image is about an individual's morality. In her book, *No Fat Chicks*, Terry Poulton writes that women believe the "most preposterous fairy-tale ever concocted: that to be fat is be like Cinderella's stepsisters – ugly, lazy, mean, and stupid."³⁴ A woman's body is not neutral. Regardless of whether she wants it to be or not, a woman's body makes a statement about her morality. In other words, bodies become "indicators of moral virtue" or vice.³⁵ So, for example, slenderness represents restraint, self-control, and moderation, while weight represents "moral failure, the inability to delay gratification, poor impulse control, greed, and self-indulgence."³⁶ Being "fat" or being "obese" is considered "bad" or "ugly." A moral judgment is affixed to someone's weight, especially if that person is a woman. This kind of value system has been called "lookism" which is defined by Nichols as "that ranking of persons that attributes worth based on random variations in supposed attributes of personal attractiveness."³⁷

This affects women more widely than men since women are stigmatized for their weight more than men.³⁸ According to *Health Canada*, "fat can be construed as a symbol of power in men but always symbolizes weakness and inferiority in women."³⁹ Among women, obesity is connected to downward social mobility and "seems to affect women's

³⁴ Poulton, *No Fat Chicks*, 40.

³⁵ Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 70.

³⁶ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 4.

³⁷ Nichols as quoted in Small, "Addressing Body Image," 9.

³⁸ Cash, "The Psychology of Physical Appearance," 51; Poulton, *No Fat Chicks*, 40; Fallon, "Culture in the Mirror," 80.

³⁹ *Health Canada* as quoted in Small, "Addressing Body Image," 9.

social relationships more adversely than it does men's."⁴⁰ The sad truth is that women face greater pressure to conform to a certain ideal body image than men.⁴¹

1.2 Body Image and Sexual Attractiveness

The reason why women are stigmatized for their weight more than men leads into the next facet of body image. Body image is about sexual attractiveness. In *Am I Thin Enough Yet?*, Sharlene Hesse-Biber writes, "a woman ... is judged almost entirely in terms of her appearance, her attractiveness to men, and her ability to keep the species going."⁴² This is because, as many studies show, men respond more to visual stimuli than women.⁴³ Furthermore, attractive females are considered to have more feminine personalities, and as such, "they represent the prototypic ideal of their gender."⁴⁴

For women who are overweight their ability to attract the opposite sex is compromised. Research shows that physical weight is a key factor in determining attractiveness. Indeed, in research studies that asked what attributes were most indicative of "positive appearance," weight was an important factor.⁴⁵ A prime example of this kind of mentality can be found in a dating and social-networking site called *BeautifulPeople.com*. Managing director, Greg Hodge, and site founder, Robert Hintze, recently expelled about 5,000 members for gaining weight over the holidays. According to the article in the *Hamilton Spectator*, Hintze stated that the site is expanding because beautiful people enjoy being able to associate with other attractive people without the

⁴⁰ Grogan, *Body Image*, 7. See also Gimlin, *Body Work*, 4–5.

⁴¹ See Gimlin, *Body Work*, 4 and 98.

⁴² Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 17.

⁴³ Fallon, "Culture in the Mirror," 80. See also Cash, "The Psychology of Physical Appearance," 55.

⁴⁴ Cash, "The Psychology of Physical Appearance," 54.

⁴⁵ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 14.

inconvenience of sifting through ugly members who populate other dating sites. Hintze compares his site to other dating sites by stating, “Other sites are jungles of hippos and warthogs. BeautifulPeople [sic] is a wonderful game reserve of leopards and gazelles.”⁴⁶ While this example does include both men and women in its narrow standards of beauty, it is important to note that weight is a key factor for sexual attraction. For women, however, the implications of weight and physical attraction are great.

1.3 Body Image and the Sexualization of Women’s Bodies

One implication for women is that the emphasis on physical attraction has caused the human body to become sexualized. One woman writes of the effect of being sexualized: “Being sexualized has the remarkable effect of erasing even the most introspective of moments, leaving a woman utterly aware of nothing but her body, while at the same time making her a spectator of herself.”⁴⁷ Women’s bodies have become objectified so that their worth as a person is measured according to their physical attractiveness. Unless a woman is deemed sexually attractive by men, she is not considered to be worth much. In fact, this is the message that most women’s magazines present to its readerships. An ideal standard of beauty is “primarily linked with romantic heterosexuality; with getting and keeping a man.”⁴⁸

While beautiful women are objectified, just the opposite occurs for those women who are considered overweight or obese. Overweight women are de-sexualized because of their weight. During her time observing the events at NAAFA (National Association to

⁴⁶ Hintze as quoted in Stewart, “Only skinnies need apply,” *The Hamilton Spectator*, January 8, 2010.

⁴⁷ Jacob, “My Brown Face,” 9.

⁴⁸ Blood, *The Social Construction of Woman’s Body Image*, 67.

Advance Fat Acceptance) Debra Gimlin interviewed a woman named Tamara. Tamara shared with Gimlin that she “had a sense that [she] was a sexual being, but not really that [she is] a woman in a woman’s body.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Tamara explained “that fat women separate themselves from their bodies because they, like other members of society, have come to believe that their appearance is unacceptable.”⁵⁰

Terry Poulton further explains the negative consequences of weight for a woman. She writes that “nothing advertises a woman’s sexual unavailability, or repels potential admirers, more effectively than a protective layer of fat.”⁵¹ One woman that Terry Poulton interviewed describes the effectiveness of her weight in protecting herself from society’s demands to be thin: “I’ve come to think of my body as my disguise. It’s my cave and my bomb shelter. And it’s my walking rebuke to those who inflict Barbie doll demands on all women.”⁵² If a woman wants to remain unavailable to men, then she need only put on or keep on extra weight so that she does not meet the body image ideal. Conversely, if a woman is able to attract the attention of men, then she has confirmation that she has achieved the cultural standard of physical beauty.⁵³

1.4 Body Image and Sexual Relationships

Another implication of weight for women is that it can negatively impact their sexual relationships. One study reported that for overweight women dating occurred less frequently. Overweight women also had “less date or mate satisfaction, and experienced

⁴⁹ Gimlin, *Body Work*, 121.

⁵⁰ Gimlin, *Body Work*, 121.

⁵¹ Poulton, *No Fat Chicks*, 123.

⁵² Poulton, *No Fat Chicks*, 123.

⁵³ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 77.

more peer criticism than overweight men or normal-weight men and women.”⁵⁴ For those women who seek to get married, their weight can play an important factor in determining their perceived marriage-ability.

While it has been shown that men consider women who are not overweight to be more attractive, this emphasis on weight is not held exclusively by men. After interviewing several women, Sharlene Hesse-Biber found that women themselves believed that there was a strong correlation between thinness, attractiveness, and marriage. Some of their comments included: “I think I have to please men if I want to get a date, if I want to be married, if I want anything, and so how I appear to men is really my final (weight) goal, like if I’m going to get married or be an old maid” or “I know it sounds corny, but if I gain weight, I won’t be able to find a husband.”⁵⁵ The issue of weight for women is a very serious matter because it means that women who do meet the cultural standards for beauty have their bodies sexualized and objectified, while those who are overweight are de-sexualized and rejected as potential mates.

1.5 Body Image and Control

Another aspect of body image that deeply impacts women’s lives is the issue of power or control. By controlling her weight, a woman seemingly has control over her life. For many women, feeling fat means feeling powerless. Thinness, on the other hand, gives women a sense of power and self-confidence.⁵⁶ “[B]y investing time, money, and energy on attaining a thin body, women may be substituting a momentary sense of power

⁵⁴ Cash, “The Psychology of Physical Appearance,” 63.

⁵⁵ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 61.

⁵⁶ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 67.

for “real authority.”⁵⁷ A woman’s weight and appearance is one aspect of her life that she has control over.

It is important to note that the issue of control is of special importance for young girls who are entering into womanhood. For some young girls, control of their bodies is taken to the extreme, where many of them develop eating disorders in order to maintain control over their weight, and thereby their development.⁵⁸ Rejecting weight gain can be an adolescent’s way of adapting to the changes of puberty.⁵⁹ The reasons why some girls reject the onset of puberty are varied; for some it is because they want to remain a child, while for others losing weight is one way of helping them to separate from their parents and reduce the impact of the strain of other developmental stressors.⁶⁰ Still other girls reject puberty because they are afraid of adulthood itself and its features, such as responsibility, self-determination, and sex and sexuality.⁶¹ By maintaining control over her weight, a young girl is able to prevent or stall the growth of breasts and hips, which in turn means that her body does not become sexualized.⁶² These examples are by no means exhaustive of the reasons for why woman might want to control her body, but they do serve to illustrate that weight and appearance are areas in which a woman or girl can exert control in her life.

⁵⁷ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 29.

⁵⁸ The issue of eating disorders will be discussed more in depth in chapter two.

⁵⁹ Rosen, “Body-Image Disturbances,” 198.

⁶⁰ Rosen, “Body-Image Disturbances,” 198.

⁶¹ Frost, *Young Women and the Body*, 22. Morag MacSween provides a helpful critique of H. Bruch’s work on the psychological approach to body-hatred and its connection to a rejection of sexuality. She writes, “What having an adult female body *means* in a culture which simultaneously eroticises, degrades and devalues both women and their bodies, and how the transformation of the formally asexual child’s body into ambiguous icon of female beauty is *experienced*, are questions which are simply left unasked by Bruch” (MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies*, 41–2). Kelly Small observes that sexual abuse can have severe consequences on a woman’s body. She writes, “Girls who have been sexually abused at an early age may be afraid to enter puberty and become women, thinking that looking like a woman may bring more abuse” (Small, “Addressing Body Image,” 9).

⁶² Rosen, “Body-Image Disturbances,” 199.

1.6 Body Image and Spirituality

Finally, but no less importantly, body image is also a spiritual issue. The many facets of body image and body image dissatisfaction point to a spiritual hunger. They point to a longing for acceptance, for a sense of meaning, and for wholeness.⁶³

Throughout history women's bodies have been viewed with suspicion and derision. This long philosophical history has taught people to identify women with their bodies.⁶⁴

Augustine, for example, taught that women's bodies were "inherently opposed to the orderliness of the divine; indeed women were perceived as 'a living locus of disorder and passion.'"⁶⁵ Because he linked sin with sexuality and womanhood was so closely connected to sexuality, women's bodies came to be seen as symbols of shame and moral guilt.⁶⁶ Women's bodies separated them from God so that salvation came through a renunciation of the body. This bodily renunciation is illustrated through the female mystics of the medieval period who would "frequently embrace a 'holy anorexia,' celibacy, loneliness, self-inflicted pain, and their own marginalization" in order to transcend the body and achieve spiritual freedom.⁶⁷ Because of the spiritual limitations imposed on them by their bodies, women sought spiritual fulfillment in ways that denied their bodily existence.

While these philosophical beliefs about women's bodies and spirituality are not explicitly touted in pop culture, the very same message seems to be implied. According to Lilian Calles Barger, what these women mystics and women today have in common is "the assault on the body that they were willing to endure in order to control its

⁶³ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 7.

⁶⁴ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 58.

⁶⁵ Spalding, "The Place of Human Bodiliness," 72.

⁶⁶ Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 211 and 220.

⁶⁷ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 62.

meaning.”⁶⁸ Rather than trying to become more masculine in their pursuit of spirituality, women today try to attain a particular body image ideal. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, discusses the connection between women’s pursuit of the “perfect” body with medieval spirituality. She writes, “Magazines transmit the beauty myth as the gospel of a new religion. Reading them, women participate in re-creating a belief system as powerful as that of any of the churches whose hold on them has so rapidly loosened.”⁶⁹ For those church leaders who seek to minister to women and offer them the message of salvation, this poses a significant obstacle to their task.

Feminist theologian, Michelle Mary Lelwica identifies pictures of women in women’s magazines as not simply images, but as symbolic icons. The images of women found in magazines are icons of womanhood; they point to a “seemingly transcendent truth” about what it is to be a woman.⁷⁰ The historical icon of women and womanhood, which sought to reject the female body has been exchanged for that of models, such as Kate Moss, in women’s magazines, and it should be added, in all popular forms of entertainment. She writes:

[T]hese icons are the visions in reference to which many girls and women learn to relate to their bodies, to others, and to their deepest anxieties and dreams . . . these images serve what has historically been a religious function: that of mediating the search for meaning in a world of uncertainty, injustice, longing, and pain.⁷¹

For women and young girls these images of beauty which popular culture has deemed to be the ideal body image offer a sense of meaning for their lives. This is why so many girls believe that they are worth their weight or whatever physical feature they do not like

⁶⁸ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 62.

⁶⁹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 86. See also Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 70.

⁷⁰ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 41.

⁷¹ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 41.

about their bodies, and why they believe that they will live better and happier lives if only they lose some weight.⁷²

1.6.1 Body Image and Shame

Michelle Graham notes one study where it was found that seventy percent of women felt “depressed, guilty and shameful after looking at a fashion magazine for only three minutes.”⁷³ In this example these feelings of guilt and shame result from the comparisons that women make between themselves and the models in advertisements. However, advertisements are only one location among many in which women are presented with the ideal body image.⁷⁴ In *The Depleted Self*, Donald Capps defines shame as a “response to our failure to live up to an ideal that we have held for ourselves and [it is] the experience of self-deficiency.”⁷⁵ The problem with shame is that it is “deeply personal.”⁷⁶ In chapter two of *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, Helen Merrell Lynd notes that shame has to do with the personhood of an individual. It is about the whole self and it is internalized.⁷⁷ According to Capps, “We *perform* guilty actions, but we *are* our shame.”⁷⁸

⁷² Blood, *The Social Construction of Women's Body Image*, 18. See Table 3.2 in Cash, “The Psychology of Physical Appearance,” 61.

⁷³ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 14.

⁷⁴ Chapter two will discuss the ways in which contemporary culture promotes the ideal body image.

⁷⁵ According to Capps, the difference between guilt and shame is that guilt has to do with other people's expectations of an individual, while shame has to do with an individual's personal expectations of herself. He writes, “[W]ith guilt, the ideals that we have failed to live up to we continue to associate with the expectations of others.” Capps' distinction between guilt and shame is helpful however it fails to recognize how people often take on the expectations of others and make them their own. Thus, the reasons and occasions for guilt become the reasons and occasions for shame (Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 72).

⁷⁶ Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 73.

⁷⁷ See Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, chapter 2.

⁷⁸ Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 74. Psychologist Lewis Smedes also identifies shame as being related to feelings about the self and guilt as feelings about actions that are done (Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, 9).

1.6.2 Body Image as a Measure of Self-Worth

For many women, their bodies are a source of shame. Because of their bodies they feel “fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being.”⁷⁹ Michelle Graham notes one of the dangers of women and their feelings of shame when she writes, “Even women who looks as if they came from a lingerie ad are susceptible to questioning their worth in relationship to their appearance.”⁸⁰ This is why one young girl can write, “Searching through catalogues / you wish you could order / the bodies not the clothes.”⁸¹ This study clearly shows that there is a direct correlation between how a woman sees herself and her self-esteem and self-worth. Sharlene Hesse-Biber writes, “As part of membership in our society, young women have to learn how ‘to be a body.’ And, for the most part, what a woman observes in the mirror is what she uses as a measure of her worth as a human being.”⁸²

A woman’s identity and worth is found in her physical body; all that matters is whether or not she fits the cultural standard of beauty. Her confidence is rooted in how thin or beautiful she is and not in any of her other non-physical qualities.⁸³ That this is the case is evident from a number of studies that have been conducted. One study followed a group of 23 female college students at two universities. From the study it was concluded that the peer-group culture was of primary importance to college-age women, and this culture focused on how to meet and attract the opposite sex. A woman’s status within her

⁷⁹ Merle Fossum as quoted in Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, 3.

