**Echo of Eternity:**

**The Mission Potential of Women’s Yearning for Beauty**

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**Abstract**

Feminine beauty is an obsession of modern western culture, yet it has generally been disparaged and ignored by the church. This study investigates the relationship between women’s yearning for physical beauty and God’s missional purposes for the universe, suggesting ways an understanding of this can promote mission to and by women.

First, the nature of beauty itself is explored. Through an analysis of God’s deliberate injection of beauty into creation and the tabernacle, alongside an examination of how God himself is beautiful in the person of the Holy Spirit, biblical beauty is identified as that which evokes delight and fulfils its God-given function. In this way, beautiful women are those who please God and live out their priestly purpose of worshipping, serving and extending God’s rule in the world. Second, aspects of eschatological beauty are analysed in an exploration of why women long for beauty. Although a desire to cover shame, seek validation or prioritise self play a part, women’s yearning for beauty is ultimately a longing for God himself and life in his presence. Third, implications of recovery of beauty through the wholeness and holiness given through Jesus are discussed. Such restoration of beauty can draw women to respond to the gospel as well as motivate towards engaging in mission.

Women’s yearning for physical beauty indicates that beauty is fundamental to God and his cosmic purposes of restoring beauty to the world and gathering his people to delight, worship and serve him. Given that the pursuit of physical beauty is significant for many women, this area offers potential for addressing deep needs and empowering women as they continue their crucial role as mission agents in revealing true beauty to the world.

**Contents**

**Introduction**

**Chapter 1: What is beauty?**

* **Creation**
* **Tabernacle**
* **Divine beauty**

**Chapter 2: Why do women long for physical beauty?**

* **Temple**
* **Bride**
* **Throne**

**Chapter 3: How can women be beautiful now?**

* **Wholeness**
* **Holiness**

**Conclusion**

**Bibliography**

**Introduction**

Women have a deep desire to be physically beautiful. From Nefertiti, Helen of Troy, Marie Antoinette to Marilyn Munroe, icons of feminine beauty have been idealised and emulated by millions. Women across the centuries and cultures have bound their feet, squeezed into corsets, applied white lead-based make-up and worn multiple neck-lengthening rings, investing considerable time, cost and discomfort to meet prevailing beauty standards.[[1]](#footnote-1) Today internet and social media have raised personal appearance to a new level of significance[[2]](#footnote-2) and countless women of all ages pursue the young and thin western version of beauty.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although men are increasingly affected, it seems this preoccupation with the body beautiful is primarily the concern of women.[[4]](#footnote-4) However despite their best efforts many women suffer body angst[[5]](#footnote-5) and emit a ‘constant murmur of dissatisfaction’ concerning their physical beauty.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This ongoing yearning could be a response to the impossibility of achieving physical perfection in the light of the relentless ageing process and airbrushed societal standards, yet it also can also be linked to the effect of beauty in general. Tom Wright notes how an experience of beauty, such as in a sunset or symphony, is always incomplete, leaving an itch that will not go away.[[7]](#footnote-7) Certainly people flock to natural beauty spots to drink in the wonders of the created world. In popular culture there is a longing for owning beautiful things[[8]](#footnote-8) and enjoying the aesthetic dimension of everyday life, like telling bed-time stories and singing just for fun.[[9]](#footnote-9) Even so, beauty can often be restricted to the external[[10]](#footnote-10) and confused with prettiness, attractiveness and likeability.[[11]](#footnote-11)

For centuries the church was a key promoter of beauty, with faith inspiring great works of art which sparked worship of God among whole communities.[[12]](#footnote-12) Throughout the patristic and medieval periods theologians like Irenaeus, Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas esteemed beauty as one of the transcendental qualities of being, on a par with truth, goodness and unity.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although many tended to focus on its spiritual aspect, they developed theologies of beauty and debated its importance for faith and life. While this has continued in eastern Orthodox circles,[[14]](#footnote-14) the centrality of beauty has been diminished in both high culture and western theology,[[15]](#footnote-15) with only a handful of western theologians, such as Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, proving the exception.[[16]](#footnote-16) Today art critics tell us we live in an age of ugliness and death which has downgraded beauty to something *passé* or merely subjective.[[17]](#footnote-17) Many of us worship in a church which relegates beauty to flower arranging and preaches a message of the true and good while ignoring the beautiful.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Renewed theological interest in beauty has been triggered by the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar[[19]](#footnote-19) and, although beauty continues to be a contested area within theology,[[20]](#footnote-20) a growing number of scholars affirm ‘A theology that takes no account of beauty has clearly overlooked something essential to the Christian faith.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Nonetheless while recent studies have explored important themes, such as beauty and the cross,[[22]](#footnote-22) it seems little mention has been made of the significance of beauty in the context of mission[[23]](#footnote-23) or of feminine beauty, which appears to be the domain of feminist and body theologians.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Many scholars agree that beauty evokes ‘our spirit’s aching need for the infinite’[[25]](#footnote-25) and affords a glimpse of the future transfiguration of the cosmos.[[26]](#footnote-26) While most refer to this in the context of creation or the arts, I suggest this extends to women’s yearning for physical beauty. This paper argues the beauty women long for is an echo of eternity, stemming from a desire to recover a sense of beauty derived from being made by, like and for God. Although our perception of beauty has been distorted, an appreciation of beauty as revealed in creation and future glory, set in the context of God’s overarching missional ends for the universe,[[27]](#footnote-27) reveals women are truly beautiful as they delight God and fulfil their priestly calling of worship and service. A reclamation of this beauty offers wholeness and holiness which can both draw women to respond to the gospel plus empower them for mission.

