

Extreme Makeover:  
Exploring Elective Cosmetic Plastic Surgery in the United States

Elective cosmetic plastic surgery is one of the faster growing industries in the United States leading the President of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons to declare this to be the “new way to age gracefully” for many Americans.<sup>1</sup> A cursory glance at television program lineups shows this industry permeating everyday life. Television programs such as *The Swan*, *Extreme Makeover*, or *I Want a Famous Face* highlight more drastic surgeries involving so-called “total body makeovers”, which can give the impression that this type of surgery is only for those wishing to make drastic changes in their lives. One can believe that plastic surgery is only for the extreme, however, a look at the larger culture paints a different picture. Television programs like *Dr. 90210* highlight people who wish to make smaller changes to their bodies such as rhinoplasty, face lifts, breast augmentation, liposuction, botox injections or collagen injections.<sup>2</sup> While waiting in line at the grocery store one is treated to tabloid magazines inviting them to see pictures of the latest celebrity to go “under the knife” in their latest attempt to defy the normal aging process. The external pressures of culture and the lack of understanding identity has led to a never ending quest for external beauty and youth. This obsession with

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<sup>1</sup> “10.2 Million Cosmetic Plastic Surgery Procedures in 2005 – Up 11%”, American Society of Plastic Surgeons Press Release, 3/15/2006, Arlington Heights, IL. [Accessed online at [http://www.plasticsurgery.org/news\\_room/press\\_releases/2005-procedural-stats.cfm](http://www.plasticsurgery.org/news_room/press_releases/2005-procedural-stats.cfm)]

<sup>2</sup> Rhinoplasty is a surgery designed to alter the appearance of the nose. Breast augmentation enlarges breast size. Facelift is a surgery which the skin of the face is cut and then pulled back to erase the effects of aging. Liposuction is an actual vacuuming of fat from various parts of the body. Botox is a toxin which deadens the nerves on the face in order to “freeze” the aging process or provide a “lift”. Collagen is a protein gel typically injected into lips to make them appear “fuller”.

appearance has created a large and profitable medical industry able to cater even to the average person instead of exclusively to the rich or powerful.<sup>3</sup>

The increase of elective plastic surgery in the quest for “beauty” leads to several ethical questions. First, why are people compelled to have these surgeries? What are some of the ramifications of elective plastic surgery, emotionally and physically? Finally, how does this practice inform the Church of culture and how can the Church address the motives behind elective plastic surgery in a way that is faithful to Scripture? This paper will explore elective plastic surgery, the reasons many seek this procedure and lay out a Biblical foundation for dealing with this subject in light of identity, and being created in God’s image.<sup>4</sup>

“I just don’t want to look like a boy when I’m at the beach in my bikini” was what the 17 year old girl said as she was about to have breast augmentation surgery.<sup>5</sup> This was her second plastic surgery and since she said was insecure about her appearance, her mother was more than happy to pay for this surgery not only to boost her daughter’s self-esteem, but also because she was being highlighted on the popular television show *Dr. 90210*.<sup>6</sup> Self-esteem is one of the more prominent reasons driving people to alter or “enhance” their body appearance because the idea of attractiveness is one aspect of society exerting sway on those who do not believe they measure

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<sup>3</sup> “2005: The Year in Plastic Surgery”, American Society of Plastic Surgeons Press Release, 12/16/2005, Arlington Heights, IL. [Accessed online at [http://www.plasticsurgery.org/news\\_room/press\\_releases/2005-top-10.cfm](http://www.plasticsurgery.org/news_room/press_releases/2005-top-10.cfm)] This press released revealed this statistic: “A groundbreaking study found 71 percent of people considering plastic surgery had annual household incomes of less than \$60,000. Only 13 percent reported an annual household income of over \$90,000.”

<sup>4</sup> This paper does not intend to explore the many good uses of plastic surgery such as reconstructive surgery after and accident, or corrective surgeries which help the body to function its intended fashion. The author, who has been blessed by plastic surgery after a minor accident, believes that God through His common grace has given mankind this ability and it can be used for good. One only needs to look at the events which propelled plastic surgery into the forefront during and after World War I to see what a blessing this profession can be.