⁸⁰ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 14.

⁸¹ As quoted in Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, 5.

⁸² Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 58.

⁸³ See Grogan, *Body Image*, 44.

peer group depended on looking good and maintaining a thin body in order to attract men.⁸⁴

Initially, the girls in the study were focused on their education, however, over time their attention shifted from college studies to peer-group interests which emphasized romance. These girls eventually adopted cultural or peer-group values as their own.

When a woman's worth is based upon her appearance it necessarily follows that her focus would shift to the pursuit of becoming attractive.⁸⁵ Indeed, in a chapter on the connection between body-image dissatisfaction and eating disorders, James C. Rosen writes:

Given the importance placed on appearance in our weight-conscious society, it is not difficult to see how a young woman (with or without an eating disorder) might take the view that her self-worth is dependent on having a perfect body and that if only she were able to lose some weight, or look more perfect on the outside, then no one would know just how bad a person she is on the inside.⁸⁶

Rosen identifies contemporary culture's emphasis on attaining a certain beauty ideal and its impact on a woman's perception of her own body and worth. A woman will focus her attention on her weight in order to feel more acceptable to those around her. A woman's emotional well-being can be negatively impacted by her own perceptions of her weight, and given that studies show that the majority of women suffer from a negative self-image, this clearly shows that there is a great need among women to adopt a positive and healthy body image.

⁸⁴ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 90.

⁸⁵ Frost, *Young Woman and the Body*, 31.

⁸⁶ Rosen, "Body-Image Disturbances," 190.

1.6.3 Body as a Means to Fulfillment

For women, their bodies become the means by which they can achieve meaning and fulfillment. In other words, their bodies become objects which they can manipulate in order to achieve the cultural ideal which offers the hope of acceptance and happiness.⁸⁷ These ideals presented through the media offer women a means of salvation. “Produced and marketed as a recognizable ideal, many young women consume this promise in the hopes that they too might be recognized, that their lives might be seen as valuable, or that they might be seen at all.”⁸⁸ And so women manipulate their bodies through body modification (bod mod) and plastic surgery, and by exercising, dieting, and starving themselves. Women’s bodies have become objects through which they seek spiritual meaning and identity.

Body image has also come to dominate a woman’s measure of happiness or fulfillment. Essentially, women believe that being thinner will have a positive impact on their lives.⁸⁹ In other words, many women have come to believe in the “When I’m Thin Fantasy” and as a result, put their lives on hold. In her book *When Food is Love*, Geneen Roth writes, “We’ve told ourselves that the reason we’re not loved properly is our fault for not being thin...Blaming ourselves gives us a feeling of some control [and] the illusion that when we’re finally thin, we will be loved properly.”⁹⁰ Michelle Graham also talks about this fantasy that surrounds being thin, however she calls it a lie. She writes, “We’ve been buying a lie. Literally. It’s this: Being attractive means being happy. It

⁸⁷ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 42.

⁸⁸ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 47.

⁸⁹ Lafrance, et al., “Women, Weight and Appearance Satisfaction,” 228.

⁹⁰ Roth, *When Food Is Love*, 70.

means being admired, respected, loved. It means I have great value.”⁹¹ According to pop culture a woman’s fulfillment comes from attaining a culturally determined beauty ideal of thinness. When a woman bases her self-worth and happiness on how she looks, it is no wonder that so many women suffer from body dissatisfaction.

1.6.4 Body Weight as a Measure of Sin

Closely connected to this idea of achieving wholeness or meaning through attainment of a beauty ideal, is the notion which Lisa Isherwood refers to as the “Weigh Down” religion, where fat is a measure of one’s sin.⁹² The explicit link between weight and religion came to the fore in the 1950s among Protestant traditions. A prime example of this kind of teaching is Charlie Shedd’s book *Pray Your Weight Away* (1957). In his book, Shedd claimed that fat was a measurement of a person’s sin so that “fatties are people who literally can weigh their sin.”⁹³ Shedd, however, was not the only Christian to demonize fat. Other examples include Marie Chapien and Neva Coyle’s book *Free to Be Thin* which is filled with prayers for the reader to pray such as, “Show me, Lord, the mistaken thinking that has held me in bondage and made me fat” or “Dear Father, in the name of Jesus, I renounce the hold that sweets (name them) have had over me ... Sweets are now ugly to me...They have made my body ugly and I refuse to give them that power over me any longer.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 15.

⁹² See Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 71. The spirituality of the ‘weigh down’ religion is closely connected to the section on morality, which serves to illustrate how truly interconnected are the many facets of body image. Michelle Mary Lelwica identifies this system of belief as “Culture Lite” (Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 73).

⁹³ Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 71.

⁹⁴ Chapien and Coyle, *Free to Be Thin*, 58 and 86.

Another popular book is Gwen Shamblin's *The Weigh Down Diet* which has sold millions of copies and generated over thirty thousand twelve-week dieting groups throughout the USA.⁹⁵ According to Shamblin, fat is displeasing to God and it reveals a deeper spiritual problem that is essentially the inability to fully surrender one's life to God.⁹⁶ Yet, what Shamblin fails to recognize, as do many other evangelical Christian dieting efforts, is the unquestioned assumption that women must be thin, which underlies their reasons for dieting. As Michelle Mary Lelwica helpfully points out, these dieting approaches fail to "seriously interrogate the 'idolatry' of female thinness," which suggests their own "lingering ties to 'worldly' concerns and [their] underlying compatibility with the saving promises of Culture Lite."⁹⁷ These popular Protestant Christian approaches to weight and dieting are significant because they illustrate how Christians are not exempt from having accepted the belief that being thin means finding happiness and fulfillment in life, as well as the belief that having weight affixes a moral value to an individual, especially women.

For those who do not hold to traditional Christian values, there are those advertisements and dieting opportunities that appeal to a "new religion." Michelle Mary Lelwica cites an advertisement for *Avia* running shoes which adopts the language of religion. According to Lelwica, "The image juxtaposes a stereotypical view of Christianity (characterized by guilt, damnation, and belief in female weakness) with a liberal vision of 'a New Religion' (defined by joy, redemption, and affirmation of female

⁹⁵ Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 83.

⁹⁶ Shamblin as quoted in Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 76. In fact, Shamblin views the events of 9/11 as God's punishment for America's love of food (Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 74).

⁹⁷ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 76.

strength).”⁹⁸ The goal of the ad is to appeal to those women “whose needs for a sense of meaning remain unfulfilled by the promises of traditional religion and whose dreams have been delayed or lost in the shuffle of a rapidly changing and unevenly conflicted world.”⁹⁹ However, this ad and others like it still promote an unquestioned body image ideal that remains impossible for most women to attain. This ad, as well as pop culture as a whole, endorses a narrow and limiting standard of beauty that requires women to reject their bodies in order to find fulfillment, meaning, and identity in their lives.

This thesis has argued that body image is a pervasive and critical issue that deeply affects the lives of many women, and as such it is imperative that the Canadian evangelical church articulate a theology of the body as it seeks to provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to and for women. In the process of defining what body image means, it was discovered that body image is a multifaceted issue that impacts women’s lives in a number of different ways: First, body image makes a claim about a woman’s morality. Second, it determines her sexual attractiveness. Third, it results in the sexualization of a woman’s body. Fourth, it directly impacts a woman’s ability to engage in sexual relationships. Fifth, it can become an issue of control in her life. Finally, body image is also a spiritual issue where a woman’s body becomes the source of her sense of shame, her measurement of self-worth, her means of finding fulfillment, and her measure of sin.

Having identified that body image is a serious issue that many women struggle with, it necessarily follows that this problem is rooted in some common experience. This raises the question, ‘Why do women have such negative body images?’ Accordingly, in

⁹⁸ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 93.

⁹⁹ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 93.

the next chapter the focus will be on understanding contemporary culture and its impact on women's perceptions of body image. This will be done by briefly addressing the historical background of body image ideals before launching into a study of the role that the media plays in shaping the current ideal body image through television and movies, magazines and advertising, and the diet industry. The chapter will conclude by highlighting the magnitude of the crisis of body image by looking at eating disorders.

CHAPTER 2: MANIPULATING BODIES - CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND THE FORMATION OF BODY IMAGE

This chapter turns to the contemporary context in which women are located because the context in which a person lives, shapes and moulds her so that she becomes a product of her environment. One author writes that “the body is a medium of culture. It is the surface on which prevailing rules of a culture are written.”¹⁰⁰ Women’s bodies reveal what culture says about beauty and acceptance, and women’s perceptions and feelings about their bodies are shaped by culture.¹⁰¹

By briefly looking at the various beauty ideals that have been promoted throughout history, the significance of the contemporary ideal will be made evident. As technology has advanced over time, the diverse ways in which cultural ideals can be passed on to women has increased. The message about the ideal beauty type has been communicated through the media. These mediums include TV, the internet, magazines, and dieting fads, to name a few. By studying these media influences, this chapter will also demonstrate how powerful an influence the media has on women and what message is being conveyed. Finally, the magnitude of the crisis of body image in the lives of women will be made evident by addressing the thought patterns that women have formed about their bodies, as well as by studying one of the consequences of having an unhealthy body image: eating disorders.

¹⁰⁰ Gimlin, *Body Work*, 3.

¹⁰¹ Gimlin, *Body Work*, 3.

2.1 Defining “Culture”

Before addressing what contemporary culture teaches girls and women about body image, it is necessary to briefly define what is meant by the terms “contemporary culture” and “mass media”, and why these two concepts need to be addressed. In this paper “contemporary culture” refers to popular (pop) culture. Clifford Geertz offers a helpful definition of culture:

[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.¹⁰²

Culture, then, is a way of “meaning-making.” Thus, pop culture or contemporary culture, terms which I will use interchangeably, refers to the meaning-making done by ‘Hollywood’ through the medium of the mass media.

Mass media is here defined as the instruments that are used to transmit pop culture to society.¹⁰³ These include movies, women’s magazines, music, advertising, TV, etc. The reason that pop culture or contemporary culture will receive special attention is because it “expresses many aspects of the language that constructs the world inhabited by contemporary North Americans.”¹⁰⁴ The power of pop culture is further compounded by the fact that “[u]nfortunately, so many believers [and it should be added non-believers] (both young and old) merely inhale uncritically the world view “Hollywood” advances and thereby become unwitting participants in the world the language of Hollywood creates.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, 5.

¹⁰³ Leiss et al., *Social Communication in Advertising*, 68.

¹⁰⁴ Grenz, “(Pop) Culture in Theological Reflection,” 311.

¹⁰⁵ Grenz, “(Pop) Culture in Theological Reflection,” 313.

2.2 Other Influencing Factors in Body Image

While pop culture is extremely important in assigning meaning to body image in the lives of girls and women, it is important to recognize that pop culture is not the only influencing factor in these lives. Other formative factors include familial influences and upbringing, ethnic background and cultural upbringing, and all forms of abuse.¹⁰⁶ A few of these factors will be briefly discussed here.

According to a controlled study conducted by Eric Stice, body dissatisfaction has been connected to familial influences in adolescent females. For example, an adolescent who sees her parent bingeing is more likely to engage in bingeing herself. This behaviour is called modeling or imitation, and it refers to the “process wherein individuals directly copy behaviours that they see others perform.”¹⁰⁷ Other behaviours that might be influenced by family members in adolescent females include “excessive dietary restraint, preoccupation with body dimensions, extreme weight-control behaviors, and vomiting for weight-control purposes.”¹⁰⁸ These can be the result of modeling the behaviours of family members or a result of being pressured by family members to maintain a certain weight. The comments made by a 43-year-old woman explain the effects that one’s family can have on an individual’s body image. She writes:

Being around critical people leaves its scars. Both my parents were very critical of their children. They tended to focus on everything negative about us. And as a result, when I am critiquing myself, I focus on what’s wrong. Instead of saying to myself, ‘I have a nice figure,’ I say, ‘I have a big butt.’ It’s very hard to break this habit. It’s as if the critical words are being *burnt* into your heart and mind. These words can be with you the rest of your life. It’s like being *branded* for life.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ This is not an exhaustive list but it does offer some suggestions.

¹⁰⁷ Stice, “Modeling of eating pathology,” 932.

¹⁰⁸ Stice, “Modeling of eating pathology,” 932.

¹⁰⁹ As quoted in Kearney-Cooke, “Familial Influences,” 100.

This woman's comments illustrate how formative one's family is to his or her body image.¹¹⁰ This is not to say that the affects will always be negative, but it does show how important one's family can be.

Another factor that impacts a woman's perception about her body is her ethnic background and cultural upbringing. Black adolescent females, for example, are more likely to relate positive characteristics to larger and curvier women. Moreover, they are more likely to define beauty as "working with what you've got" instead of the popular thin ideal.¹¹¹ This attitude towards larger bodies is also present among Hispanic and Native American women living within the United States.¹¹² People of Hispanic ethnicity, with its strong family influences, are more likely to report satisfaction with their current weight and less of a focus on dieting behaviours.¹¹³ Thus, "[i]dentification with one's cultural group (whether it be native or adopted) is important in an individual's perception of what is ideal."¹¹⁴

Finally, sexual abuse, as one form of abuse, can be an influential factor in developing an eating disorder.¹¹⁵ According to Susan Wooley, "In some way, it appears that sexual abuse often (though not always) produces an eating disorder through a series of comparably well-understood psychological influences on psychological processes."¹¹⁶ For some women, then, they want to change their body shape in order to avoid any more sexual advances. For other women, they might develop an eating disorder as a means of

¹¹⁰ Michelle Graham writes that mothers, through the way that they talk about and treat their own bodies, impact the way that their daughters view and feel about their bodies (Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 21).

¹¹¹ Levine and Smolak, "Body Image Development in Adolescents," 77. See also Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 66.

¹¹² Jackson, "Physical Attractiveness," 18.

¹¹³ Altabe and O'Garro, "Hispanic Body Images," 253.

¹¹⁴ Fallon, "Culture in the Mirror," 96.

¹¹⁵ Hilde Bruch shares the story of a client who linked her eating disorder to her father's inappropriate physical advances towards her (Bruch, *Eating Disorders*, 240).

¹¹⁶ Wooley, "Sexual Abuse and Eating Disorders," 186.

punishing themselves for what happened.¹¹⁷ Sexual abuse is another key factor that affects a woman's perceptions about herself and her body.

2.3 Defining Beauty

Contemporary culture teaches young girls and women that to be beautiful one must be thin. It also teaches that in order to be accepted by others or happy in life one must be thin.¹¹⁸ Michelle Graham, in *Wanting to Be Her*, identifies the problem: "We've been buying a lie. Literally. It's this: Being attractive means being happy. It means being admired, respected, loved. It means I have great value. Guys will want me. Girls will want to be me."¹¹⁹ In a study initiated and financed by *Dove*, it was found that many women consider "beauty" and "physical attractiveness" as having a great deal of overlap or as being interchangeable.¹²⁰ This is significant given that in 1913, the definition provided by *Webster's Dictionary* identified "beauty" as "properties pleasing to the eye, the ear, the intellect, the aesthetic faculty or the moral sense."¹²¹ This definition describes "beauty" as being more than just about physical attractiveness. However, more recently, the definition of "beauty" has become very narrow. Yet, what many fail to notice is that

¹¹⁷ Calam and Slade, "Eating Patterns and Unwanted Sexual Experiences," 102. In her chapter on the connection between sexual abuse and eating disorders, Susan Wooley explains that clinicians are divided over whether or not there is enough clinical data to prove a direct correlation between eating disorders and sexual abuse. One of the reasons why there is such widespread disagreement is because the first reports on these two issues were based on case descriptions and observations from clinical series and were not drawn from controlled studies (Wooley, "Sexual Abuse and Eating Disorders," 175). Furthermore, Calam and Slade note that some studies indicate that there is a link while others do not support this theory (Calam and Slade, "Eating Patterns in Unwanted Sexual Experiences," 101–2).