Adopting a biblical-theological approach which includes exploring selected scripture passages while critically engaging with relevant scholarship across a broad sweep of issues, I will focus on three main areas. Firstly I will identify and analyse what beauty is by examining biblical texts relating to beauty in creation and tabernacle design followed by an evaluation of how God the Holy Spirit is beautiful. Secondly I will consider three aspects of the eschatological beauty of the new creation and relate these to ideas regarding why women long for physical beauty. Thirdly I will investigate how women can be beautiful now through the fulfilment of our priestly mandate and discuss the mission potential embedded within this.

Just as Jesus responded to felt needs during his earthly ministry, for example in granting food and healing (Mark 8:1-13, 22-26), so examining the longing underlying women’s beauty obsession addresses a significant area in many women’s lives, one which appears to have received little, if any, attention by missiologists. This is especially relevant in view of the contemporary confusion over beauty,[[28]](#footnote-28) the emphasis placed on physical appearance by modern culture and social media as well as women’s crucial role as mission agents.[[29]](#footnote-29) It is hoped this paper will stimulate further investigation into the mission potential of women’s yearning for beauty.

Although everyone knows what beauty is, very few can define it.[[30]](#footnote-30) My preliminary definition follows Aquinas’ classic description as ‘that which pleases when perceived’,[[31]](#footnote-31) including the natural, artistic, moral and intellectual.[[32]](#footnote-32) The area of ‘theological aesthetics’ refers to the branch of theology which explores the relationship of beauty with doctrine and practice.[[33]](#footnote-33) In this study I use ‘mission’ in the wide sense of everything involved in inviting people to fulfil their ultimate purpose to worship and glorify God.[[34]](#footnote-34) While elements of this paper may be relevant to men, I focus on women and write as a western reformed member of the sisterhood who is yearning for beauty herself.

**Chapter 1: What is beauty?**

To understand what lies beneath women’s desire for physical beauty, it is essential to consider what beauty is itself. Because God is the creator and source of all things, it follows that beauty comes from him and he is supremely beautiful.[[35]](#footnote-35) Yet what does it mean to describe God as beautiful? Does his beauty fit with Aquinas’ definition? The key to discerning God’s beauty is his self-revelation through nature and scripture.[[36]](#footnote-36) Therefore to identify a biblical understanding of beauty I will first explore two passages which recount how God created and instigated beauty: his creative acts in Gen. 1 and 2 and his instructions for the tabernacle design in Ex. 25-40. Secondly I will apply this biblical definition of beauty to God himself and examine how he is beautiful with particular reference to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Throughout I will analyse the thinking of three diverse theologians who have made unique contributions to theological aesthetics: Augustine, the first scholar attributed with highlighting the theological significance of beauty,[[37]](#footnote-37) Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards[[38]](#footnote-38) and Russian Orthodox lay theologian Paul Evdokimov.[[39]](#footnote-39) In this way I will show beauty is central to God himself and a key component of his missional purposes for the cosmos.[[40]](#footnote-40)

**Creation**

Beginning with Genesis, God’s creation of the universe is portrayed in panoramic and close-up form in chapters 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-25 respectively.[[41]](#footnote-41) Seven times God expresses pleasure at his handiwork, deeming creation ‘good’ then ‘very good’, a designation which includes aesthetic goodness or beauty.[[42]](#footnote-42) God does not need to check whether his universe is good but takes joy in doing so[[43]](#footnote-43) and names the garden ‘Eden’ which means ‘delight’ and fills it with trees ‘pleasing to the eye’.[[44]](#footnote-44) God’s response of sheer delight at his beautiful world demonstrates how beauty evokes pleasure,[[45]](#footnote-45) leading some to describe beauty as an experience or encounter which provokes awe or wonder.[[46]](#footnote-46) This is evident in the psalmist’s outbursts of praise regarding creation (Ps. 33:6-9, 95:1-7) and ties in with our classic definition of beauty as ‘that which pleases when perceived’. Edwards develops this connection between beauty and delight in observing how God’s delight within himself moved him to create a beautiful universe which in turn somehow ‘enlarges’ God’s being as he rejoices over creation.[[47]](#footnote-47) Thus beauty and delight are combined as God’s delight gives birth to beauty which in turn produces further delight both on God’s part and ours. Edwards’ thinking corresponds to Augustine’s connection of beauty with love and delight[[48]](#footnote-48) and emphasises how beauty is essential to God and significant in the very act of creation itself.