<sup>5</sup> “Busy as a Li”, *Dr 90210*, Season Three, Episode One. Airdate 11/28/05, Los Angeles, E! Entertainment Television, 2006. The young girl’s first surgery was rhinoplasty because she did not like the look of her nose.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

up to cultural standards of beauty.<sup>7</sup> The ideas of beauty, attractiveness and desirability can lead some to a quest of the unattainable. Such can be the case with celebrities. On one level, due to advancements in media technology, a celebrity can always appear desirable when being projected as an image. On another level, when the celebrity sees their image contrasted with their actual appearance, there can be a stark contrast because they do not resemble “themselves”.<sup>8</sup> This divorce of real self and the image of self has led that particular subculture to attempt a metamorphosis of the two-dimensional image into the three-dimensional world of reality.<sup>9</sup>

As culture has moved to a more image/media driven format, the demand and availability for an outlet to be or become a desirable image has grown. When “average” people do not meet up to the standards of cultural beauty a sense of inadequacy ensues, leading some to go beyond the normal means of applying cosmetic products, such as makeup, and seek a true alteration of appearance.<sup>10</sup> This has led to many of the cosmetic surgery developments, particularly breast augmentation, which evolved from paraffin injections in the late 1800s to liquid silicone injections in the 1950s and eventually arriving at silicone rubber/gel and other gel based implants in the 1970s through today.<sup>11</sup> As this aspect of the plastic surgery industry was developing, advertisements for various breast enlargement procedures would typically show a “before” photograph of a woman with smaller breasts and a look of unhappiness on her face, then an

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<sup>7</sup> David B. Sarwer and Leanne Magee, “Physical Appearance and Society” in *Psychological Aspects of Reconstructive and Cosmetic Plastic Surgery*, ed. David B. Sarwer, Thomas Pruzinsky, Thomas F. Cash, Robert M. Goldwyn, John A. Persing, and Linton A. Whitaker, (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins: 2006): 27-29.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*, (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 193-194. Blum points out the bent of “tabloid” magazines which continually publish photos of celebrities “caught without makeup” and also gives concrete examples of the “real” versus the “imaged” in celebrity culture.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-219.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy*, (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press: 1997): 271. Haiken also cites studies confirming that the majority of those seeking cosmetic surgeries, who are primarily women, particularly with breast augmentation, are doing so out of a sense of inferiority.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-284. In 1991 the U.S. Federal Drug Administration banned silicone breast implants. There are other types of breast implant available, however.

“after” photograph of the woman with larger breasts and an even larger smile, giving the impression that happiness was to be found in appearance.<sup>12</sup>

Not all plastic surgeries are to enhance breast size, or change the look of one’s nose. Another use of plastic surgery is to defy the aging process. This is accomplished primarily through facial procedures such as facelifts or chemical injections, aimed to smooth away wrinkles, or even liposuction, which can eliminate fat from parts of the body that begin to “sag” with age. In 2005, age defying facial procedures far exceeded all other categories of plastic surgeries, totaling over 5,000,000 procedures with Botox injections as the clear favorite with 3,839,387 injections, gaining over 2004’s 2,992,607 Botox injections.<sup>13</sup> As the Baby Boomer generation gets older, the trend will likely increase 2005’s 38% rise in plastic surgery procedures over 2000.<sup>14</sup> Defying age was the theme of an episode of *Dr. 90210*’s “Age Ain’t Nothin’ But a Number” where three patients, all Baby Boomers, received facelifts in order to have a younger appearance to help their social and economic status.<sup>15</sup>

Social and economic status has been regarded as one of the main influences for those who are aging to undergo procedures to seek a more youthful appearance. The social aspects are obvious; society deems youth as more attractive and attractive people are often deemed more capable.<sup>16</sup> The economic aspects are tied to the social aspects as well. This is borne out statistically as psychologists have determined that “better looks” leads to more business

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 252. While this sort of advertising is not as prevalent as it was in the 1960s-1970s, a typical website for a large scale Plastic Surgeon will have before/after photographs of their most popular procedures, typically without the patients faces being shown.