¹¹⁸ See Fallon, "Culture in the Mirror," 96; Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 28; and Frost, *Young Women and the Body*, 42.

¹¹⁹ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 15.

¹²⁰ This study was conducted in 2004. 3,200 respondents were interviewed in ten countries globally: U.S., Canada, Great Britain, Italy, France, Portugal, Netherlands, Brazil, Argentina and Japan. Women that were interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 64 (Etcoff, "The Real Truth," 13).

¹²¹ *Webster's Dictionary* as quoted in Etcoff et al., "The Real Truth," 4.

the ideal that is being promoted by popular culture is an impossible ideal. “With few exceptions, women are incapable of attaining the appearance idealized by contemporary culture.”¹²² This is not because women lack the self-control or desire to meet cultural standards; rather, it is because these standards are physically impossible for the average woman to attain. The average North American woman is 5 feet 3 inches tall and weighs 152 pounds, while the average super model is 6 inches taller and weighs 42 pounds less.¹²³

2.4 Historical Background

Interestingly, it was not always this way. Throughout history, there have been a number of different ideals that women have had to conform to. In the late Middle Ages, for example, a curvaceous and voluptuous body was considered the ideal. Fat was “erotic and fashionable.”¹²⁴ The reason for this was because women “were desired for their procreative value and were often either pregnant or nursing.”¹²⁵

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ideal fluctuated between curvy and thin. However a watershed moment in the history of beauty ideals occurred in the 1960s with the arrival of a young woman, nicknamed ‘Twiggy.’ Seventeen-year-old, Leslie Hornby Armstrong entered the American fashion industry and revolutionized cultural standards of beauty and fashion.¹²⁶ Twiggy was five foot, six inches and she weighed only ninety-seven pounds.¹²⁷ “Ethereal weightlessness and Nordic features”¹²⁸

¹²² Gimlin, *Body Work*, 5.

¹²³ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 17.

¹²⁴ Fallon, “Culture in the Mirror,” 84.

¹²⁵ Fallon, “Culture in the Mirror,” 84.

¹²⁶ Fallon, “Culture in the Mirror,” 88.

¹²⁷ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 28.

as the beauty ideal swept the world round and women began to starve themselves in order to become just like Twiggy. Even those fashion models who were established in the trade felt that they had to lose weight. In fact:

Two of the most prominent were actresses Jane Fonda – who has admitted to suffering a twenty-year eating disorder while trying ‘to get closer to the bone’ – and Sally Field, who developed bulimia in response to feeling ‘immensely unattractive [because] everybody ... was Twiggy except me.’¹²⁹

Nobody was exempt from the pressure to lose weight and become skinny. From the early 1960s and onward, the sizes of both Miss America, Miss USA, and *Playboy* decreased significantly. In a study conducted by Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, and Thompson (1980), data that was collected on winners from Miss America revealed that from 1959 to 1978, there was a significant drop in weight per height.¹³⁰

The effects of this new standard on women are profound. Not only do women now have to maintain a certain weight in order to be considered attractive, but a white North American ideal is being touted as *the* ideal regardless of a person’s race or ethnicity. Liz Frost, for example notes that not all bodies are equally valued. She states that the skin colour, size and shape of bodies in Western culture are of greater value than those of black women.¹³¹ Indeed, one author writes:

‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?’ America’s mirror screams back Blondie, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Marilyn Monroe... Oh, yes, sometimes the look changes and those who are styled arbiters decree brunettes, exotics or ethnics the latest ‘in’ look. But no matter that they may sing the praises of voluptuousness this year and dark and sultry the next, the objects of beauty are always overwhelmingly white.¹³²

¹²⁸ Etcoff et al., “The Real Truth,” 4.

¹²⁹ Poulton, *No Fat Chicks*, 42.

¹³⁰ Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show the results of their study (Garfinkel and Garner, *Anorexia Nervosa*, 109).

¹³¹ Frost, *Young Women and the Body*, 42.

¹³² Gillespie as quoted in Frost, *Young Women and the Body*, 43.

While it has been said that contemporary culture promotes this message of thinness, it must be asked how women are receiving this message, and how has this message become so widespread?

2.5 The Role of the Media

The media plays a key role in persuading women to believe that being thin is highly important for their lives, and this message comes at them in a variety of ways. The extent of its presence in the lives of women is overwhelming. North Americans view 1, 500 images daily “in print ads, TV programs and commercials, posters, store windows, billboards, movies, sports, magazine features, books, greeting cards, cartoons, and even gag items.”¹³³ This culture of thinness is promoted in the movies and on TV, it is depicted in magazine articles and ads, and it is featured in dieting self-help books and clubs. Everywhere a woman turns, she is being told that she needs to conform to society’s standard of beauty if she wants to be found attractive or accepted. Part of the trouble is that this standard is unattainable for the average woman. The media presents women with “perfected bodies, something which may stimulate desires to emulate, and women’s magazines...offer women advice...on how to be thinner, have better skin, shinier hair, etc. and therefore, such magazines may imply, be a better and more loved person.”¹³⁴

One of the greatest dangers of the media is that it has the ability to promote one ideal to a variety of cultures. In the days before mass media and the Internet, people were

¹³³ Poulton, *No Fat Chicks*, 74. Dove has a video clip entitled “Onslaught” which shows the number of advertisements that a young girl will be subjected to at an early age. Their tag line is “Think unrealistic ads don’t affect young girls? Think again.” Their point is that girls cannot escape the cultural standard of beauty and so young girls need to be educated about what they are seeing so that they have the opportunity to work on having a healthy self-image. See “Onslaught,” [no pages].

¹³⁴ Frost, *Young Women and the Body*, 30.

limited to only what their country provided them. Now, with globalization, one country's standards of beauty are being spread to many other nations. In "Culture in the Mirror", April Fallon writes that "the rise of mass media in the 20th century is more likely to impose more uniform standards of both beauty and fashion throughout the world than has existed previously."¹³⁵ The significance of this must not be underestimated. One culture's preference for beauty is being passed on to other cultures where it is impossible to attain. The white, Western ideal is simply not possible for a woman of Indian heritage, but she hears this message from a number of different sources.

2.5.1 Television and Movies

Television and movies are two ways in which this message is promoted both explicitly and implicitly. Shows such as *Beverly Hills 90210*, *America's Next Top Model*, and *What Not to Wear* are only a few examples of the shows that are available for viewing and hearing the message that how one looks is all-important. *Beverly Hills 90210* has a cast of young beautiful people that its viewers are meant to want to imitate. By only casting such young and beautiful people, they are sending the message that the viewer too must be young and beautiful to be just as loved or accepted. In *America's Next Top Model* and *What Not to Wear*, women are being told outright that they need to look a certain way if they want to get anywhere in life or if they want to be considered attractive by their peers.

In the movies, the beautiful actress or actor is cast as the main character of the film, with the slightly less beautiful and quirky, or heavier set person cast as their friend

¹³⁵ Fallon, "Culture in the Mirror," 82.

and sidekick. Very rarely is an unattractive person cast as the lead role in a movie, and when they are, it is because his or her undesirable features, such as weight or odd looks, are meant to be laughed at for comedic value. Even though these shows and movies may seem innocent, the message that they are sending is anything but innocent. In *A Women's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960*, author Jeanine Basinger writes, “Women measure themselves by the cultural norms that are presented to them. What is a woman? How is she supposed to look and act? Movies ... provided models to answer these questions, and women...gobbled them up.”¹³⁶ Movies supply women with examples of ideal beauty types that they can compare themselves to, and they present storylines that tell women that to be beautiful means that one will get ‘the guy’ and live a successful and happy life.

2.5.2 Magazines and Advertising

Another major tool used for communicating the thin ideal is magazines or advertisements. In 2000, *Marie Claire* sold 948, 321 copies, with a global readership of 15, 000, 000.¹³⁷ Given how many women read these magazines, it is no small thing that over 95 per cent of the space used is for advertising.¹³⁸ Hesse-Biber writes, “Women’s magazines, with their glossy pages of advertising, advertorials, and beauty advice, hold up an especially devious mirror. They offer to ‘help’ women, while presenting a standard nearly impossible to attain.”¹³⁹ Sylvia Blood, in *Body Work*, describes the danger of

¹³⁶ Basinger as quoted in Poulton, *No Fat Chicks*, 49.

¹³⁷ Blood, *Body Work*, 64.

¹³⁸ Blood, *Body Work*, 64.

¹³⁹ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 32.

women's magazines, highlighting how they feed on women's insecurities about their bodies:

Women's magazines function as an 'ostensibly authoritative text of femininity'... Their overwhelming focus on themes of personal change and self-improvement constitute a 'discourse of femininity', where a woman's body is regarded as permanently flawed and always in need of remedial work. Feelings of insecurity and self-dissatisfaction, which are the *sin qua non* of the advertising industry, and which fuel consumerism, are induced by ubiquitous glossy images of perfect-looking, ideal women.¹⁴⁰

What many women fail to realize as they read these magazines is that very rarely is a true likeness being depicted. Photographs of models have been enhanced and edited with the use of computers in order to present a refined image.¹⁴¹ *Dove*, in their "Campaign for Real Beauty," has produced a video called "Evolution" that shows the work that an advertising company goes through to create an advertisement.¹⁴² In the video clip, the model looks like an ordinary woman at the beginning, but then has makeup applied and her hair styled so that her appearance changes drastically. Then, once the photographs have been taken, a computer is used to edit the pictures, so that the final product is not really the model at all, but a 'better' misrepresentation of her. Their message: "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted."¹⁴³

2.5.3 The Diet Industry

Another way by which the message of an ideal beauty is passed onto women is through the dieting industry. Sarah Grogan writes, "One of the most powerful social

¹⁴⁰ Blood, *Body Work*, 64–5.

¹⁴¹ Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 34.

¹⁴² See "Evolution," [no pages].

¹⁴³ See "Evolution," [no pages].

forces in the promotion of thinness in Western society is the diet industry. Books, slimming plans and diet foods are sold to a public which ‘feels fat.’¹⁴⁴ The number of women that diet is overwhelming: among Americans and British women about 95 per cent of women have dieted at one point in their lives, and about 40 per cent are dieting at any one time.¹⁴⁵

The connection between advertising and the dieting industry should not go unnoticed, because it is the advertising industry that creates the need which the diet industry has the goods to fill. In other words, “the dieting industry is the perfect industry, because it creates a problem (body dissatisfaction) and then offers to solve it. ‘By creating a market for itself it ensures that women will continue to feel fat and will continue to support the dieting industry.’”¹⁴⁶ The books, videos, programs, and products to help women slim down are innumerable,¹⁴⁷ but the message remains the same: In order to be found attractive and be accepted, women must meet the unattainable beauty ideal and this requires weight loss.

2.6 Cultural Ideals and Eating Disorders

One thing that many women fail to understand is that the female body naturally has more fat than the male body. It is natural for a woman to have more curves than a man. During puberty, girls’ bodies “soften and spread out in ways that our culture calls fat.”¹⁴⁸ The natural process of gaining weight is a part of the developmental process for

¹⁴⁴ Grogan, *Body Image*, 20.

¹⁴⁵ Grogan, *Body Image*, 42.

¹⁴⁶ Ogden, *Fat Chance! The Myth of Dieting Explained*, 48.

¹⁴⁷ As of 1996, there are over 17, 000 different diet plans, products, and programs available to choose from (Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin*, 39).

¹⁴⁸ Small, “Addressing Body Image,” 9.

females, yet it causes much anxiety for young girls who are told that they must be thin. With the thin ideal firmly in place as the measure of beauty for women, “females of normal weight are misjudged and also misjudge themselves as overweight.”¹⁴⁹ With feelings and fears of being overweight, it is no wonder that women sign up for gym memberships and strictly monitor what they eat on a daily basis. These feelings of inadequacy and discontent with one’s body can lead to very destructive thought patterns and the development of eating disorders.

April Fallon identifies the connection between cultural ideals, personal bodily dissatisfaction and the development of eating disorders:

[W]e can see culture setting the standard (a thin ideal), individual biology providing a backdrop for inadequacy or falling short (i.e., a heavier body), culture providing the acceptable venue for alteration (dieting), and one’s membership status (i.e., being female and having one’s self-worth be dependent on one’s physical attributes) within the cultural group influencing the vigor with which one pursues the avenue for alteration.¹⁵⁰

For some women their efforts to achieve the ideal become extreme and involve severely distorted perceptions of how they look. Two of the most common eating disorders are *anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia nervosa*.

In 1994, the *American Psychiatric Association* cited criterion for the diagnosis of *anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia nervosa*. In order to be diagnosed with *anorexia*, an individual had to: refuse to maintain a minimal normal weight; fear becoming fat or gaining weight; have disturbance in body weight and shape perceptions that are linked to self-esteem; and miss at least three normal non-drug induced menstrual cycles. For an individual to be diagnosed with *bulimia* he or she had to: experience recurrent episodes of binge eating; experience recurrent behaviour to compensate for the binging such as

¹⁴⁹ Fallon, “Culture in the Mirror,” 93.

¹⁵⁰ Fallon, “Culture in the Mirror,” 81.

purging, fasting, etc.; experience the recurrent bingeing and compensatory behaviour for at least twice per week for at least three months; and take body weight and shape into consideration in his or her self-evaluation.¹⁵¹ In both of these eating disorders, body weight and shape perceptions are keys to the behaviours, and can lead these individuals to extreme measures to control their weight.

In 1987, Cooper and Fairburn conducted a study and found that women with eating disorders felt that other people measured them mainly on their appearance and did not consider other qualities in their evaluations. Some of the women's thoughts that they recorded in their study included: "'Because I'm big, people don't like me' ... 'If I was thinner, I would be more successful' ... 'My legs have fat dimples in them (or some other minor imperfection), therefore, men don't like my body.'"¹⁵² For these women, they have adopted a particular way of thinking that causes them to continually measure their worth according to their perceptions of their bodies. Garner and Garfinkel provided their patients with an analogy for treatment of distorted body-size perception: "When I try to estimate my own dimensions, I am like a color blind person trying to coordinate her wardrobe. I will have to rely on objective data or someone I can trust to determine my actual size."¹⁵³ Their analogy clearly illustrates how incapable an individual is of looking at herself objectively when she suffers from an eating disorder.

The effects of such a mentality are far-reaching. Women with a negative self-image will go to great lengths to avoid situations in which they feel self-conscious, and will adapt their lifestyles accordingly. For some women this means avoiding "social outings where the person believes her body will be scrutinized, wearing baggy clothes...,

¹⁵¹ Frost, *Young Women and the Body*, 14.

¹⁵² See Cooper and Fairburn, "The Eating Disorder Examination," 1–8.

¹⁵³ Garner and Garfinkel, "Body Image in Anorexia Nervosa," 279.

avoiding physical intimacy, and eating less.”¹⁵⁴ For others, they will avoid particular triggering situations such as going out to a restaurant for dinner with friends and family.¹⁵⁵ The pressure to eat food when around other people is very difficult to deal with, and so to get the focus off of themselves they will eat, knowing that they can purge later on, or they refuse to go out for food in the first place.

In this chapter it has been argued that women are deeply impacted by the pervasive and critical issue of body, and as such it is imperative that the Canadian evangelical church articulate a theology of the body as it seeks to provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to and for women. In this chapter, it has been shown that women live in a cultural context which upholds one standard as the ideal beauty that many women cannot attain. Women receive this message from the mass media on a daily basis. The result of this cultural environment is that many women have developed negative thought patterns about their bodies and about themselves as persons. In addition, many women have developed eating disorders to deal with their feelings of inadequacy and their desire to lose weight. Sarah Grogan sums up the situation that most contemporary women and young girls find themselves in: “Women are never free from self-consciousness, and they constantly self-monitor.”¹⁵⁶ This truth begs a response from the church as it seeks to provide healing to the many women that are broken from culture’s demands to be beautiful.