However the delight beauty evokes can become distorted and prove dangerous. Eve was beguiled not only by the desire for wisdom but by the beauty of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6). Potiphar’s wife lusted after handsome Joseph (Gen. 39:6-7) and the inhabitants of Jerusalem became entrapped by their splendour (Ezek. 16). Augustine experienced his own love-hate relationship with beauty as he struggled with worldly pleasures before his longings were satisfied in God.[[49]](#footnote-49)

The possibility for beauty-desire to become a snare is likely when we think of beauty in purely subjective terms, in line with the contemporary notion that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’.[[50]](#footnote-50) However God’s estimation of his world as beautiful affirms that beauty is a reality inherent in creation.[[51]](#footnote-51) While it can produce a subjective response, beauty is something objective and independent of human opinion.[[52]](#footnote-52) Augustine reflects this realist view of beauty in his foundational statement that things give pleasure because they are beautiful and not vice versa.[[53]](#footnote-53) He identifies order, harmony and symmetry as criteria that determine beauty,[[54]](#footnote-54) ideas which Aquinas later developed into proportion, wholeness and splendour.[[55]](#footnote-55) While the creation account does not use these particular terms, it does affirm Augustine and Aquinas’ understanding of beauty as something concerning substance as well as aesthetics.[[56]](#footnote-56)

This is evident in a second meaning attached to God’s description of ‘good’ in Gen. 1 as ‘functioning properly’ or ‘fittingness’.[[57]](#footnote-57) This means something is beautiful when it fulfils its purpose. Thus creation is beautiful not only because it evokes God’s delight but because it operates as he intended. We see this in the structure of creation as God systematically created and brought everything to perfect order.[[58]](#footnote-58) The ‘literary choreography’[[59]](#footnote-59) of the creation account echoes God’s deliberate forming and furnishing of the earth, establishing time and seasons, bringing forth creatures and humankind while building up to the climax of the first sabbath day.[[60]](#footnote-60) The perfect harmony of creation was also in line with God’s intentions, demonstrated in abundant provision and ecosystems for sustainable life as well as the introduction of Eve as an equal partner without whom Adam would not be complete.[[61]](#footnote-61) Augustine’s concept of beauty as ‘one single harmony’[[62]](#footnote-62) was a reality, with interdependence and mutuality within and between creation, humanity and God himself.

A further way the beauty of creation ‘functioned properly’ was in its conformity to God’s purposes. We see this particularly in the forming of humanity in God’s image, a final creative act so distinctive and momentous it was heralded by divine self-communing,[[63]](#footnote-63) repetition and use of ‘Let us make’ rather than ‘Let the land produce’.[[64]](#footnote-64) Actuated by a unique, solemn resolve in the depths of his heart,[[65]](#footnote-65) God ‘fashioned’ Adam from the dust and breathed life into him, making him in his ‘image’ and ‘likeness’. Although the meaning of being made in God’s image has been a matter of considerable debate,[[66]](#footnote-66) a helpful understanding comes from Meredith Kline who interprets this in the light of Gen. 5:1-3, suggesting we are made in God’s likeness as a son resembles his father.[[67]](#footnote-67) This places our being within the context of relationship which fits in with God’s own interaction within the Trinity. It also shows that our sonship has its roots in creation as well as new birth and adoption. Additionally it draws a connection to our model for image-bearing who is the eternal, firstborn Son (Col. 1:15). Psalm 8 links the creation of the ‘son of man’ with ‘glory and honour’ and this association between image and glory is further developed by Paul in the New Testament (2 Cor. 3:18, Rom. 1:21). Clearly a key part of resembling the Father is reflecting his glory. Many scholars note a biblical association between God’s glory and divine beauty,[[68]](#footnote-68) enabling us to say one purpose of image-bearing entails displaying God’s beauty.