<sup>13</sup> 2000/2004/2005 *National Plastic Surgery Statistics*, American Society of Plastic Surgeons, Arlington Heights, IL. [Accessed on [http://www.plasticsurgery.org/public\\_education/loader.cfm?url=/commonsport/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=17870](http://www.plasticsurgery.org/public_education/loader.cfm?url=/commonsport/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=17870)] What makes this statistic even more telling is when compared to the total number of reconstructive surgeries due to injuries, birth defects, or tumors, the numbers are almost even. Out of all elective procedures combined, reconstructive surgeries (non-elective) are only 30% of the total number.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Age Ain’t Nothin’ But a Number”, *Dr. 90210*, Season Two, Episode 20, Airdate 4/18/2005, Los Angeles: E! Entertainment Television, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> David B. Sarwer and Leanne Magee, “Physical Appearance and Society”, 29.

opportunities, thereby creating a quandary for those who are aging, but desirous for success.<sup>17</sup>

This trend was highlighted recently in a *USA Today* article introducing the newest demographic in plastic surgery patients – the aging male executive.<sup>18</sup> This new trend was called “logical” because, as Dr. Bruce Cunningham, President of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons said, “[executives] feel pressure or are challenged by younger people who may have more advanced skills in computers and technology”.<sup>19</sup>

There is a “dirty little secret” that is tied to cosmetic plastic surgery. While the procedures alter appearance, and the patient believes their problems are solved, many times once is not enough. Not only are there many people having multiple procedures performed on their bodies, there are also risks associated with the “reward”. The most noticeable risk associated with plastic surgery is found in the inherent newness of the procedures themselves. While plastic surgeries are performed by gifted physicians, many of the procedures do not undergo the scrutiny of extensive clinical trial periods and a physician does not have to be certified to perform plastic surgery procedures.<sup>20</sup> This means many of the procedures have not been practiced in a way to understand some of the long term effects. Indeed, it is quite possible that some of the newer innovations could lead to drastic consequences as the surgery recipient ages, or if a chemical is later discovered to be more dangerous than originally expected. This has been the case in the evolution of breast augmentation as the U.S. Federal Drug Administration banned silicone breast

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>18</sup> “More Execs Get Another Kind of Work Done” by Del Jones, *USA Today* 3/20/2006 [Accessed online at [http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/2006-03-20-ceo-facelifts-usat\\_x.htm?POE=MONISVA](http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/2006-03-20-ceo-facelifts-usat_x.htm?POE=MONISVA)]

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Alice Laneader and Paul Root Wolpe, “Ethical Considerations in Cosmetic Surgery” in *Reconstructive and Cosmetic Plastic Surgery*. 301. Unfortunately, this article does not offer a reasonable solution to the skyrocketing numbers of elective surgeries. The authors seem to take an approach which falls in line with ethical egoism, placing the autonomy of the individual over the good use of medicine altogether.

implants in 1991 after many women began experiencing severe medical difficulties due to silicone leakage.<sup>21</sup>

Another consideration to take into account is the psychological factor. Many postoperative emotions come into the fray. One particular emotion is dissatisfaction. The primary reason many undergo cosmetic alterations is to improve their attractiveness and social relationships. Several studies show that plastic surgery typically does not improve these lifestyle areas and, in fact, open the patient to “negative postoperative reactions”.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes postoperative dissatisfaction will lead the person to seek a corrective operation from a different plastic surgeon, and other times the self-consciousness, which drove them to the original surgery in the first place, drives that person to antisocial behavior.<sup>23</sup>

Dissatisfaction is not the only psychological risk when considering plastic surgery. Obsession can be another consequence. Such is the case with author Hope Donahue, who wrote *Beautiful Stranger: A Memoir of an Obsession with Perfection*. The book chronicles Ms. Donahue’s obsession with appearance from her first surgery at age 18 to nearly ten surgeries before she sought psychological treatment for her obsession at age 27.<sup>24</sup> This is also evident in the popular program *Dr. 90210*, which has many patients who are “repeat customers”, happy enough with their chin implant, but believe they would be happier with a little liposuction and a collagen injection. The iconic daytime program *Oprah* demonstrated the consequences of this obsession, highlighting the story of a 28 year old woman who had 26 altering surgeries because

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<sup>21</sup> Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 278-279.