In the next chapter three key theological questions related to the topic of a theology of the body will be explored: First, what does it mean to be created in the image of God? Second, what does it mean for human beings that Christ became human, and

¹⁵⁴ Rosen, “Body-Image Disturbances,” 196.

¹⁵⁵ Rosen, “Body-Image Disturbances,” 196.

¹⁵⁶ Grogan, *Body Image*, 54.

lived, died, and was resurrected in bodily form? Finally, what does it mean to be embodied beings? The answer to these questions will provide the Canadian evangelical church with a helpful framework in which to view the pervasive and critical issue of body image.

CHAPTER 3: SUBVERSIVE HOPE - TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

In order for church leaders to provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to women it is essential that they respond to the issue of body image by articulating a theology of the body. Unfortunately, this task is much easier said than done, because as Gregg R. Allison has noted, “evangelicals at best express an ambivalence toward the human body, and at worse manifest a disregard or contempt for it.”¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, although much work has been done regarding the study of the body and gender relations, relatively little study has been directed toward addressing the dilemma of body image, women, and a theology of the body, and how they relate to one another.¹⁵⁸ If women are to begin the journey toward healing and fully embodied living in the midst of a culture that promotes one ideal of beauty and stigmatizes those who do not fit this ideal, then it is imperative that a theology of the body be developed. As Lilian Calles Barger writes, “What we need is to find a subversive act of resistance against cultural dictates strong enough both to tame the mythical beauty beast and to thwart the dysfunctional relationship we have with our bodies.”¹⁵⁹ What follows in this chapter is an attempt to answer three key theological questions related to the topic of a theology of the body¹⁶⁰: First, what does it mean to be created in the image of God? Second, what does it mean for human beings that Christ became human, and lived, died, and was resurrected in bodily form? Finally, what does it mean to be embodied beings?

¹⁵⁷ Allison, “Toward a Theology,” 4.

¹⁵⁸ Many of these gender related studies are conducted by feminist theologians who tend to focus on the problem of patriarchy and quickly turn to conversations on phallicism. See Julia Baudzej’s article, which discusses feminist responses to embodiment and the incarnation of Christ which focuses on his maleness (Baudzej, “Re-telling the Story of Jesus,” 72–91).

¹⁵⁹ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 24.

¹⁶⁰ These questions are multifaceted and complex and what is offered here is only provisional, but hopefully, it will begin a journey towards a recovery of what it means for women to live a bodily existence.

3.1 A Theology of the *Imago Dei*

The creation account in Genesis provides a theological starting point for a theology of the body because it is here that the creation of human beings is recounted and that the Christian understanding of embodied life finds its foundation. Indeed, of the five texts that deal with the *imago dei*, three of the “exegetically significant texts” occur in Genesis (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:5–6).¹⁶¹ According to Stan Grenz, Gen 1:27 is “the linchpin of the biblical teaching regarding a universal aspect of the *imago dei*”¹⁶² because it is here that the reader is told that God created humanity in his own image in language that is “graphically corporeal.”¹⁶³ Because the biblical author does not provide clarification as to what this image refers to, there are a number of interpretative options that have been developed and promulgated throughout history. Daniel L. Migliore identifies as many as five different interpretative options of *imago dei*: physical resemblance, rational nature of human beings, dominion over the earth, human freedom or freewill, and human life in relationship.¹⁶⁴ Interestingly, all of the characteristics are rooted in bodily existence. For example, without the body humanity would not be able to assert its dominion over the earth or live life in relationship with one another. As such, two key facets of the *imago dei* will receive focus in chapter three: the bodily aspect and the relational aspect.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Grenz, *The Social God*, 184.

¹⁶² Grenz, *The Social God*, 186. In his article, “The Image of God in Man,” D. J. A. Clines also affirms the significance of the phrase ‘in the image of God’ for understanding the biblical thought about the nature of humankind. According to Clines it cannot be over-emphasized (Cline, “The Image of God in Man,” 53).

¹⁶³ Prokes, *Toward a Theology*, 78.

¹⁶⁴ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 140–1.

¹⁶⁵ This is not to say that the other options are not integral to the *imago dei*; however, it is to say that humanity’s corporeal existence in community is vital to an understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God.

3.1.1 *Imago Dei* as Embodied Beings

In order to understand what is meant by the *imago dei* one needs to look more closely at the creation narrative. The Hebrew words used to express *imago dei* in Gen 1:27 are *tselem* (“image”) and *demuth* (“likeness”). According to its use within the Old Testament, the noun *tselem* means “‘sculpture, plastic image, statue’ (1 Sam 6:5, 11; 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chron 23:17).”¹⁶⁶ It is also used to refer to images of the gods (Ezek 7:20, Amos 5:26; Num 33:52 molten images). Similarly, the noun *demuth* was understood to mean “that which is like something, likeness, representation.”¹⁶⁷ Contemporary exegetes are nearly unanimous that the two terms are virtually synonymous.¹⁶⁸

While chapter one does not provide an explanation as to what exactly is meant by *tselem* and *demuth*, Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that Gen 5:1–3 provides illumination because it further develops the idea of *tselem elohim* or “image” through the genealogies that are listed there. These verses reiterate that God created humanity in his own image then proceed to inform the reader that Adam had a son who was created in his own image and likeness (5:3). As such, according to Frymer-Kensky v 3 explains what is meant by “likeness.”¹⁶⁹ She writes, “God created us to be like God, and even though God is beyond gender, it is the nexus of male and female that is the likeness and creates the likeness.”¹⁷⁰ Moreover, in a study on the Old Testament’s usage of *tselem* and *demuth*, R. Larry

¹⁶⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 146.

¹⁶⁷ Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 146.

¹⁶⁸ Grenz, *The Social God*, 187. See also Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 13.

¹⁶⁹ Von Rad also contends that “image” and “likeness” are interchangeably used, and that the corporeal aspect of humanity is integral to the *imago dei* (Von Rad, *Genesis*, 58). See also Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 15.

¹⁷⁰ Frymer-Kensky, “The Image,” 322.

Overstreet concludes that both terms refer to what is visible to the eye.¹⁷¹ Because of this, a physical understanding cannot be abstracted from a theology of the *imago dei*.

There have been a number of theologians, however, who have denied that being created in the image of God included the body. They argue that the *imago dei* refers to the spirit of humanity. According to H. H. Rowley, the *imago dei* cannot refer to humanity's physical form because in the Old Testament Yahweh is not thought of in this way.¹⁷² Such an understanding, however, would seem to contradict what Scripture says about the physical creation of humanity, as Overstreet's study of *tselem* and *demuth* and Frymer-Kensky's study of Gen 5:3 have illustrated. Such an understanding also denies the importance of humanity's bodily existence. Indeed, in an article which studies the phrase "in the image of God" D. J. A. Clines writes:

Man [sic] according to the Old Testament is a psychosomatic unity; it is therefore the corporeal animated man [sic] that is the image of God. The body cannot be left out of the meaning of the image; man [sic] is a totality, and his [sic] 'solid flesh' is as much the image of God as his [sic] spiritual capacity, creativeness, or personality, since none of these 'higher' aspects of the human being can exist in isolation from the body.¹⁷³

The creation account makes it clear that bodily existence is important to humanity's experience. In her book, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, Catholic theologian Mary Timothy Prokes notes that "body-meaning" is found in the creation of humanity in God's image.¹⁷⁴ To divide the person into body and spirit is to adopt the beliefs of Gnosticism. The importance of the body to human existence is captured by Frederica Matthews-Green who observes, "We are not merely passengers riding around in skin tight racecars; we are

¹⁷¹ Overstreet, "Man in the Image of God," 62, 65.

¹⁷² Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*, 84.

¹⁷³ Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 85–6.

¹⁷⁴ Prokes, *Toward a Theology*, 57.

our bodies. They embody us.”¹⁷⁵ God created humans with bodies and he declared that what he had made was good, thereby affirming humanity’s bodily existence.

3.1.2 *Imago Dei* as Reflecting God

Another important characteristic of the *imago dei* for human bodiliness is that although “the Creator has no body, the divine intent is that the human body be an active agent in communicating the image of God ... Our bodies make us present even as God is present in a particular place of belonging.”¹⁷⁶ Every person’s bodily presence serves as a reminder that God is present. God is made known through humanity, and thus each person is known through his/her body-selves. In other words, this bodily existence implies a relational way of knowing one another and knowing God. Accordingly, bodies in community are an important aspect of the *imago dei*.¹⁷⁷

3.1.3 *Imago Dei* as Reflecting the Community of the Trinity

According to Stephen R. Tracy, the relational aspect of humanity is the first aspect of the image of God that is found in the creation account.¹⁷⁸ An understanding of the *imago dei* as being human life in relationship is important to a theology of the body for two reasons. First, the *imago dei* affirms that embodied existence cannot take place apart from other persons. The importance of relationship can be seen in the creation

¹⁷⁵ Matthewes-Green, “The Subject Was Noses,” 5.

¹⁷⁶ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 130. See also Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 67. Clines writes, “It is of the greatest theological moment therefore that precisely within this depiction of God’s transcendent freedom over the whole world-order we find the doctrine of God’s image, that is to say, of the real presence, or immanence, of the deity within the world through the person of man [sic]” (Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 88).

¹⁷⁷ See Prokes, *Toward a Theology*, 75.

¹⁷⁸ Tracy, *Mending the Soul*, 24.

narrative when it says that God created woman because it was not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18–25). In his commentary on Genesis, Claus Westermann notes that in Gen 2:18–25 the narrator “is emphasizing something of peculiar importance to the human creature: namely, community.”¹⁷⁹ That this is the case is evident from the language that Adam uses when he greets the woman for the first time. “It is the outcry of joyous surprise by the man who discovers in the woman his companion.”¹⁸⁰

Adam needed human companionship in the presence of another person. Humanity as social beings reflect God “who exists not as a solitary being but as a being in fellowship.”¹⁸¹ It is through relationship that people are known. As Migliore writes, “We do not simply *have* bodies; we also *are* our bodies. We express ourselves and communicate with others through our embodied actions.”¹⁸²

The implications of this need for human relationship have been studied by social scientists. The research that they have conducted reveals that social, intellectual, and emotional growth are impacted by relationships. In fact, “The human need for relationship is so profound that infants who are fed, clothed, and given medical care but are deprived of physical touch will often fail to thrive and, left untouched, may actually die.”¹⁸³ This confirms that human relationship is integral to an embodied existence and this aspect of human life is part of what it means to be created in the image of God.

Second, the *imago dei* affirms that humanity as created in the *imago dei* is meant to reflect the relationality of the Trinity.¹⁸⁴ In Gen 1:26, God says, “Let *us* make human

¹⁷⁹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 20.

¹⁸⁰ Westermann, *Genesis*, 21. See also Anderson, *Genesis*, 60–1.

¹⁸¹ Hockema, *Created in God's Image*, 14.

¹⁸² Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 143.

¹⁸³ Tracy, *Mending the Soul*, 24.

¹⁸⁴ Prokes, *Toward a Theology*, 66–8.

beings in *our* image, in *our* likeness.” It was in God’s image that he created *them* (Gen 1:27). Some biblical scholars have argued against seeing in the plural of v 26 a reference to the Trinity. Gordon Wenham, for example, argues that the plural is used because God is speaking to his heavenly court.¹⁸⁵ Bill T. Arnold, on the other hand, argues that it is best to understand the plural as “an especially emphatic exhortation of self-deliberation or determination, expressing the measured and intentional action God is about to take.”¹⁸⁶ However, Anthony Hoekema contends that it does not refer to the heavenly court “since God is never said to take counsel with angels, who—themselves creatures—cannot create man [sic], and since man [sic] is not made in the likeness of angels.”¹⁸⁷ Moreover, it is unlikely that the plural is a form of self-deliberation because it is extremely rare to find a plural form of a self-address. As Clines observes, “The rarity of parallels gives us little confidence in the correctness of this view.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, it must be concluded that while v 26 does not provide a clear Trinitarian theology, it is hinting at the plurality of God which the New Testament further develops into a doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁸⁹

This “speaks to us of God’s community and God’s desire that humanity also bear the image of divine community.”¹⁹⁰ Human “experiences of friendship, caring family relationships, and inclusive community ... [are] hints or intimations of the eternal life of

¹⁸⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 28.

¹⁸⁶ Arnold, *Genesis*, 44.

¹⁸⁷ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 12. See also Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 66–7.

¹⁸⁸ Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 68.

¹⁸⁹ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 12. Clines also understands the plural to refer to a plurality within the Godhead, and in light of other Old Testament passages (Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30; and Ezek 37) it is possible that the God is addressing his Spirit as the agent of creation (Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 69).

¹⁹⁰ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 130.

God and of the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed.”¹⁹¹ Humanity in relationship is meant to reflect the relational nature of the Trinity.¹⁹²

This is an important point to bear in mind because the nature of the community of the Trinity is that of self-giving love. It is a relationship that embraces diversity and difference.¹⁹³ As Migliore writes, “If the triune God is self-giving love that liberates life and creates new and inclusive community, then there is no salvation for the creature apart from sharing in God’s agapic way of life in solidarity and hope for the whole creation (cf. Rom 8:18–39).”¹⁹⁴ The love that is present within the divine relational community is liberating and inclusive. It welcomes diversity and offers salvation, which is a significant fact within the contemporary context in which women are expected to conform to one ideal.

3.2 The Fall

Yet, the creation account does not stop at God’s declaration that what he created was good. The account in Genesis also includes the fall of humanity in chapter three. To view the *imago dei* apart from the fallenness of humanity is “sheer idealism.”¹⁹⁵ The devastating effects of Adam and Eve’s sin have been felt ever since they ate the fruit, and these results concern the body and the soul. With the entrance of sin into the world, death and shame also came. When the woman and man took the forbidden fruit and ate it, their eyes were opened and they realized their nakedness (Gen 3:6–7).

¹⁹¹ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 79.

¹⁹² Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 141.

¹⁹³ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 77.

¹⁹⁴ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 81.

¹⁹⁵ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 149.

It is noteworthy that the first thing the biblical author mentions after Adam and the woman have eaten the fruit is that their eyes were opened and they noticed their bodies. In his commentary on Genesis, von Rad refers to the consequences of their sinful actions as “a rift that can be traced to the depths of their being.”¹⁹⁶ Barger identifies the significance of this act in her book, *Eve’s Revenge*. She writes, “They saw that they were naked, and in that instant shame entered the world and disintegrity invaded the body-self. The body and self were alienated from each other, split apart, becoming a marred image of God.”¹⁹⁷ Adam and Eve tried to hide their shame by covering their bodies, but the damage was done – sin, death, and shame had entered the garden.

The body-self division that takes place, which Barger designates as “disintegrity,” is evidenced throughout the philosophical tradition which views the spirit as separate from and superior to the body. Descartes, for example, prioritized the mind over and against the body during the Enlightenment, and developed the idea that the body was no more than a machine.¹⁹⁸ The result was the division of the body and spirit. The danger of this, as feminist theologian Anne Spalding notes, is that disembodied rationality detaches people from their feelings which then has moral consequences.¹⁹⁹ B. W. Harrison rightly observes the danger of this dualism, “Failure to live deeply in ‘our bodies, ourselves’ destroys the possibility of moral relations between us.”²⁰⁰

Perhaps one of the most extreme consequences of this dualism in the world is the sexualization of women’s bodies through the media and through pornography. Through

¹⁹⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 91.