Part of being made in God’s image involves obeying his mandate to exercise dominion over the earth as well as working and taking care of it (Gen. 1:26-30, 2:15). The fulfilment of such priestly and kingly offices is God’s plan for humanity and an important way we demonstrate the beauty of fittingness. Included in this are exercising authority over creation, cultivating culture, forming domestic, social, political and religious institutions and generally shaping every dimension of society.[[69]](#footnote-69) Yet the Genesis account hints at a deeper intent behind the divine mandate. The goal of creation was not simply to create a perfect and productive home for Adam and Eve. Rather God purposed to form a garden for himself (Is. 51:3, Ezek. 28:13, Gen. 13:10): an Edenic temple to be the focal point for his presence on earth[[70]](#footnote-70) in which his image-bearers would experience life as unbroken *shalom* in relationship with himself.[[71]](#footnote-71) Indeed he designed the cosmos as his sanctuary to be a place of rest for himself, his people and his creation.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Evidence for this is found in God’s activities on the seventh day of creation, as he ceased working, rested, blessed the day and made it holy (Gen. 2:2-3). This day was not a mere tag-on to God’s working week or precipitated by exhaustion, but instead was a rest of achievement. John Walton notes how this concept of rest is associated with divine temple-building in scripture and in the Ancient Near East, containing the idea of God being enthroned and taking up his role as sovereign ruler of the completed cosmos (Is. 66:1).[[73]](#footnote-73) Gordon Wenham highlights parallels between Eden and the later sanctuaries of the tabernacle and Jerusalem temple, such as the presence of cherubim, the entrance from the east, the tree of life, gold and precious stones plus the flowing river. Similar language is used to describe how God walked within the garden and the sanctuaries. Likewise the command to work and take care of the garden, which can also be translated ‘serve and guard’, is expressed in the same way as the tasks of the priests and Levites.[[74]](#footnote-74) When seen within this context of a garden-temple, it is clear God’s intention for Adam and Eve was to worship and serve him within Eden and extend the sacred space throughout the world, partnering with God in his plan to ‘rest’ within his earthly sanctuary.

The functional dimension of beauty shown Genesis 1 and 2 runs throughout scripture and explains why beauty is not always recognised by scholars since the loveliness of an object simply consists in being what it is meant to be.[[75]](#footnote-75) Yet the fittingness aspect should not be over-emphasised. Although Augustine gradually became more positive regarding temporal beauty,[[76]](#footnote-76) he writes in his *Confessions* that creaturely beauty has not fulfilled its purpose unless it leads us to God.[[77]](#footnote-77) Claus Westermann echoes this ‘beautiful for’ idea, claiming creation is beautiful only in that it praises God.[[78]](#footnote-78) Whilst these views helpfully connect beauty with revelation and worship, they are less than consistent with the fully material character of creation indicated in Genesis.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The creation account affirms beauty has two aspects: evoking delight and fittingness. Our definition can therefore be extended to ‘that which pleases when perceived and fulfils its divinely ordained function’.

**Tabernacle**

A further instance of God actively promoting beauty comes in his instructions for the tabernacle in Exodus 25-40. These are deemed important, taking up almost half the book of Exodus, and come at a significant point in the Israelites’ history as they leave Mount Sinai and set off towards the promised land. The tabernacle was a portable sanctuary accompanying the people on their journey, a replacement for the Edenic temple now off-limits for humankind due to Adam and Eve’s rebellion (Gen. 3:1-24). Biting the forbidden fruit destroyed the holistic beauty and order of creation, bringing deterioration and death as humankind was banished from God’s presence and the tree of life. Instead of extending Eden into the world, human beings started to spread distrust and violence, evidence of the radical distortion of the *imago Dei* and our subsequent inability to perfectly fulfil the divine mandate. God’s provision of the tabernacle granted himself a new earthly dwelling place (Ex. 25:8-9),[[80]](#footnote-80) restoring the fellowship of Eden and the worship and service of his people.

The tabernacle design is outlined in two sections through God’s detailed instructions to Moses and the description of its construction and consecration (Ex. 25-31 and 35-40). Although it was a tent it was an extremely opulent and splendid one, with a distinct layout, bespoke articles overlaid with precious metals, extravagant hangings, fragrant incense and anointing oil, all carefully created using costly materials. Just as God had formed a beautiful universe, here he instigated the creation of a magnificent sanctuary through skilled artisans guided by his Spirit.

As with creation, the tabernacle was beautiful in that it evoked delight, especially delight in the God who was pleased to dwell there. From the cherubim statues placed on top of the ark and embroidered on the curtains, the royal and divine colours of purple and blue and the exclusive use of gold for the Most Holy Place, everything pointed to the glory and majesty of God.[[81]](#footnote-81) Evdokimov appreciates the role of aesthetics in encountering God. In his study on iconography he discusses how, with renewed senses, we can experience God through the chants, icons, incense and sacrament of the Orthodox liturgy and how aesthetic experience when mixed with faith can become an opening through which God’s beauty erupts.[[82]](#footnote-82) Although there could be greater emphasis on contemplating scripture in his writing, Evdokimov’s emphasis on a holistic experience of God’s beauty along with awareness of mystery in worship balances the overly-cerebral or overly-chummy approaches common in some Protestant churches today. In fact his understanding of an icon opening a breach through which the Transcendent shines[[83]](#footnote-83) parallels the tabernacle’s function of being a portal between heaven and earth.[[84]](#footnote-84)