<sup>22</sup> David B. Sarwer, “Psychological Assessment of Cosmetic Surgery” in *Psychological Aspects of Reconstructive and Cosmetic Plastic Surgery*, 267-269.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 266-267. Obviously not every patient experiences severe psychological repercussions, but it is a risk

<sup>24</sup> Hope Donahue, *Beautiful Stranger: A Memoir of an Obsession with Perfection*, (New York, Gotham Books: 2004): 1-292.

she kept finding more and more flaws in her appearance.<sup>25</sup> While 26 surgeries is an extreme example, it does give insight into the risk of obsessive behavior that is possible when one undergoes a cosmetic procedure.<sup>26</sup>

One question posed by bioethicists and feminists, who are the primary critics of elective plastic surgery, is concerning the role of medicine with physical enhancement. Some of the criticisms range from doctors catering to a market that objectifies women to the responsibility of a physician profiting from body enhancement while people in developing countries are dying from easily treatable diseases.<sup>27</sup> Some argue, bioethicists notwithstanding, that plastic surgery is an individual choice and the consequences are primarily realized by the individual.<sup>28</sup> When personal autonomy is given the highest place on the decision making scale, it seems to limit the positive and negative effects of cosmetic plastic surgery to apply only to the person making the decision. This is false reasoning because it presupposes consequences to exist only in the sphere of the decision maker and not affecting others' lives, which is logically impossible since humans live in an arena of relationships.<sup>29</sup> While it is acknowledged by the critics of this industry that plastic surgery can and is used for good, given the underwhelming number of "needed" surgeries, the industry is under much scrutiny and will continue to receive this scrutiny as more and more cable channels line up to air plastic surgery reality programs feeding the American hunger for beauty.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "Hooked on Plastic Surgery at Age 28", *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Airdate 2/8/2005, Chicago: Harpo Productions, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly enough, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons does not publish statistics for "repeat customers".

<sup>27</sup> Alice Laneader and Paul Root Wolpe, "Ethical Considerations in Cosmetic Surgery", 310-311.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>29</sup> James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003): 84-90.

<sup>30</sup> The cable network Oxygen, owned by Oprah Winfrey, has just added a new program, *Drastic Plastic*, to its lineup which is designed to explore "misconceptions" about cosmetic plastic surgery. E! Entertainment has renewed *Dr. 90210* for another season and ABC is taking applications for the next season of *Extreme Makeover*. VH1 has taken a different route by airing the program *Plastic Surgery Obsession*, which first aired on May 8, 2006. This program is

The Church Father Tertullian once said, “what hath Jerusalem to do with Athens” and such seems to be the case with the American Church and the industry of elective cosmetic plastic surgery.<sup>31</sup> This leads to the question of how this practice informs the Church about culture and how the Church can inform culture about this practice. The Church does not exist apart from the culture and must understand the “why” of a practice in order to address the pertinent issues behind many of the motivations leading people to seek cosmetic alterations.

The primary area for the Church to understand and address is that of an identity crisis which leads to unhappiness and makes the allure of altering appearance appear the best option. Many people derive their identity not in “who they are”, but rather in “how they appear”, meaning they understand themselves as images, rather than a holistic person.<sup>32</sup> This identity crisis causes individuals to view their humanness and self-worth quantitatively, leading them to believe their worth can be objectified from external means (e.g. wealth, beauty, power), rather than the character, personality, or values they exude as people.<sup>33</sup> Therefore identity is understood as what people see or think upon first glance, rather than what people understand after knowing. This external focus leads to guilt on the part of the person not having model looks, or the “perfect” physique, and that guilt can lead to the person seeking a means of external change in order to fit in and be seen as “normal”.<sup>34</sup> Indeed this version of identity leads to a misperception

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designed to take a critical look at the industry and the American obsession with mimicking celebrity. Clearly, pop culture has a place for plastic surgery on primetime television.

<sup>31</sup> I say this due to the absence of Christian authored journal or magazine articles on this practice as it becomes a growing trend in American culture.