¹⁹⁷ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 137.

¹⁹⁸ Vergote, “The Body as Understood,” 97.

¹⁹⁹ Spalding, “The Place of Human Bodiliness in Theology,” 74.

²⁰⁰ Harrison, “The Power of Anger,” 205.

these images women's bodies are objectified and made the objects of consumption.²⁰¹

James Nelson identifies the dangerous natural progression that takes place once the mind is separated from the body. He writes, "The depersonalization of one's sexuality, in some form or degree, inevitably follows. The body becomes a physical object possessed and used by the self."²⁰² Herein lies one of the problems that women face on a daily basis that a theology of the body must seek to rectify.

The consequences of this sinful deed, the eating of the forbidden fruit, were pronounced by God in Gen 3:14–24. God says to the woman that she will experience even more pain in childbirth, and that her desire will be for her husband and that he will rule over her (3:16).²⁰³ God says to Adam that the ground will be cursed and that he will have to endure hard labour in order to survive (3:17–19). Immediately following this pronouncement Adam asserts his dominion over the woman and names her Eve, which means "mother of all living," thereby beginning his "dysfunctional subordination of woman. The creature who was designed to work alongside him and to exercise care over the earth has been reduced to her reproductive role."²⁰⁴

There are some scholars who argue that in this naming of Eve, Adam recognizes God's blessing even after his judgments on them for their sin.²⁰⁵ Von Rad takes this a step further by arguing, "One must see the man's naming of the woman as an act of faith,

²⁰¹ Barger writes, "Sunglasses, auto batteries, legal services, and motorcycles are sold by paralleling the desire to consume a product with the desire to consume the woman. Through metaphor woman has become an object of consumption forever imprisoned in her sex, while the physical-based roles of women always threaten to reduce her to her body" (Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 17).

²⁰² Nelson, *Embodiment*, 40.

²⁰³ It is incorrect to see God's pronouncement on the woman as a legitimation of Adam's superiority and subjugation of Eve. As Phyllis Trible writes, "We misread if we assume that these judgments are mandates. They describe; they do not prescribe ... This statement [v 16] is not license for male supremacy, but rather is condemnation of that very pattern. Subjugation and supremacy are perversions of creation" (Trible, "Eve and Adam," 436).

²⁰⁴ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 138. See also Trible, "Eve and Adam," 436-7.

²⁰⁵ See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 268.

... an embracing of life, which as a great miracle and mystery is maintained and carried by the motherhood of woman over hardship and death.”²⁰⁶ Yet, as Wenham, notes, it is doubtful that this represents a response of faith on the part of the man.²⁰⁷

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with motherhood, but it is to say that the problem lies in having her identity reduced to it.²⁰⁸ In Gen 2:23 the man names this new person “woman.” By naming her thus, the man is rejoicing over their mutuality. Yet, this understanding of the woman is lost in 3:20; in this naming of Eve, Adam has essentially reduced her to a bodily function. As George W. Ramsey argues, “The essence which he [Adam] perceives in this new creature determines the name.”²⁰⁹ This is why Clines writes, “Adam sees the point very exactly when immediately after the divine sentences on the two of them he calls her Eve, ‘life’, ... She has not yet had a child, and is not yet the mother of anyone; but her function is as plain as her two names ... Woman-Life exists for the procreation of children.”²¹⁰ For Clines, Adam’s naming of Eve, reduces her to procreative function.

Moreover, Eve’s desire will now be for her husband (3:16). In their commentary on the Old Testament, Keil and Delitzsch interpret desire as “a morbid yearning; the woman ‘... was punished with a *desire* bordering upon disease.”²¹¹ Von Rad also

²⁰⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 96.

²⁰⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 84.

²⁰⁸ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 138.

²⁰⁹ Ramsey, “Is Name-Giving,” 35. Ramsey argues against the view that sees Adam’s naming as an act of domination. However, his argument is based upon the belief that in naming an entity its essence was being determined. Thus, for example, when Adam named the woman “Eve” he was shaping the character of the woman as being a life-giver. For Ramsey, the act of naming did not make something that which it was named. While this is a convincing argument, what Ramsey fails to acknowledge is that by naming the woman “Eve”, Adam still reduces her identity to that function. According to Ramsey’s argument, when Adam named her “Eve” he named her according to her essence which was a life-giver (Ramsay, “Is Name-Giving,” 33–5).

²¹⁰ Clines, *What Does Eve do to Help?*, 39–40.

²¹¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 103.

supports this understanding of “desire.” He describes the impact that God’s judgment has on the woman:

There are three facts which because they are related to one another in unresolved tension grind down the woman’s life: (1) hardships of pregnancy, pains at birth, and (2) yet a profound desire for the man in whom she (3) still does not find fulfillment and rest (Ruth 1.9), but rather humiliating domination!²¹²

In him she will seek to find fulfillment and her “exercise of power is centered on pleasing or manipulating the man (most evidently in the use of sexuality), which in turn enslaves her more.”²¹³

Some scholars, however, argue that rather than understanding Eve’s desire as referring to her desire for the man, it should be understood to mean a desire to dominate her husband or as referring to sexual appetite.²¹⁴ Susan Foh, for example, argues in favor of understanding “desire” to refer to a desire to dominate. She disagrees that Eve’s “desire” can refer to her desire for her husband because “[t]he rule of the husband, *per se*, is not a result of or punishment for sin. The headship of the husband over his wife is a part of the creation order.”²¹⁵

However, there are a number of problems with Foh’s interpretation that makes it better to accept the interpretation that “desire” refers to Eve’s desire for her husband. One problem with her argument lies in the fact that she bases it upon the presupposition that headship is inherent to the created order. As Phyllis Tribble writes, “The subordination of female to male signifies their shared sin.”²¹⁶ Moreover, Wenham also disagrees with

²¹² Von Rad, *Genesis*, 93.

²¹³ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 139.

²¹⁴ See Foh, “What is the Woman’s Desire?” 376–83.

²¹⁵ Foh, “What is the Woman’s Desire?” 378.

²¹⁶ Tribble, “Eve and Adam,” 436. For a more detailed discussion as to the equality of man and woman prior to the fall, see Tribble, “Eve and Adam,” 431-8.

Foh's interpretation because she bases her understanding of "desire" upon its usage in Gen 4:7 which speaks of sin's urge is for Cain. According to Wenham, "given the rarity of the term "urge", (... apart from Gen 3:16 and 4:7 occurring only in Cant 7:11), certainty is impossible."²¹⁷

The relational nature of bearing God's image is deeply affected so that the relationship between man and woman is dysfunctional. And so begins woman's quest to be found beautiful and desirable by man, thereby reducing her worth to her body.²¹⁸

In the creation narrative, God created humanity with bodies and declared that what he had created was good. His intention was that humanity live embodied lives, whereby they experienced God and knew one another through their body-selves. God's good intentions were upset when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. The consequences of this act are far-reaching. This sin caused and continues to cause alienation between the body and spirit, a division which has been promoted by various individuals throughout history to the detriment of the body. This sinful deed also caused a rift in the relationship between man and woman, so that woman would seek fulfillment and meaning in man and man would exert his authority over her. Finally, this sin also introduced shame into the lives of human beings, which "tells us that we must hide our true selves... [and] makes us hungry for praise [and makes] us think we'll never get that

²¹⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 81-2.

²¹⁸ This reduction of women to their bodies is evidenced throughout history. According to Karen Jo Torjensen for example, "A woman's honor was her good reputation, and this had always to be a reputation of chastity ... A woman, however, demonstrated her honorability by comporting herself with shame, signifying that she understood her sexual vulnerability, and avoiding all appearance of indiscretion" (Torjensen, *When Women Were Priests*, 136 and 137). A woman's character was closely connected with her sexuality and thus her body. Dishonorable women were those women who did not protect their chastity or guard their bodies appropriately. See also *Daughters of the Church* by Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld for a more conservative approach to the study of women and how they have been viewed and treated throughout history, and *Women and Christianity* by Mary T. Malone for a history of women's position in the church and how it was closely connected to Greek and Roman views of women and their bodies.

affirmation with our body the way it is.”²¹⁹ The numerous effects of this sinful act are obvious today in the lives of women as they endlessly seek to attain the ideal body image in their quest for meaning and identity.

3.3 The Incarnation of Christ

Within redemptive history, God has provided a means of salvation that offers grace and speaks to embodied humanity in its place of alienation. “It was in Christ, the eternal Word made flesh, that the redemptive, embodied expression of the human vocation to be living icon of God came to its fullest realization.”²²⁰ Indeed, Christ is the image of God (John 14:9; 2 Cor 4:4; and Col 1:15). The importance of the incarnation of Christ cannot be emphasized enough for it is impossible to even articulate a theology of the body that does not take seriously Christ’s embodiment. Yet, a theology of the body that sees Christ as both fully human and fully divine, and living an embodied life has proven to be a difficult concept for many people to grasp.

Mary Timothy Prokes rightly identifies the importance of the incarnation for a theology of the body. She writes that only when the incarnation of Christ is reflected on can “there be an authentic grappling with the theological significance of the body in a time of radical transition, in a time when the very identity of what it means to be enfleshed is severely questioned.”²²¹ Lisa Isherwood begins one of her chapters by noting that the saving message of the incarnation “has never sat too well with the realities of

²¹⁹ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 40.

²²⁰ Prokes, *Theology of the Body*, 62. See also Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 160.

²²¹ Prokes, *Theology of the Body*, 32. Although Prokes’ book was published during the mid-90s the importance of what she is writing is of no less value for today.

living beings, particularly women.”²²² The candor with which she makes this remark is perhaps shocking but not unwarranted. Years of Christian history reveal the truth of her statement – Christianity and bodies have appeared to be mutually exclusive topics especially for women. The problem with this ideology theologically is that it denies the incarnation of Christ. By addressing the incarnation of Christ, it is hoped that further light will be shed on what it means to be embodied beings as well as its implications for living embodied lives, especially for women.

3.3.1 Christ’s Embodied Existence

Contrary to an ideology that denies the integrity of the body, Scripture informs its readers that Jesus lived a bodily existence. John 1:14a, for example, says, “The Word became *flesh* and made his *dwelling* among us.” Although the details are few, the Gospels do provide some information about the life of Jesus before his public ministry. The Gospel of Luke, for example, says that Jesus “grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). The details that the Gospel authors provide affirm that Jesus was human like those around him and that his life was quite embodied. Moreover, the accounts of his life which he spent in active ministry were very corporeal. They speak of his needing rest and nourishment, and of his experiences of emotional pain (Luke 4:1–2; 22:44; John 11:1–37). Jesus lived the life of an ordinary human being and went through the natural process of bodily development.

²²² Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 37.

The importance of Christ's human experience is critical to a theology of the body because, in order to redeem humanity God must enter fully into humanity's embodied experience. As Barger rightly notes:

Must not God identify with us and walk in our shoes, experiencing the mundane daily tasks of eating, work, and rest? Must not God also experience the rejection of the community that each of us comes to know? To make a difference where it matters most, only a God near to us can provide the assurance that our flesh has meaning.²²³

Added to this should be the questions, "Must not God experience the pain and suffering that women experience as they seek to find meaning and significance through the limited means made available to them – their bodies? And must not God experience the pain and suffering that women experience through the physical and emotional betrayal of a gender who is considered to be better and stronger than them?" A Gospel which fails to speak to the lived experience of humanity is not a full Gospel at all.

3.3.2 Christ and an Affirmation of the Body

Yet, the Gospel message that Scripture shares is a message that speaks of Christ, fully human and fully divine, sharing in the lived experience and the suffering of the world.²²⁴ One of the beauties of the incarnation of Christ is that it affirms a fully-embodied spirituality. Indeed, the union of the Spirit of God with human flesh "goes smack against the notion that our body is a hindrance to our spiritual life and that true

²²³ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 144.

²²⁴ See James F. Keenan who discusses the importance of Christ's divine-human nature for human embodiedness within the history of Christianity (Keenan, "The Human Body," 335).

spirituality lies in escaping the body.”²²⁵ Christ’s embodiment affirms the goodness of the human body and the life that is lived through that body.²²⁶

The incarnation of Christ not only affirms the goodness of the body through his own bodily existence but also in his treatment of others. Through his actions, he extended grace to people. Jesus associated with and ministered to those individuals who were considered outcasts by society because of their bodies. “The social stigma of physical brokenness contributed to a profound sense of exclusion in Jewish society, just as today our age, gender, race, and lack of ideally defined beauty can be experienced as isolating.”²²⁷ Yet, it was to the isolated members of his society that Jesus went. It was with the flawed and unacceptable people of society that Jesus shared a message of unconditional love. Jesus showed these people grace.²²⁸

Jesus’ treatment of women is especially important for a theology of the body because he affirmed the value of women and their bodies thereby going against the cultural norms of his day. Jesus’ healing of the woman who had experienced bleeding for twelve years is a prime example of Jesus’ evaluation of women and their bodies (Luke 8:43–48). According to Jewish purity laws, “Women with their monthly discharges and pregnancies were often in a position of being unclean.”²²⁹ Yet, in this account, the woman immediately stops bleeding as a result of touching Jesus’ cloak (Luke 8:44). Instead of becoming impure himself, which people believed would happen as the result of coming into contact with anything impure or defiled, Jesus’ brings healing and restoration. “Jesus spoke to and touched women instead of regarding their bodies as a

²²⁵ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 153.

²²⁶ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 144.

²²⁷ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 158.

²²⁸ Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 42.

²²⁹ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 159.

problem.”²³⁰ Through Jesus women’s bodies become a location for redemption to take place.

3.3.3 Christ Redefines “Beauty”

The incarnation of Christ is not limited to articulating a theology that simply affirms the goodness of a bodily existence however. The incarnation of Christ also includes his death and resurrection. Christ died a very human death when he was hung on the cross. The act of this self-giving has much to offer a theology of the body because, as Elaine Graham observes, it affords the opportunity of examining “what it might mean for God to be revealed in a human *body*, broken and suffering, whose resurrection proclaims that Love is stronger than death.”²³¹ The picture of Jesus hanging on the cross is a profound image for a theology of the body because it defies a neat and orderly view of human embodiment. Christ on the cross is broken, bleeding, and naked, and it is through this act of self-giving love that true beauty is displayed for the world. The cross is an overwhelming contradiction for those who have been “conditioned by a culture of consumption to desire and appreciate what is slick and appealing to the eye...”²³²

In *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eisland offers an alternative way of viewing God that is rooted in the reality of the broken and bleeding body of God’s Son. For Eisland this picture of God is contained in the image of “God in a sip-puff wheelchair.”²³³ It is within this that she “recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged ‘not

²³⁰ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 159.

²³¹ Graham, “Words Made Flesh,” 114.

²³² Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 172.

²³³ Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 89.

feasible,' 'unemployable,' with 'questionable quality of life.'"²³⁴ While Eisland's theology of the "disabled God" specifically addresses the problem of how people with disabilities have come to be viewed as inferior or of less worth or dignity, and the theology that supports an able-bodied prejudice, her understanding of God is informative for a theology of the body.²³⁵

The picture of the imperfect Christ on the cross or God in a sip-puff wheelchair is a challenge to narrow ideals of beauty and acceptance.²³⁶ It shows humanity that at the moment of God's triumph over sin and death, the body-self that accomplished this was Christ crucified. Eisland draws attention to the implication of this understanding of God.

She writes:

The significance of the disabled God is not primarily maleness, but rather physicality. Jesus Christ the disabled God, is consonant with the image of Jesus Christ the stigmatized Jew, person of color, and representative of the poor and hungry – those who have struggled to maintain the integrity and dignity of their bodies in the face of the physical mutilation of injustice and rituals of bodily degradation.²³⁷

Those bodies that are outside the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, good, and normative are represented in Christ's broken body. "God is at work in the broken bodies of the faithful; not all-powerful, nor helpless, but a survivor, interdependent with others in mutual care."²³⁸

²³⁴ Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 89.