The tabernacle also demonstrates beauty in terms of fittingness as it fulfilled its functions as a diminished Eden in a world of chaos. Filled with imagery of Eden, even its three-part structure of courtyard, Holy Place and Most Holy Place mirrored the land, the garden and the tree of life.[[85]](#footnote-85) Like Eden after the fall, the way was barred to God’s presence with a high fence around the courtyard and restricted access. The priests and Levites took up the ‘work and take care’ mandate given to Adam and Eve, serving and preserving the sacred space through an elaborate system of sacrifice to ritually purify the people from sin.[[86]](#footnote-86) Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place once a year (Lev. 16), his bejewelled garments granting him ‘glory and beauty’ (Ex. 28:2), setting him apart as a representative of Israel to enter God’s holy presence.

The tabernacle’s purpose of modelling the garden-temple is further underlined by Moses’ reiteration of the commandment to keep the sabbath (Ex. 31:12-17). This was an important reminder of the creation ordinance and God’s sovereign rule as well as his desire to fellowship with his people. Yet the sabbath command had an even greater significance for the Israelites since after the liberation from Egypt it became linked with God’s redemptive work (Ex. 20:8-11, Deut. 5:12-15).[[87]](#footnote-87) The cloud of God’s glory which engulfed the tabernacle after its consecration marked a new chapter in the history of Israel as God once again dwelt with his people (Ex. 40:34-38): a powerful symbol of the restoration of the Edenic reality[[88]](#footnote-88) and the outworking of God’s mission to redeem humanity.

**Divine beauty**

God’s deliberate injecting of the beautiful into creation and the tabernacle suggests beauty is fundamental to God and his purposes. However the Bible only once describes God as beautiful *per se* in Ps. 27:4 and explicitly states the suffering Servant is not outwardly attractive (Is. 53:2). Because we often think of beauty as something sensory, it does not seem to apply to God whom we cannot see, hear or touch. Nonetheless divine beauty is implied in scripture, expressed through various words such as glory, majesty and splendour (2 Pet. 1:17, Ps. 145:5)[[89]](#footnote-89) and linked with tangible objects and places (Is. 28:5, Rev. 4:3). If we use our biblical definition of beauty as ‘that which pleases when perceived and fulfils its divinely ordained function’, surely God is the epitome of beauty since he is the most delightful of all and the being fully in accord with his own intentions.

The specific person of the Godhead mentioned in the creation and tabernacle accounts is the Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:2, Ex. 31:1-11). Here we see the Spirit as beautiful in fulfilling two of his divine functions: birthing a beautiful world and empowering human beings to partner with him in the creative task in making and appreciating beautiful things. The beauty we experience through nature and artistic expression are ways the Spirit’s work reflects divine beauty and glorifies the Father and Son. Although both creation and human artistry have been tainted by the Fall, this earthly beauty nonetheless anticipates the transfigured world to come.[[90]](#footnote-90)

The Spirit is also beautiful in the way he leads individuals to be born again (John 3:5-8), filling us with his presence and restoring fellowship with the Father through the Son (Rom. 8:15-16). Jesus and now believers replace the tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple as the dwelling place for God on earth, empowered for mission in extending the kingdom of God (Acts 1:8). The ‘Spirit of Beauty’[[91]](#footnote-91) sanctifies us individually and corporately so that we grow in holiness (1 Pet. 1:2, Gal. 5:16). Unlike physical beauty, this spiritual loveliness grows progressively stronger, transforming us from glory to glory into Jesus’ likeness (2 Cor. 13:18).

Patrick Sherry claims scholars neglected to discern the beauty of the Spirit for centuries due to the dominant influence of Augustine and his focus on the beautiful Son.[[92]](#footnote-92) While this Christological emphasis conforms to Jesus’ role of revealing the Father (John 14:6-11), the more fully developed Trinitarian theology of Edwards restores this imbalance and affirms the harmony and mutuality within the Godhead.[[93]](#footnote-93) In regard to beauty’s aspect of evoking pleasure, Edwards shows how the Spirit is ‘the beauty and happiness’ of both the Father and the Son.[[94]](#footnote-94) He is God’s inner-trinitarian love, ‘the infinite delight and pleasure of God’ who also brings comfort and delight to the souls of God’s people.[[95]](#footnote-95) This identification of the Spirit with beauty helpfully highlights the connection between beauty and holiness (Ps. 29:2).[[96]](#footnote-96) Since God’s beauty is to a large extent his holiness,[[97]](#footnote-97) the more the Spirit sanctifies us, the more beautiful we become. Sherry presses this connection between beauty and holiness further, showing how the Spirit’s role in developing both anticipates our future glorification.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In summary, the Bible portrays a full-orbed view of beauty which includes the two aspects of evoking delight and fulfilling divinely ordained function, a somewhat different emphasis to the surface-idea of beauty in vogue today. We can recognise what beauty is when we look backwards in history, toward God as the fountain of all beauty who created a beautiful garden-temple and tabernacle as focal points for his presence on earth. These sanctuaries allowed his people to fulfil their priestly purpose of worship and service, partnering with God as he moved toward his ultimate missional goal of fellowshipping with all his children.

