

AlbertMohler.com

The Snare of Beauty — Flashpoints of Our Obsession with Attractiveness

According to the Bible, every single human being is made in the image of God, and is thus, for this reason alone, truly beautiful. Truth wins over “enhancements,” and true beauty resides within an individual’s character. The Bible straightforwardly condemns the human quest for physical beauty as vanity.

Thursday, July 22, 2010

Beauty, says philosopher Roger Scruton, “is never viewed with indifference.” Those words come to mind in light of a major article in this week’s *Newsweek* magazine that purports to document the fact that employers show a marked preference for attractive people in making hiring decisions. Add to that article a recent news report on a new sperm bank dedicated to the reproduction of “beautiful people.”

The *Newsweek* article, written by Jessica Bennett, begins by documenting what economists measure as the financial benefits of physical attractiveness. The “beauty premium” adds 5 percent to the lifetime earnings of attractive men, and 4 percent to the lifetime earnings of women. Economist Daniel Hamermesh argues that an attractive man earns an average of \$250,000 of “beauty premium” income over his “least-attractive counterpart.”

The magazine surveyed more than 200 corporate hiring managers and almost 1000 members of the public and confirmed that “from hiring to office politics to promotions, even, looking good is no longer something we can dismiss as frivolous or vain.”

The mostly-male hiring officers also said (by 61 percent) that it would be advisable for a woman seeking a job to wear clothing to the interview that would show off her figure. No kidding. The managers even ranked physical attractiveness third on their list of criteria for hiring — above education.

A New York-based recruiter consulted by the magazine asserted that, in this job market: “It’s better to be average and good looking than brilliant and unattractive.” Women, it is argued, face an even more complicated equation than men. Attractive women have an advantage over less attractive women in hiring for low-level positions. But when it comes to high-level executive positions, attractive women face added questions about their qualifications.

Plastic surgery is the answer for many. As Jessica Bennett reports, “We are a culture more sexualized than ever . . . with technology that’s made it easier to ‘better’ ourselves, warping our standards for what’s normal.” With plastic surgery and “enhancement” procedures becoming routine, a beauty arms race results, and those who are in competition find themselves “running to stand still.” Cosmetic surgery, Botox, and an array of technologies and product lines compete for an expanding market of people running hard in the race to stay or get ahead.

Bennett offers two interesting angles of argument in her essay. First, she argues for objective standards of physical beauty — a necessary assumption for her article.

In her words:



Biologically speaking, humans are attracted to symmetrical faces and curvy women for a reason: it's those shapes that are believed to produce the healthiest offspring. As the thinking goes, symmetrical faces are then deemed beautiful; beauty is linked to confidence; and it's a combination of looks and confidence that we often equate with smarts. Perhaps there's some evidence to that: if handsome kids get more attention from teachers, then, sure, maybe they do better in school and, ultimately, at work. But the more likely scenario is what scientists dub the "halo effect"—that, like a pack of untrained puppies, we are mesmerized by beauty, blindly ascribing intelligent traits to go along with it.

The implication of this argument — blame evolution. Those who make this argument generally base it on a form of what might be called “aesthetic Darwinism,” or the survival of the prettiest. Yet, even without the evolutionary baggage, there seem to be objective standards of human beauty that even infants seem to recognize.

Secondly, Bennett argues that the current quest for physical attractiveness — perhaps even a current expectation among the young — is rooted in their generation's experience of reality TV and popular culture “that screams, again and again, that everything is a candidate for upgrade.”

The other news report is even more troubling. CBS News reports that “an online dating service for good-looking people” has launched a sperm bank intended to produce beautiful babies. As the report states, “The ‘fertility introduction service’ aims to link wanna-be parents - handsome or homely - with good-looking sperm and egg donors who have registered with the site. The goal? Create a kid whose good looks stop traffic.”

The founder of the service told the *Vancouver Sun*, “Initially, we hesitated to widen the offering to non-beautiful people . . . But everyone - including ugly people - would like to bring good-looking children into the world, and we can't be selfish with our attractive gene pool.”

How unselfish of the service — It will allow even those it would consider to be unattractive parents to purchase “attractive” sperm in order to breed attractive offspring.

Mark these reports as signs of our confused times. At present, there are no laws that would prevent such a fertility service from offering its services just as outlined here. While laws preventing discrimination are on the books, there is little to stop hiring managers from hiring the more attractive candidate over alternatives. This, as if you needed further evidence, is a demonstration of what it means to live in a fallen world.

Christians reading these reports must remember that beauty and attractiveness are not the same thing. Beauty, according to the Christian worldview, is established by God himself, and is inseparable from truth and goodness. Attractiveness is the mere delight of the eyes. In a sinful world, our eyes delight in many wrong things, and many of the most beautiful realities are, to the mere eyes, unattractive.

After all, we follow our Savior who “had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” [Isaiah 53:2]. The cross is not pretty, but it is beautiful. This is the ironic foundation of a Christian understanding of beauty. We cannot merely trust our eyes, for our eyes will lie to us, and we are to find beauty in truth.

According to the Bible, every single human being is made in the image of God, and is thus, for this reason alone, truly beautiful. Truth wins over “enhancements,” and true beauty resides within an individual's character. The Bible straightforwardly condemns the human quest for physical beauty as vanity.

Jessica Bennett concludes: “The quest for beauty may be a centuries-old obsession, but in the present day the reality is ugly.” She is right, of course. But the ugliness of our confusion about beauty is not merely a present day reality. That confusion goes right back to Genesis 3 — to a pretty fruit and the Devil's lie.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Jessica Bennett, “[The Beauty Advantage](#),” *Newsweek*, July 26, 2010.

“[Beautifulpeople.com Sperm Bank: Is Your DNA Sexy Enough?](#),” *CBS News*, July 22, 2010.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.