²³⁵ See Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 98. This is not to diminish the work that Eisland has done, especially with regard to people with disabilities and their families; rather, her work offers a challenge to contemporary views of what is beautiful and acceptable in light of an alternative understanding of Christ's incarnation.

²³⁶ See Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 80.

²³⁷ Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 102.

²³⁸ Graham, "Words Made Flesh," 119.

3.3.4 Christ and the Resurrection

Even as Christ died a physical death, so also he was resurrected in bodily form. The implication of this for a theology of the body is profound because Jesus' bodily resurrection confirms that the human body is integral to salvation.²³⁹ Antoine Vergote argues that "the resurrection event does not imply the thesis of an immortal soul; on the contrary, it suggests the idea that the body is the whole man [sic] interdependent with the beings to which it relates."²⁴⁰ The promise of a bodily resurrection, as found in 1 Cor 15:35–44 for example, calls people to treat their bodies as integral to living embodied lives.²⁴¹

3.4 The Importance of Embodiment

In light of the *imago dei* and the incarnation of Christ, it necessarily follows that there is a value to people as embodied beings and to the role that their bodies play in their humanity. Mary Timothy Prokes identifies the importance of embodied existence for the individual. She writes, "Body and soul are not separate entities. A human person does not *possess* a body; rather, from the moment of conception, each is *expressed* bodily, so that no one can be distinguished from his/her body."²⁴² Understanding the significance of embodied existence is of infinite value and will assist pastoral leaders of the Canadian

²³⁹ Allison, "Toward a Theology of Human Embodiment," 13.

²⁴⁰ Vergote, "The Body as Understood," 97.

²⁴¹ Keenan, "The Human Body," 333. Indeed, a positive evaluation of the body to human existence can be found in Paul's concluding words on the resurrection of the body: "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (Sumney, "Resurrection of the Body in Paul," 19).

²⁴² Prokes, *Toward a Theology*, 36.

evangelical church to formulate a theology of the body as they seek to respond to the pervasive and critical issue of body image in the lives of women.

3.4.1 The Body Affirmed

First, embodiment is important to a theology of the body because it affirms that the body is essential to human life and its experiences. Apart from their bodies, people cannot be persons; it is impossible to exist apart from a bodily existence.²⁴³ Bodies are the means by which people are able to be in the world: “of being some-particular-where; of taking in that place by seeing it, hearing it, and touching it.”²⁴⁴ This means then, that bodies must be respected as integral to the identity of the individual. As Judith Andre rightly argues in her essay entitled, “Respect for Bodies,” bodies must be attended to with respect which has two components: “acknowledging the existence of something and appreciating its value.”²⁴⁵ Not only must people learn to *recognize* their bodies, but they must also learn to *appreciate* their bodies.

This proves to be a difficult task given that bodily existence entails pain, hardship, and suffering. Nancy Eisland calls this the profound ambiguity of embodiment. She writes, “Embodiment is not a purely agreeable reality...There is simply no denying it. We concede the precarious position of living a difficult life and affirming our bodies as whole, good, and beautiful.”²⁴⁶ Oftentimes whenever suffering is experienced, it is tempting to become alienated from the body, to reject the body as being essential to the body-self. A theology of the body, however, must strive to recognize and affirm that

²⁴³ Andre, “Respect for Bodies,” 10.

²⁴⁴ Andre, “Respect for Bodies,” 10.

²⁴⁵ Andre, “Respect for Bodies,” 17.

²⁴⁶ Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 95–6.

people's bodies cannot be alienated from their selves because to do so is to become alienated from their lives.²⁴⁷

3.4.2 The Essential Body

Second, as the *imago dei* and Christ's incarnation make clear, the body is essential to a person's identity and as such, "Any spirituality that we embrace must be one that has already embraced our bodies."²⁴⁸ The phenomenon of self-injury provides an example that illustrates the interconnectedness of the spirit and the body. In *A Bright Red Scream*, Marilee Strong writes, "The body is, indeed, the temple of the soul. Cutters are living proof that when the body is ravaged, the soul cries out. And when the soul is trampled upon, the body bleeds."²⁴⁹ The body cannot be separated from the person and is important to spirituality. The Roman Catholic *Catechism* states that "spirit and matter, in [humanity], are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature."²⁵⁰ A theology of the body that recognizes embodiment as being integral to spirituality will emphasize the role that the body plays. People experience God through their bodies; they taste, touch, see, and smell creation all around them. People partake of the Eucharist as a physical act of remembering the death and resurrection of Christ. They eat his body and drink his blood as the community of God. Praising God entails the use of the body to gesture reverence by kneeling or lifting hands or by singing songs of praise. Spirituality is embodied, and as such, embodiment is central to a theology of the body.

²⁴⁷ Andre, "Respect for Bodies," 21.

²⁴⁸ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 44.

²⁴⁹ Strong, *A Bright Red Scream*, 88.

²⁵⁰ *Catechism*, #364.

3.4.3 The Body and Community

Finally, embodiment is central to a theology of the body because it illustrates and affirms the significance of the body to human relations. “Thus, in the body and through the body, one touches the person himself in his concrete reality.”²⁵¹ People come to know and be known to one another through their bodies. While there is great beauty and opportunity for embodiment and human relationships through appropriate and nurturing relationships such as father-daughter or husband-wife, there is also the potential for this to become a means of abuse.

In his book *Mending the Soul*, Stephen R. Tracy identifies how sexual intercourse was created to be a positive act by which two people come to know one another through their embodied selves but how sexual abuse perverts it. He writes, “Sexual abuse is incredibly damaging because, as creatures made in God’s image, sex is the most powerful bonding activity in which we can engage.”²⁵² An activity that was meant to draw a husband and wife together can be used to control another person or be used out of selfish desire.

Moreover, when the self is separated from the body the results are dangerous. For example, “procreation and sexual activity lose their personal relational significance; violent intrusions and technological manipulations become commonplace.”²⁵³ The body comes to be viewed as an object which is at the mercy of the individual, there for the purpose of creating meaning out of life or being a site of asserting control. When this happens, how one treats another individual is impacted. Sex is no longer an act of deep intimacy but is only a physical act. This is why people can say, “It’s just sex.” The

²⁵¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life*, 13.

²⁵² Tracy, *Mending the Soul*, 28.

²⁵³ Prokes, *Toward a Theology*, 37.

importance of the body to relationality is denied so that physical acts lose their meaning and importance.

A theology of the body, however, must recognize the importance of the body to human relations. People as embodied beings know one another through their bodies through a word spoken, a gesture given, or a shared touch. This embodied way of knowing others cannot but help influence the way an individual knows herself as well as impact those around her.

As church leaders seek to respond pastorally to women and their struggles with body image, it is vital that they articulate a theology of the body. In this chapter three key theological questions were explored which aid in this initiative: What does it mean to be created in the image of God? What does it mean for human beings that Christ became human, and lived, died and was resurrected in bodily form? And, third, what does it mean to be embodied beings? These explorations have established the parameters of an embodied theology. It is only when a theology of the body is articulated that church leaders can minister to women because it is upon this theology that the foundations for a new understanding of the body are built.

If church leaders hope to succeed at empowering women both to change and to participate in bringing change, then this theology of the body must remain relevant to the struggles that women face.²⁵⁴ In the next chapter the focus will be the interaction between theology and women's lived experiences. A series of women and their experiences will be shared in the next chapter in order to illustrate the need for theological reflection on the importance of the body for the lives of women.

²⁵⁴ Groome, "Theology on Our Feet," 63.

CHAPTER 4: BREAKING THE SILENCE - THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN AND A THEOLOGY OF EMBODIMENT

This thesis has argued that body image is a pervasive and critical issue that deeply affects the lives of many women. In this chapter, the lived experience of a number of women will be examined in light of the theology of the body that was developed in chapter three. In the first section, Charlotte Cooper's experience will be considered within the framework of a theology of the body that rejects the narrow definition of the ideal body image that is so highly valued by contemporary culture. The focus of this chapter will then move to Srey's story that describes the abuse that can result when body-self disintegrity takes place. Her story will be viewed within the lens of a theology of the body that affirms a body-self integrity. Next, Jenny's experience with her own body will be examined in view of a theology of the body that affirms the value of community for sexuality. As the argument progresses there is also a need to draw attention to the importance of a theology of the body that responds to the shame that is experienced by many women. This will be done by examining a poem written by an anonymous 14-year-old girl. Finally, this chapter will turn to the biblical example of Mary in order to illustrate how Christ has made women's bodies places for redemption.²⁵⁵ These reflections will, in turn, set the stage for chapter five which offers ministry initiatives for a pastoral response.

²⁵⁵ It is important to note at the outset that the "dialectical hermeneutic" that is offered here is multifaceted and interrelated (Groome, "Theology on Our Feet," 73). As will become clear as this chapter progresses, there is a significant amount of overlap between the various aspects of a theology of the body. For instance, it is impossible to speak of a definition of beauty that does not take into consideration the diversity found within the Trinity as well as the countercultural definition of beauty that the image of Christ-crucified offers to a contemporary audience. Rather than viewing the overlap that takes place as being redundant, it should be viewed as confirmation of the importance of a theology of the body for the issue of body image in women's lives.

4.1 Rejection of Culture's "Beauty"

This thesis began with a poem by Charlotte Cooper entitled "Mirrors." It served to introduce the topic of body dissatisfaction that one young girl suffers. Included here is the first part of her poem that describes the role models that she desires to emulate. She writes:

I often hear,
 Mostly from psychologists on talk shows,
 How teenagers see distorted images in our full-length mirrors.
 The ones that set decorators in movies and on television
 Border with Prom pictures, snapshots and
 Cute boys: Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, David Duchovny, David Boreanaz.
 In my room, Ben and Matt and both Davids are next to my bed.
 They are on the wall across from the mirror.
 On my desk.
 On my ceiling.
 But not around my mirror.
 Around my mirror are women: Nadia Anerman, Kate Moss, Amber
 Valletta, Shalom Harlow.
 I get to see them as I look at myself
 They are my goals. They are my aspirations.
 And then I wonder why I hate myself.
 When I am alone in my room, I look at myself
 And I am disgusted.
 After seeing what I should look like around the mirror,
 I hate my body and self.
 I truly believe that I should look that way,
 Because no matter what I say in class about images,
 I truly believe that it is my own fault that I don't look like a model.²⁵⁶

The sad truth is that Charlotte has bought the lie that culture shares with every woman – the lie that says that to be beautiful one must be thin like the supermodels who pose for the advertisements in magazines. Charlotte is one victim of the "tyranny" of thinness.²⁵⁷ Even though she recognizes the limiting ideal that these images portray and promote, she accepts it as truth. The danger of this is that whenever the thin ideal is promoted and

²⁵⁶ Charlotte Cooper as quoted in Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, 7-8.

²⁵⁷ Jean Kilbourne defines this as the "tyranny" of thinness (Kilbourne, "Still Killing Us Softly," 396).

women reject their bodies in order to conform to this ideal, they are “lessen[ing] the divine image.”²⁵⁸

A theology of the body, however, offers a much needed alternative to the limiting ideal of what is considered beautiful and acceptable that pop culture promotes via the mass media. As the creation narrative in Gen 1 makes clear, God created man and woman in his image and when he was finished he declared his creation to be a marvelous work of art. God created humanity in such a way that together they reflected the Trinity which is a “living unity... [of] plenitude that includes difference and relationship.”²⁵⁹ This means that the beauty and diversity that is present in the Trinity is meant to be reflected in and through humanity.

Moreover, when Christ died on the cross, he redefined beauty in a profound and breathtaking way. “Even though death on a Roman cross was painful, its primary function as a deterrent was public humiliation. The crucified died exposed in a bloody sweat and unable to control bodily excretions. It was a degrading and shameful death, devoid of human dignity.”²⁶⁰ Yet in the very same moment when Christ was deemed ugly and despicable to the world, a new kind of beauty was introduced to the world; the beauty of love poured out. As Barger writes, “This other-centred love, which is the pleasure of God, is the only beauty that can restore our imaginations.”²⁶¹ It is this other-centred love that offers the hope of restoring the imagination of one young girl, and others like her, to see the beauty that her body presents. In that moment, Jesus challenged the cultural definitions of beauty of his day, turning them on their heads.

²⁵⁸ Frymer-Kensky, “Religious Anthropology,” 323.

²⁵⁹ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 77.

²⁶⁰ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 170.

²⁶¹ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 172.

The miracle of this for women like Charlotte is that it rightly challenges what people should accept as the right and proper definitions of beauty. It challenges people to see beauty in the unexpected and least likely of places, not just in the bodies of supermodels like Nadia Anerman and Kate Moss. As Lisa Isherwood writes, “Therefore, Christians will have radical views about beauty and perfect embodiment which will not conform to the dictates of heteropatriarchy.”²⁶² Such a definition, which sees beauty in the love manifested in the broken and bleeding body of Christ, is subversive. It is counter-cultural. It encourages women to recognize the beauty that their own seemingly, unlikely bodies contain. This is good news for those women who are deemed “too fat” by the tyranny of thinness.²⁶³ Such is the power of the cross – it invites women like Charlotte to accept the differences that they find in their bodies and to recognize that God declared them to be beautiful and has redeemed them.²⁶⁴

4.2 Body-Self Integrity

In addition, a theology of the body rejects the ideology that is prevalent within contemporary culture which separates a woman from her body and encourages men and women to view women’s bodies as objects. Pop culture educates people to view women’s bodies as objects to be consumed and manipulated. The pornography industry, for example, has considerably influenced the way women’s bodies are viewed by fragmenting them in their portrayal of women. A. Kuhn writes, “In pornography, photographs are often composed in such a way that a particular body part is greatly

²⁶² Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 81.

²⁶³ Kilbourne, “Still Killing Us Softly,” 392.

²⁶⁴ Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 81.

emphasized.... [A]n abstracted bodily part other than the face may be regarded as an expropriation of the subject's individuality."²⁶⁵ The idea of a woman as a person is rejected by pornography so that her body becomes the object that is desired for the selfish pleasure of the viewer.²⁶⁶

The extreme of this, or perhaps the natural consequences of this way of viewing women's bodies, can be seen in the story of one young girl. In an article from January 2007, news reporter Dan Rivers shares the story of six-year-old Srey. When Srey was just five years old, her parents sold her to a brothel. For several months, Srey was abused by pimps and sex tourists. "Passed from man to man, often drugged to make her compliant, Srey was a commodity at the heart of a massive, multimillion-dollar sex industry in Phnom Penh, Cambodia."²⁶⁷ The sad truth is that Srey is not the only one suffering this kind of abuse. In fact, millions of children are involved in the sex trade industry worldwide.²⁶⁸

Srey's story speaks about the profound suffering that many girls and women suffer. Srey's body became a commodity for people to buy and sell, and she suffered body-self disintegrity at the hands of those who wanted to take advantage of a young girl's body. It is to this very situation that a theology of the body speaks and offers hope.

Contrary to such a view and treatment of the body, the creation account affirms that God created both men and women as embodied beings. As Cline rightly argues, the body "is a totality."²⁶⁹ The body is essential to life; it is a vital part of one's personhood. When those pimps and sex tourists took advantage of Srey's body they effectively denied

²⁶⁵ Wooley, "... And Man Created 'Woman,'" 42.

²⁶⁶ See Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 96.

²⁶⁷ Rivers, "Girl, 6, embodies Cambodia's sex industry," [8-10].

²⁶⁸ Rivers, "Girl, 6, embodies Cambodia's sex industry," [1].