**Chapter 2: Why do women long for physical beauty?**

Women’s longing for physical beauty is a symptom of living in a disfigured world, out of sync with the *shalom* God intended. Some attribute this yearning to other reasons, such as a drive to cover shame, seek validation or prioritise self. While these are powerful factors, I propose they are secondary causes, emanating from an underlying eschatological longing[[99]](#footnote-99) shared with the rest of creation (Rom. 8:22-23), a groaning for the restoration of a beauty which is good, true and ultimately divine.[[100]](#footnote-100) Since human beauty will be completely fulfilled only in the coming age, in this chapter I will use our biblical definition of beauty to analyse how women will be beautiful in the new Jerusalem as portrayed by John’s vision in Rev. 21:1-22:6. In particular I will examine the significance of the temple, bride and throne, highlighting how each addresses the secondary causes mentioned above. This investigation of women’s eschatological beauty will help grant eternal perspective on our current beauty obsession, showing how our longings for beauty are rooted in a longing for God himself.

**Temple**

John’s description of the new Jerusalem is the final in a series of symbolic visions which unveil the victorious outcome of the cosmic conflict between God and Satan, the consummation of God’s overarching purpose of dwelling with his people.[[101]](#footnote-101) Written using rich imagery and metaphor, it gives a dazzling vista of the new creation. The Holy City is one of transcending and transcendent beauty, filled with sparkling jewels and shimmering streets of gold, luminous with the brilliance of God’s own splendour. Whether this city is symbolic of a place, the people of God or perhaps both,[[102]](#footnote-102) it is brimming with abundance, harmony and glory.

One of the surprising features of this city is the absence of a temple. The cubical dimensions of the city, reminiscent of the tabernacle’s Most Holy Place,[[103]](#footnote-103) plus Edenic references to precious stones, a river and the tree of life indicate the whole city is the locus of God’s presence. Yet John explains the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple, suggesting ‘while the church is the temple where God dwells, God is the Spirit-Temple where the church dwells.’[[104]](#footnote-104) Thus the new creation is a world taken forward into the future God always intended,[[105]](#footnote-105) a fresh beginning[[106]](#footnote-106) as well as a ‘deeply happy ending’ to the biblical story of creation and redemption.[[107]](#footnote-107) Bearing in mind our definition of beauty as that which evokes delight, the eschatological beauty of believers will be evident through God’s unmitigated pleasure in welcoming them into the Most Holy Place filling the new Jerusalem and into the divine household.[[108]](#footnote-108) The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will be opened at last as we ‘see God’s face’ and are showered with his wholehearted approval.[[109]](#footnote-109)

This divine ‘well done’ is significant for many women who feel shame for simply being daughters of Eve and having female bodies. Instead of considering Eve the most beautiful woman of all time, we tend to think of her as the most dangerous[[110]](#footnote-110) since she was the first to taste the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6-7). Although she was as stunning physically in the moments after eating as before,[[111]](#footnote-111) shame overcame her and has subsequently followed her daughters down through the millennia. Tertullian’s oft-quoted invective against women as ‘the devil’s gateway’[[112]](#footnote-112) is one of many historical texts denouncing women,[[113]](#footnote-113) such as the ‘defective and misbegotten’ description by Aquinas.[[114]](#footnote-114) Although this seems to have been counterbalanced in part by elevating Mary as the womanly ideal of the Christian faith,[[115]](#footnote-115) her portrayal as revered virgin-mother is fundamentally impossible to emulate.[[116]](#footnote-116) Eve’s shame continues to haunt women who can feel devalued being bypassed for leadership roles in the church even though they are often more spiritually mature, godly and discerning than many men.[[117]](#footnote-117)

Likewise shame is attached in a particular way to the female body. Augustine associated the female body with lust although he also claimed women’s bodies would be redeemed in glory, arguing against the suggestion they would be resurrected in male form.[[118]](#footnote-118) Yet his identification of women with inferior worldly knowledge in contrast to the godlike wisdom pertaining to men[[119]](#footnote-119) created a conflict between women’s spirituality and their ‘sinful’ body.[[120]](#footnote-120) While every believer battles with their human nature (Rom. 7:23-24), Augustine’s thinking required women to distance themselves from their bodily identity. They were barred from the priesthood on the basis their bodies were incapable of symbolising Christ as the embodiment of perfect humanity.[[121]](#footnote-121) Chine Mbubaegbu notes that today the normal functions of the female body, although less of a taboo subject than before, are often viewed as something negative. Body hair needs to be removed and pregnancy is something that ruins the figure.[[122]](#footnote-122) While the Nigerian Celestial Church of Christ’s prohibition against the attendance of menstruating women[[123]](#footnote-123) and the concern of thealogists to ‘resacralise’ women’s bodies[[124]](#footnote-124) can be viewed as opposite and extreme ends of the spectrum, nonetheless they demonstrate the continuing shame borne by many women in their physical selves.