<sup>32</sup> Dick Keyes, *Beyond Identity*, (Eugene Or, Wipf and Stock Publishers: 1998): 7. True identity and humanness, however, can only be realized when one is in union with Christ.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Winter, *Perfecting Ourselves to Death*, (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press: 2005): 111-114.

of beauty and value on the part of both sexes, giving a skewed understanding of worth and dignity.<sup>35</sup>

If identity is understood in a way that is divorced of external cultural pressures, then the problem of self-esteem is not as complicated as it may seem on a surface level. When an individual understands the truth that identity is derived from their standing before God, rather than culture, it takes on a view of anthropology that is based upon a Christian worldview, rather than cultural standards.<sup>36</sup> The pressures and guilt which result from being a fallen human in a fallen world, unable to compete with the dominating standards still exist, but are able to be buttressed by the knowledge that one's true identity and value is not based upon the standards of fallen humanity. Having a sense and understanding of the Biblical view of identity, leads to a view of self that embraces the whole person as possessing worth and value in the eyes of God and being able to function in relationship with other humans irrespective of their social standing – physically, financially, and status-wise.

The Church has a beautiful reality to give to the culture and instill in Christians who may be considering cosmetic surgery themselves – the *imago Dei*.<sup>37</sup> Employing the teaching of man as a created person in God's image allows people to hear the message that they are created with dignity and intrinsic value, no matter what their social status may be.<sup>38</sup> A fundamental truth of Scripture is that human beings are whole persons, body and soul, which leads to the logical

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<sup>35</sup> Kristen Harrison, "Television Viewers Ideal Body Proportions: The Case of the Curvaceously Thin Woman", *Sex Roles*, 48 (March 2003): 255-256. Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19-21 are appropriate for dealing with this notion.

<sup>36</sup> Keyes, *Beyond Identity*, 11. Worldview does determine anthropology, meaning there is a right and a wrong way to view humanity. Many Christians who are confused with their identity are because their worldview is not informed Biblically, but rather by misapplication of Scripture, or by the larger culture. This misunderstanding of identity, worth and value has led to an exploding market of Christian "self-help" books, designed to make an individual feel better about themselves, or designed to point the individual to look to the Triune God for their worth and dignity.

<sup>37</sup> Recent conversations with pastors from different churches have reinforced my understanding that even Christians have questions about seeking physical enhancement and sometimes come to pastors for counseling in this area because they do not understand if this practice is "right or wrong".

<sup>38</sup> Psalm 8, James 2:1-8, James 3:9

conclusion that the “external” self is not separated from the “inner” self – there is union, not dichotomy.<sup>39</sup> This union of the person leads to an avenue of practical understanding: Churches are to address the external aspects of personhood and the internal, or spiritual, aspects as well.<sup>40</sup> Oftentimes people, including Christians, believe that Christianity or the Bible addresses spirituality only in an internal manner. *Imago Dei* eliminates that misconception and provides an understanding that being human is not a spiritual/physical dichotomy, but even the physical aspects of the person are indeed the person. Beauty is not found in physique, but rather found in being human. Teaching the reality that all humans are created in God’s image and reflect his creativity and handiwork and that identity is not derived from cultural perception, but rather who the person is as a whole individual can be a step in lessening the confusion many have concerning beauty, worth and value.

What does the Church have to do with elective cosmetic plastic surgery? There is much to be done, especially in the area of teaching the intrinsic worth and dignity of every person. There is also much to be done in instilling a better understanding of how people must view themselves in the arena of identity. American culture is entrenched in the idea that worth is found in cultural standards of beauty. These standards are ever changing, in fact, many of the “silver screen beauties” of the early days of American cinema would be subject to the ridicule of the “who’s fat” issues and episodes of today’s celebrity magazines and television programs. With that in mind, the Church must work to transform the culture in the area of its desire for seeking physical alterations to find self-worth. This transformation cannot be done by ignoring the growing trend, or by railing against it in the pulpit. This transformation must happen by teaching the truth that human beings are image bearers of God and crowned with glory and honor, by

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<sup>39</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): 217-218.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223.

teaching that identity is not simply found in appearance, and by teaching that the road to happiness and self-fulfillment cannot be found by undergoing surgery to defy the aging process or make one's image look culturally "beautiful".

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