²⁶⁹ Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 86.

Srey's personhood. For those who would seek to reduce women and young girls to their bodies, a theology of the body firmly rejects the possibility of doing so. Bodies are the means by which women and men experience life, and as such are of infinite importance. In response to a culture that either reduces a woman to her body or that refuses to see the body as important to a woman's personhood a theology of the body rejects these impulses and affirms the vital part that the body plays in embodied personhood.

4.2.1 Body-Self Integrity and Community

Moreover a holistic view of the body as evidenced in the creation narrative affirms the need for and the value of community.²⁷⁰ Part of what it means to be created in the *imago dei* is that human beings were designed to be in relational community with each other. In a culture where people's bodies are not viewed as important to their personhood and where people's lives are fragmented from one another it becomes far too easy to view the body as separate from the person.

The value of one woman's body has been reduced to being a tool for having sexual pleasure; it has been divorced from her personhood. According to Jenny, a 27-year-old with a public relations career, "If you're with multiple people, you can't get your heart broken."²⁷¹ Jenny feels that "[h]aving casual sex keeps her safe, at least emotionally."²⁷² The problem with this is that it has created in Jenny a "cavalier attitude [that] is shocking."²⁷³ Even though the risk of contracting an STI is quite high, Jenny does not ask her sexual partners about their sexual pasts, and she admits to not always

²⁷⁰ See Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 180.

²⁷¹ Voss, "When Did Unsafe Sex Stop Being Scary?" [12–3].

²⁷² Voss, "When Did Unsafe Sex Stop Being Scary?" [13].

²⁷³ Voss, "When Did Unsafe Sex Stop Being Scary?" [27].

using what little protection condoms do offer.²⁷⁴ Jenny's incautious treatment of her body as well as her devaluation of the importance of the body for relationships is evidenced in her sexual activities. Her body has been fragmented from her personhood.

In light of this, Mary Timothy Prokes' definition of sexuality is important because it illustrates and emphasizes the relationality of embodied existence. She writes, "[S]exuality is our human capacity as whole persons to enter into love-giving, life-giving union in and through the body in ways that are appropriate."²⁷⁵ Sexuality is a gift-giving of the entire self to another. This understanding of sexuality and the role that the body plays contradicts the cultural norm that people like Jenny adopt when they divorce their bodies from their selves. The pop cultural view of body image separates the body from the self as well as the person from sex so that the body alone is important to sexuality as a physical act. According to a theology of the body however, sexuality is not disembodied – it involves the whole person and it is a relational act.

Humanity is meant to reflect the Trinity which is a divine community existing in mutual love and self-giving. However, contemporary culture encourages a disembodied mode of living. It rejects the need that people have for community by encouraging them to watch pornography or adopt body-dissociative attitudes. As Lilian Calles Barger writes, "Disembodied communications don't feed our souls the way physical touch and proximity do... Nothing says you are important to me as much as honoring your physical presence."²⁷⁶ For women like Jenny, then, a theology of the body affirms their bodies as being integral to their personhood. "Creating more human environments requires that we

²⁷⁴ Voss, "When Did Unsafe Sex Stop Being Scary?" [7, 22].

²⁷⁵ Prokes, *Toward a Theology*, 95.

²⁷⁶ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 190.

be present both physically and emotionally.”²⁷⁷ Such a view is informative for contemporary culture because it values the whole person and refuses to separate her body from her person or to see her as a body only.

4.2.2 Body-Self Integrity and Shame

Additionally, a body-affirming theology rejects the tendency that women have to feel shame for their bodies. In popular culture weight is often an indicator of morality or a sign of sin, and thus is a reason for feeling ashamed. Many contemporary Christian dieting books have adopted the belief that fat or weight is an indicator of morality where women, more so than men, are viewed as lazy, mean or stupid. This kind of ideology rejects the significant part that the body plays in women’s lives, so that their bodies become their shame. In *Ophelia Speaks*, Shandler includes a poem written by an anonymous fourteen-year-old girl. In this poem, the girl shares her experience of what she feels when she looks at herself in a mirror:

I feel ashamed at what I look at
I am disgusted with this worthless girl—this failure.
Tears of fear slowly start to creep up into her eyes
But she has to hold back—has to stay strong.
I am hoping to see a figure which is perfect and beautiful,
With every single bone and organ visible
Protruding sharply through a pale paper-thin layer
But come to find a different girl
I am disgusted and feel empty inside.
I am weak and have failed—for once I have lost
My precious battle in which I had so greatly mastered.²⁷⁸

Yet, this girl’s body is not a symbol of shame or guilt because, as a theology of the body affirms, her body was created by God and as such is considered to be beautiful. For those

²⁷⁷ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 189.

²⁷⁸ As quoted in Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, 18.

women who are convinced that they bear the weight of their sin and shame, a theology of the body offers liberation and empowerment through its body-affirming message.

Moreover, when Christ died on the cross, he despised its shame. He rejected his culture's definition of what was considered beautiful and worthy of love. Lilian Calles Barger writes, "[The beauty of the cross] allows us to look in the mirror without shame and to see others with new eyes. We will see beauty where we saw lack. We will see our naked faces reflecting the love of God."²⁷⁹ Christ's death and resurrection offer this young girl the possibility of looking at herself in the mirror without feeling ashamed of what she sees. Christ offers her the opportunity of seeing in the mirror a body-self that was worth dying for and a body-self that displays beauty. "God's gaze of love covers our shame."²⁸⁰ This is the message of hope that Christ offers.

4.3 The Root of the Body Image Issue

A theology of the body also identifies the root of the issue of body image in the lives of women – sin. As the previous chapter illustrated, the reverberations of Adam and Eve's sin continues into the present day. The disintegrity of the body and the dysfunctional relationship between men and women that resulted from Adam and Eve's sin is evidenced in women's pursuit of the ideal body. As has been mentioned already, the alienation of the body from the self can be seen in the objectification and sexualization of women's bodies. Moreover, God's pronouncement that Eve's desire would be for her husband meant that "[y]earning to recover the one-flesh union she had

²⁷⁹ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 173.

²⁸⁰ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 174.

with man in Eden, woman will place man in the position reserved for God, looking to him for fulfillment.”²⁸¹

The spiritual quest that many women are on for meaning, significance, and value has been wrongfully placed in men. Men have become idols to women so that women seek to attract men through their pursuit of the perfect body. The Cinderella fairy tale that tells women that to be beautiful is to be desired by a man and to live happily ever after is alive and well in contemporary culture. The problem with this, as Michelle Graham rightly notes, is that “[u]ntil we women replace our desire for men with a desire for God, we will remain susceptible to the habit of investing heavily in our appearance in hopes that it will buy us the affection we crave.”²⁸² Women will continue in their endless pursuit of the perfect body under the tyranny of thinness until they come to realize that God has already declared them to be beautiful and desirable.

4.4 Women’s Bodies as Places for Redemption

Interestingly, God made women’s bodies places of redemption. One character in whom this redemption is manifested is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Barger writes:

Mary has no obvious hope for transcendence. Yet her yes provides hope that in our bodies the works of God can be wrought. In her we find a sign of God’s willingness to use the insignificant, even the vulnerability and symbolic nature of our bodies. In a body that has been associated with seduction and immanence and carries the communal relational load, God pours out divine grace.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 139.

²⁸² Graham, *Wanting to Be Her*, 96.

²⁸³ Barger, *Eve’s Revenge*, 146.

God chose to work through a woman's body in order to bring redemption to humanity thereby breaking many of the socio-cultural stigmas that surrounded women and their bodies.

Yet, it is important to note that Mary is only one of many women through whom God worked to bring redemption to the world. As the genealogy in Matthew 1 shows, God used a series of unlikely figures in the heritage of Jesus that led up to Mary. The women God used were not those women who would fit a worldly, narrow definition of what is beautiful and worthy. Tamar was a forbidden Canaanite bride who had to sleep with her father-in-law in order to secure the promise of offspring (Gen 38).²⁸⁴ Rahab was a prostitute in the city of Jericho who helped Joshua overthrow the city (Josh 2). Ruth was a Moabitess who left her people to stay with her Israelite mother-in-law even though her husband had died (Ruth). Bathsheba was guilty of committing adultery with King David, an act which resulted in the murder of her husband and the death of her child (2 Sam 11–12). All of these women were unlikely characters according to worldly standards, but who, according to God, were integral to the “lineage of grace” that found its culmination in the character of Mary.²⁸⁵ The significance of both Jesus' lineage and his birth through a woman is captured by Lilian Calles Barger: “In Jesus' conception the woman's body becomes an active agent and her full humanity is affirmed.”²⁸⁶

Throughout salvation history, women were active agents in God's redemptive plans for humanity. The pinnacle of redemption is found in Christ's death on the cross where beauty is redefined so that it is to be found in the most unlikely of places. Christ's death and resurrection reject contemporary cultures limiting body image ideal. When he

²⁸⁴ Rivers, *A Lineage of Grace*, 87.

²⁸⁵ See Francine Rivers, *A Lineage of Grace*.

²⁸⁶ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 147.

died on the cross he declared that women were of infinite worth and he affirmed their importance as embodied beings to God. In Christ, women are able to find the solution to their endless search for beauty and significance, and it is a solution that affirms their bodies as integral to their personhood and lived experience.

This thesis has argued that the Canadian evangelical church needs to respond to the pervasive and critical issue of body image in the lives of women. In this chapter, the stories of five different women were examined in order to identify the ways in which the theology of the body that was developed in chapter three speak to this issue. A number of points of contact were discovered. First, a theology of the body provides a subversive definition of beauty that challenges the cultural norms that women feel bound to conform to. Second, women's bodies need to be viewed as integral to their personhood so that the objectification and sexualization of women's bodies ceases. Finally, a theology of the body recognizes and affirms the spiritual need that women experience and seek to resolve through their bodies by pointing women to the incarnation of Christ as the hope of their redemption.

In the next chapter the focus will turn to ministry initiatives for church leaders to adopt as they respond pastorally to women and the issue of body image. By articulating a theology of the body that directly addresses contemporary culture, church leaders ensure that their ministry to women is relevant. As Thomas Groome writes, "If theology is to be for us, it must be for more than our heads."²⁸⁷ Church leaders must take the next step of practical theology and apply the insights gathered to the church's ministry to women.

²⁸⁷ Groome, "Theology on Our Feet," 62.

CHAPTER 5: EMPOWERED FOR CHANGE - MINISTRY INITIATIVES FOR THE CHURCH

While articulating a theology of the body is important for Canadian evangelical church leaders as they seek to provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to women, they must make the final step of practical theology – the insights gathered in this study must be applied to praxis. As such, what follows in this chapter are ministry initiatives for pastoral leaders to apply to their ministries with women, both young and old, and both within and outside the church. An articulated theology of the body will ensure that the truth of God’s desire for embodied existence will be the basis upon which the church’s ministry rests, while a focus on cultural awareness will guarantee that this ministry remains relevant to women’s lived experience. A contextualized theology of the body is vital if church leaders are going to respond to the pervasive and critical issue of body image in women’s lives.

5.1 Breaking the Silence

Gregg Allison notes in his article on embodiment that very little has been said about the topic of human embodiment, and it must be added that even less has been said about the issue of body image in women’s lives.²⁸⁸ It is a topic in which silence is the prevailing position that church leaders seem to adopt. However, as has been shown in chapters one and two, the problem with this is that women and young girls are bombarded with an ideal body image that is impossible to meet. The toll that this is taking on women is significant as is evidenced, for example, in the rising numbers of

²⁸⁸ Allison, “Toward a Theology,” 5.

women suffering from eating disorders. Moreover, men are starting to feel the effects of a culture that subjects them to narrow standards of beauty. Yet, the first step for church leaders of the Canadian evangelical church to take is to break the silence. Attention must be brought to the crisis that women experience in the area of body image.

There are a number of ways in which church leaders can break the silence that reigns in the lives of women about their bodies. First, church leaders can teach their congregations about God's intention in creating humanity with bodies. They can teach the members of their congregations a theology of the body that rejoices in embodied existence, that redefines beauty in light of Christ's work on the cross, and that recognizes and affirms the beauty of diversity. Furthermore, church leaders can provide instruction on how to care for the bodies that God has given his creation. The most obvious way of doing this would be to provide sermons on this topic that provide illumination into the story of creation, what it means for people to be created with bodies, and how to be good stewards of their bodies. The benefit of giving sermons on this issue is that the pastor is able to draw upon Scripture, tradition, and experience.

With regard to tradition, Lisa Isherwood rightly notes the importance of remembering Christian traditions. She writes, "In my view we do well to keep before us the Christian heritage of the west if we are ever fully to understand and overcome even contemporary forms of oppression and coercion."²⁸⁹ In the past, the church has not always done a good job of encouraging people to live fully embodied lives. In fact, the church's history is marked by years of emphasizing the spiritual to the detriment and exclusion of the physical body. Recognizing where the church has gone wrong in the past is important if the church seeks to move forward.

²⁸⁹ Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 31.

5.2 Questioning Cultural Norms

Another way that church leaders can respond pastorally to the issue of body image is to challenge and question cultural norms. People, especially women, need to learn to become critical evaluators of what they are viewing. The reason for this is because all too often it is just assumed that what is being viewed is correct and offers truth for living life. Women's magazines, for example, have become very effective meaning-makers in women's lives, replacing more traditional means of seeking and finding meaning. The danger of women's magazines is that they provide veiled messages to their female readers. Lisa Isherwood writes:

Women's magazines may have taken the place of spiritual directors and lectionaries but the model of the ideal woman is just as fixed as it was for our forefathers. This is neither a conscious nor an unconscious process – it is, most worryingly, habitual. It bypasses thought in a way that was not that of our forefathers. Theirs was a religious discipline and so required of them mental commitment, thought and reflection in a way that women's magazines do not encourage or indeed require.²⁹⁰

Many of the messages that women receive about how they should view their bodies are accepted without question. The process of sharing information is encouraged to take place without any kind of critical reflection about the message that is being promoted. This is a dangerous and scary issue that church leaders need to teach its members about. There needs to be a “new mode of awareness: a way of thinking that questions the authority of prevailing norms, recognizing the emptiness of their substance and the relativity of their value.”²⁹¹

Some important questions that church leaders need to encourage both men and women to ask include: “Is this a realistic representation of a woman's body?”; “What

²⁹⁰ Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 69.

²⁹¹ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 130.

alterations have been made in order to present a better image?"; "What does this ad say about this woman's body?"; "What is this ad asking me to do or believe?"; "How does this ad make me feel?"; and, "How does this message fit with what Scripture teaches about the human body and women?" These are important questions to be asking when watching television and movies, reading magazines, listening to music, and looking at ads. They are a rather obvious way of instructing church attendees to be critical observers of their culture.

Church leaders not only need to teach the women of their congregations how to question cultural norms, but they also need to be intentional about teaching the men. Women are not the only ones who are being deeply impacted by the body image ideal; men are too. Men are being fed this message and as a result are fueling the problem and upholding these impossible standards. As has been noted, pornography is a critical issue that needs to be addressed because it not only objectifies and sexualizes women's bodies, but it also encourages men to think about women in this way and to treat them accordingly. Church leaders need to challenge the men in their congregations to be counter-cultural and to adopt new patterns of thinking and living that do not objectify women's bodies.