Part of this shame is connected with dualism, the Greek legacy of spiritual and moral superiority which paints all physical bodies with shame. This distrust of the material has permeated much theology,[[125]](#footnote-125) with both Augustine and Edwards favouring spiritual beauty over the physical. [[126]](#footnote-126) Jesus’ very incarnation plus his ministry of physical healing demonstrate the dichotomy between body and soul is artificial. The Bible affirms the ontological goodness of our physical bodies (Ps. 139:13-14) while recognising the pervasive and devastating effects of sin (Eph. 2:1-2). As Bruce Ashford and Craig Bartholomew helpfully put it, ‘Anything in creation can be directed toward God or away from him. It is this direction that distinguishes between the good and the bad, rather than some distinction between spiritual and material.’[[127]](#footnote-127)

John’s vision of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth is further evidence against physical-spiritual dualism,[[128]](#footnote-128) just as Jesus’ bodily resurrection is the ultimate proof of our future physical existence (1 Cor. 15:20-23). We will not consist of ransomed souls floating around in sanctified ether but whole people with physical bodies ‘biologized pneumatically with the life-giving Spirit of Christ.’[[129]](#footnote-129) Our bodies will be truly us, yet immortal, glorious and perhaps even more real than our present ones. As Wright surmises ‘a Christian in the present life is a mere shadow of his or her *future* self’.[[130]](#footnote-130) Whether or not our glorified bodies will match the airbrushed perfect physiques we glamorize today is an interesting question, given that Jesus’ post-resurrection body bore the scars of his suffering (John 20:27).

God’s delight in welcoming us into the Most Holy Place of his immediate presence speaks into many women’s deep sense of shame regarding their bodies, femininity and spirituality. Much of today’s quest for beauty involves wearing make-up as a mask or hiding perceived body flaws.[[131]](#footnote-131) Our natural faces and bodies are somehow unacceptable. The lack of temple in the new Jerusalem reminds us there will be no condemnation, tabernacle fence, restricted access, shut gates or gender barriers. In the glory of God’s presence women will be free to be our true, beautiful and redeemed selves.

**Bride**

John’s vision of the new Jerusalem depicts the Holy City as the wife of the Lamb, made beautiful like a bride on her wedding day. This corresponds to the image of the church as the bride of Christ in Eph. 5:22-33 where Paul describes Jesus’ loving relationship with the church which he has made holy and completely perfect. Here, in contrast to the harlot-city of Babylon (Rev. 17:1-19:10), we have a picture of the bride-city descending to earth and being presented to her husband. John’s vision anticipates the fulfilment of the ‘rest’ for which God created the universe: the intimate, eternal fellowship between Jesus the Bridegroom and his glorious church. ‘The creation of the world seems to have been especially for this end, that the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse, toward whom he might fully exercise the infinite benevolence of his nature, and to whom he might, as it were, open and pour forth all that immense fountain of condescension, love and grace that was in his heart, and that in this way God might be glorified.’[[132]](#footnote-132)

Jesus’ delight in his radiant and holy Bride speaks into women’s pursuit of beauty as a means of achieving validation, particularly from men. Although historically women’s physical beauty has been an important factor in obtaining a husband and thereby security,[[133]](#footnote-133) it now seems a primary factor in defining female success: ‘Every woman knows that, regardless of all her achievements, she is a failure is she is not beautiful.’[[134]](#footnote-134) A frumpy male professor wins admiration for his profession whereas his frumpy female colleague attracts scorn for her lack of fashion sense.[[135]](#footnote-135) This places intense pressure on women to conform to increasingly globalised beauty norms with sometimes negative consequences for physical and mental health.[[136]](#footnote-136) In recent years the western youthful and slim ideal has been challenged by anti-Barbie and pro-diversity campaigners.[[137]](#footnote-137) Celebrities speak out against body-shaming[[138]](#footnote-138) and there is a move promoting fit rather than skinny.[[139]](#footnote-139) However although modified, Barbie is still Barbie[[140]](#footnote-140) and the multi-million-pound industries around women’s beauty, such as cosmetics, diet, plastic surgery and pornography, continue apace.[[141]](#footnote-141)