5.3 Intentional Practices

Another way that leaders can be active in encouraging their church members to question cultural norms is to be intentional about the media that is used throughout the service. If pictures of people are being used in PowerPoint presentations, then they should ensure that these pictures include a variety of ethnicities as well as a variety of

body types. Portraying images of thin, white women or muscular, white men sends a very clear message to the congregants – “This is what is attractive and acceptable, and thus this is what I should look like too.” The importance of being intentional in the usage of images is but one way of responding to the issue of body image and it is one step towards “deconstructing the myth of slenderness.”²⁹²

5.4 The Power of Language

An additional way in which church leaders can respond to the issue of body image in women’s lives is to recognize the power of language in the process of meaning-making and to seek new ways of speaking about women’s bodies. In *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eisland draws attention to the need for a change in the language that is used to speak of people with disabilities as an important means of challenging oppressive beliefs and values.²⁹³ She quotes Rebecca S. Chopp, who articulates the importance of language in bringing about reformation to dominant cultural norms:

Until we change the values and hidden rules that run through the present linguistic practices, social codes, and psychic orderings, women, persons of color, and other oppressed groups will be forced – by language, discourses, and practices available to them – into conforming to ongoing practices, to babbling nonsense, or to not speaking at all.²⁹⁴

As Rebecca S. Chopp rightly notes, language is formative and when it is used to uphold oppressive structures, it is destructive. The language that contemporary culture uses to speak of women’s bodies is very destructive because it promotes an ideal body image that is impossible to attain. Advertisements speak of fat as being a horrible and debilitating

²⁹² Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 131.

²⁹³ Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 93.

²⁹⁴ Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 7.

weight to bear both physically and socially. For example, “Get off your fat, lazy butt” is a very common saying, but it stigmatizes those who are fat as being lazy and, thus bad. The language of “perfection” and “self-control” has come to be associated mainly with bodies and food and the dysfunctional relationship that exists between the two in women’s lives.²⁹⁵ Because people are shaped and formed by the culture in which they are located it is often difficult to identify those sayings or words that condone and encourage stigmas without being conscious evaluators of culture; however, it is critical that church leaders actively work to challenge the language that is used.

Furthermore, church leaders have the unique opportunity to challenge women in the language that they use to speak of themselves and other women. Women are often their own worst enemies at times. They can be supercritical of the women around them, pointing out the flaws in their appearance, using negative and often humiliating language. The impact that this kind of negative language can have on other females has been illustrated in a survey conducted by Kenyon College. The survey found that elementary school girls’ body image was impacted by how their mothers viewed their own bodies. Ira Sacker, who co-authored *Dying to Be Thin*, writes, “Some of my patients who are just out of nursery school, tell me that they’re fat. Turns out that their moms are saying the same thing about themselves.”²⁹⁶ Words have power, and in the case of women and body image that power is often destructive. Church leaders, however, have the opportunity to challenge the language that people use to speak of their bodies and appearances and the values that they ascribe to each other based on these cultural measures of worth.

²⁹⁵ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 137.

²⁹⁶ Ira Sacker as quoted in Hermann, “Influencing Your Daughter’s Body Image,” 2.

While language can be destructive, it can also offer women a way of expressing the pain and suffering they experience in and through their bodies. As was already mentioned, if healing is to take place, women need to be given a voice. “[R]econstructing and telling our stories to each other, listening for lines of conflict and connection, may be one way of seeing how the world itself needs to change if the diversity and complexity of women’s spiritual hungers are to be more adequately fed.”²⁹⁷ Church leaders need to give women the opportunity to share their stories with their communities and to be a part of the process that works toward change. Interestingly, this applies not only to those women who are living, but also those women of history that are long departed.

The Christian heritage has often favoured male voices in the process of meaning-making and spiritual formation, yet there is a wealth of knowledge and learning to be acquired simply by listening to the voices of women. This might mean, for example, drawing attention to biblical examples of women and their experiences. It might also mean allowing women to take more of an active role in the worship service of the church.²⁹⁸ In other words, “To transform what has been silenced into speech is to upset the monopoly of influence that patriarchal religion has accumulated through time and habit.”²⁹⁹

Sara Shandler’s book *Ophelia Speaks* is an excellent example of one woman’s effort to give voice to the pain and suffering that adolescent girls experience in a number

²⁹⁷ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 135. In *Ophelia Speaks*, Sara Shandler identifies the value of giving girls who have experienced rape or sexual abuse the opportunity to share their stories. In sharing their stories, these girls were able to give voice to the pain that they had experienced as well as reach out to other victims of abuse. According to Shandler, “All [the girls] wrote as a path to healing themselves. They talked about seeing the reality of their past and walking on in strength” (Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, 55).

²⁹⁸ It is important to note that many churches are already doing this and many are beginning to work towards incorporating women into their services. However, there are still churches that have not given women the voice to speak, and for this reason, it is important to emphasize the importance of women.

²⁹⁹ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 141.

of areas of their lives. The reason why Shandler's book is full of personal stories and poems about young girls' experiences is because she wanted to give these girls the opportunity to express themselves. These girls wanted "the truth of their stories to break through [sic] the isolation of others girls' adolescent pain."³⁰⁰

5.5 Diversity in "Body Practices"

It is important to note that speaking and writing are only two methods of expression. Churches, however, are a mixture of diverse people. Speaking and writing might only appeal to a small number of women and girls in the congregation. As such, church leaders need to be intentional about encouraging the different spirituality and learning types to find meaningful ways of expressing themselves. Church leaders need to be intentional about incorporating diverse ways of worship and expression, not only to give voice to women's experience but also to affirm the embodied existence of humanity.

"The body practices of the church are a physical language – the routines, rules, and practices of the body, conscious and unconscious."³⁰¹ The body practices of the church are full of embodied meaning. "Through rituals done on the body, the community reaffirms the redemption of the entire body-self."³⁰² The Eucharist or communion is the physical act whereby the body of believers consume physical symbols of the broken body and blood of Christ. It is an action that affirms the importance and meaning of what it means to be a member of God's embodied community. As Lilian Calles Barger writes:

The holy meal reminds us of our continual bond with the crucified as we return to bear witness in our bodies of his sacrifice. With the harvest of the

³⁰⁰ Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, vii.

³⁰¹ Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 112.

³⁰² Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 183.

earth on our tongues, the grace of God permeates our lives like the warm fragrance of wine, allowing us to become *ecclesia*, a gathering of those called by God.³⁰³

The act of sharing communion together affirms the incarnation of Christ and the importance of his death and resurrection for salvation. Communion is a physical ritual that is rich in meaning. It affirms the need for embodied presence in God's community. It is a body-self affirming act that speaks of life and points to the beauty of the cross as the source of that life.³⁰⁴

5.6 Journeying Together

In chapter three, the importance of the body and community was explored. Its application to a ministry for women bears mentioning. For women who struggle with a negative body image, having the support of fellow women can be an invaluable source of encouragement and healing. This support can come from a variety of relationships such as through family members, friends, support groups, or mentors. The presence of another, even one who remains silent through the tears or tirades that a woman expresses over her body, can be a priceless display of love and support. In *Ophelia Speaks*, part three of her book looks at the role that peer friendship plays in the lives of adolescent girls. One story in particular will be shared here because it illustrates how the friendships of one fifteen year old helped her through a dark time in her life. She writes:

Today I did well. I woke up, showered, got dressed, and went to school. I chatted with my friends on the bus and complained to a peer

³⁰³ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 184.

³⁰⁴ Another ritual that does this is water baptism. Baptism is a physical act that points to the redemptive work of God on the cross that brings both spiritual and physical life. It is a sign of redemption that takes place in and through the body of Christ. It also points to the eschaton when believers' bodies will be resurrected.

about a teacher...For some people, this is quite normal every day, but for me, this is an accomplishment. Each day like this one is a new triumph.

Once, I saw things from the other side of the spectrum ...

I made the dangerous mistake of keeping my problems to myself. Pushing all thoughts of my friends, dreams, and accomplishments out of my head, I acted on my anger. I swallowed a whole bottle of tranquilizer pills, along with some Excedrin.

Then I went to my room and lay down, never planning to get up. I shut my eyes, and got a sudden rush of mental images. First, the faces and voices of all my friends. Then, the image of the silver and blue cross I had worn to the funeral of my friend back in December. She had been brutally murdered, along with her cousin, only one day after my birthday. The rest of her friends and I had vowed to live our lives to the fullest, in memory and honor of her, whose life had been stolen away. It hit me like a brick wall – I was the first to break that promise. I stood up and headed down the stairs, into the living room where my father was, and I passed out.

When I awoke, late afternoon of the next day, there was a phone call from one of my 'kindred spirits' on the Net, one of the ones I had met in person. She called right after I had been taken to the hospital the night before. She knew what had happened. We talked. All that day I spent talking to friends, and all the rest of the week as well. These people cared about me and still loved me after what I had done to them and myself.³⁰⁵

For this young girl, and for many others, friends are a priceless part of one's life. They offer love and support through life's trials and are there to enjoy the good moments. For women who struggle with body image issues, friends can be that source of encouragement to press on or the ones who offer a different perspective about the body that is disliked.

Likewise, mentors can play an invaluable role in the development of adolescent girls. They offer the perspective of someone who is older and one who has gone through the struggles that a young girl might currently be facing. They have the unique opportunity of pouring into the life of young girls and teaching them about how to view their bodies in healthy and accepting ways. Intentional mentoring programs are an important resource for church ministries and community centres to draw upon as they

³⁰⁵ Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks*, 138–9.

seek to assist girls to develop healthy perceptions of their bodies. Programs like *Gamma Girls* create opportunities for older women to come alongside adolescent girls to teach and share with them the wisdom that they have gained throughout the years about how to view their own bodies. According to their website, the aim of *Gamma Girls* is to “help young women understand who God created them to be and to remain strong and focused in the midst of peer pressure” through peer interaction and mentoring relationships.³⁰⁶

Biblical theologian Anthony Hoekema speaks of the importance of relationships to human development. It is only through relationships with others that people are able to grow and mature. Relationships enrich people.³⁰⁷ For women, friendships are a source of support and encouragement, and mentoring relationships offer intentional opportunities of assisting younger girls to develop healthy body and self images.

5.7 The Heart of the Quest

As was made clear in chapter one, body image is also a spiritual issue. For many women and young girls, the pursuit of the thin body is a quest for meaning and identity. In light of this, a holistic and incarnational ministry to women will also provide illumination into this quest for meaning. Michelle Mary Lelwica notes that the language used by women to describe hunger and longing signifies “the spiritual malaise – the crises of meaning – surrounding girls’ and women’s struggles with food and their bodies: their loss of faith in and connection to a larger sense of value and purpose.”³⁰⁸ Consequently, church leaders are in a unique position to speak to women about this issue.

³⁰⁶ *Gamma Girls*, [5–6].

³⁰⁷ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 78.

³⁰⁸ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 129.

Women's obsession with dieting and fitting the body image ideal is closely connected to their need to be found desirable and wanted by others, especially men. Yet, the problem with this is that it is empty; it lacks salvation. As the creation narrative makes clear, women's desire for man is rooted in the Fall and the broken relationship that resulted between humanity and God. God brought redemption to the world in and through the body of Christ. It is in him alone that the answer to women's quest for beauty is to be found. Christ offers a "new paradigm for thinking about our bodies that renews the imagination for viewing beauty and ourselves."³⁰⁹ In Christ alone is the ultimate answer to the desire that women have for meaning-making, and the message of the Gospel affirms their embodiment.

5.8 Social Reform and Justice Movements

Finally, an important way for church leaders to respond to the issue of body image in the lives of women is through participation in social reform and justice movements. Transformation is possible only when those communities that are committed to "social justice and spiritual well-being" challenge the cultural norms about women and body image.³¹⁰ Michelle Mary Lelwica correctly recognizes the need for people to get involved in reform movements: "... critical religious thinkers can and should be engaged in the social and political challenges of their time and ... questions of spiritual significance need not be restricted to the sphere of organized religion."³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Barger, *Eve's Revenge*, 53.

³¹⁰ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 9.

³¹¹ Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 9.

Church leaders can both exemplify and encourage participation in social reform and justice movements in a variety of forms. They can get directly involved in those ministries that seek to bring an end to the objectification of women by financially supporting organizations that are trying to bring an end to the sex-slave industry. They can participate directly by buying products that are made by companies that challenge the body image ideal such as *Dove* through their “Campaign for Real Beauty” by which they seek to provide thought-provoking ads that challenge cultural norms about women’s bodies and beauty. They can get involved in political campaigns that are trying to change the ways that women’s bodies are portrayed in advertising. While only a few suggestions are provided here they do serve to illustrate that there are people and organizations that are committed to changing the way that women view their bodies and the way that they are treated. These people need the support of the church and the Christian community as they seek to empower women to live holistic and empowered lives. As Michelle Mary Lelwica writes, “With the support and inspiration of such communities, girls and women can learn to redirect their energies they devote to changing their bodies into struggles to transform the dominant ways of thinking and being that, in varying degrees and ways, jeopardize the well-being of every body.”³¹²

The suggestions that are offered here are only provisional. They offer practical ideas for how church leaders can begin to intentionally respond to this area of struggle for women. As church leaders break the silence that dominates the lives of women, they will discover new opportunities for engaging with this issue. Each person is a unique creation, and as communication begins to take place, church leaders will be able to discern the distinctive ways in which they can respond to their particular congregations. While

³¹² Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 9.

practices may differ depending on the needs and context of the congregation, the message remains the same – a holistic and incarnational ministry to women affirms a subversive theology of the body that offers the hope of embodied redemption to all women.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis body image has been shown to be a pervasive and critical issue in the lives of women. It is a multifaceted topic that impacts the physical, social, relational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of women's lives. In addition, Canadian women live in a culture which upholds one standard as the ideal beauty. This ideal is narrow and limiting, and it causes many women to experience body dissatisfaction. This message comes at women from a number of different angles on a daily basis. It is evident in television and the movies, it is contained in every magazine, and it is preached through dieting advertisements. Women are faced with the knowledge that they fall short of this beauty ideal every time they see one of the 1, 500 images that bombard them daily. In order to be accepted, women put themselves through rigorous body-modifying behaviours and actions so as to conform to this ideal. Sarah Grogan sums up the situation that most contemporary women and young girls find themselves in: "Women are never free from self-consciousness, and they constantly self-monitor."³¹³

If church leaders of the Canadian evangelical church are going to provide a holistic and incarnational ministry to women they must address this issue of body image by articulating a theology of the body. By formulating a theology of the body, church leaders affirm that a woman's body is integral to her existence and her personhood. They also affirm that the body is crucial to life lived in community. Although the church has had a long history of viewing women's bodies with suspicion and sometimes derision, contemporary church leaders have the great opportunity of looking anew at the message of the Gospel. As the creation account in Genesis affirms, humans were created to be

³¹³ Grogan, *Body Image*, 54.

embodied beings and to live in community. The incarnation of Christ also affirms the integrity of the body for human life, as well as redefines beauty through the profundity of the cross. The body is an integral part of a woman's life.

Unfortunately, many women do not view their bodies as being integral to their lives; they have rejected their bodies both through their attitudes and their actions. If this theology is going to be relevant, it must speak to the cultural context in which women are located. Church leaders must respond to this issue by adopting proactive stances in their ministries that affirm a theology of the body. Christian leaders have the responsibility of sharing the message of the Gospel with the lost.

The challenge that faces church leaders is by no means any easy task. It requires walking alongside the broken and the hurting in a ministry of compassion. It requires breaking the silence and going against what is considered right and acceptable by contemporary culture. It requires proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel to both men and women. When church leaders of the Canadian evangelical church respond to the pervasive and critical issue of body image in the lives of women, they will begin to see new opportunities for ministering to women. The ministry initiatives that have been provided here offer church leaders a spring board from which to launch their ministries, and hopefully also provide the reader with opportunities for future study. There is much work that still needs to be done with regard to body image and women's lived experiences, such as developing a theology of shame and the body. Yet, as church leaders engage in this issue, they will encounter a God who assigns great value to people's bodies, and they will discover that the Gospel offers a subversive hope of redemption to all of creation which sees in it the beauty of diversity.

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