Naomi Wolf interprets this female beauty imperative as a backlash against feminism, claiming it is a weapon used by male dominated power structures to control women’s behaviour.[[142]](#footnote-142) Although her focus on patriarchy seems rather narrow, Wolf clearly highlights how patriarchal attitudes and expectations grant men permission to look at and objectify women. Her work draws on ideas developed by John Berger who describes women as both the surveyed and the surveyors: watched by men and scrutinisers of themselves and other women from a male perspective.[[143]](#footnote-143) This concept of ‘the male gaze’[[144]](#footnote-144) is damaging in that it makes a male and often sexualised version of female beauty normative and creates a comparison culture in which women criticise themselves and each other.[[145]](#footnote-145)

This desire for validation through physical beauty has permeated the church where some have granted divine sanction to thinness by linking it with godliness and spiritual victory.[[146]](#footnote-146) A gospel preaching beauty as the essence of femininity elevates hotness along with holiness, placing responsibility upon women for catching and keeping a man.[[147]](#footnote-147) Many Christian women are told they should be physically beautiful - but not too much or they will lead men into sin.[[148]](#footnote-148) Rather than countering false values, this thinking results in an internalized oppression which puts a holy rubber stamp on secular ideas about femininity and beauty. It entraps Christian women in the same tyranny that entangles their non-believing sisters, so that some talk more about food and dieting than the saving, transforming good news of Jesus Christ.[[149]](#footnote-149) On the other hand, fear and suspicion of female beauty as something dangerous, distracting and sinful has led some Christians to exhort women to cover up and hide their physical beauty.[[150]](#footnote-150)

John’s vision of the church as a Bride reminds Christian women they are beautiful not because they can turn men’s heads but because the Bridegroom delights in them. It challenges both women and men to see sin, rather than fatness, as ugly and to look beyond the all-pervasive lens of patriarchy, especially within the church. As the Bride of Christ we will corporately enjoy deep fellowship with the Lord and live in harmony with each other. Although it seems almost impossible to imagine, the dominance and rivalry attached to present relationships between men and women plus among women will cease and the focus will instead be on Jesus and his gaze upon us. Women can trust in the faithfulness of Jesus, rather than in their appearance, to keep his covenant commitment (Ezek. 37:27-28) and return to marry his Bride.

**Throne**

A third feature of the new Jerusalem is the divine throne, a symbol central to Revelation,[[151]](#footnote-151) the ruling seat of God and the Lamb. Just as God was creation’s Alpha he will also be its Omega,[[152]](#footnote-152) fully establishing his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10).[[153]](#footnote-153) In contrast with the scene in Rev. 4-5 in which four living creatures form an inner circle of priests and twenty-four elders share Christ’s rule, here in Rev. 21:1-22:6 humans have direct access to God’s throne on earth as priests and kings.[[154]](#footnote-154) We will fulfil our divinely ordained function first conferred upon Adam and Eve and so become truly beautiful. Although no specific details are given, mention of seeing God’s face and having his name on our foreheads indicates our service will include a priestly element[[155]](#footnote-155) and we will also participate in God’s rule.[[156]](#footnote-156) This serving and reigning community describes the whole church, as noted by reference to the twelve tribes and twelve apostles, including people from all nations. ‘So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.’[[157]](#footnote-157)

John’s image of the divine throne has special relevance for women who prioritise self and beauty over God. When physical beauty is sought as a means of fulfilment while ignoring God, it is no less than idolatry. C.S. Lewis recognises our tendency to trust in beauty in general, turning beautiful things into dumb idols instead of seeing them as good images of what we really desire.[[158]](#footnote-158) When women use physical beauty to gain approval, validation or something else, it leaves a lingering aftertaste of bitterness since our thirst can only be quenched by the sole infinite One.[[159]](#footnote-159)

Sarah Coakley links our current western obsession with the body beautiful to the demise of religious faith as a provider of meaning. She astutely notes how this quest for eternal youth bespeaks a prevailing denial of death. If this life is all there is, then our only hope is to keep the body ‘alive, youthful, consuming, sexually active, and jogging on (literally), for as long as possible.’[[160]](#footnote-160) Her words are echoed by Yuval Noah Harari who predicts ‘In the twenty first century humans are likely to make a serious bid for immortality.’ He claims engineers will take over from priests and theologians in solving the problem of death.[[161]](#footnote-161) Yet this quest for salvation by self-transformation whether by cosmetics or cyborg technology undermines biblical teaching that we are made in God’s image and are more than our bodies.[[162]](#footnote-162) Secularism makes us long for beauty and fear death because we have lost God in whom true beauty originates. Paradoxically the loss of the transcendent, in conjunction with an emphasis on the utilitarian over the aesthetic,[[163]](#footnote-163) leads to a prevalence of ugliness and death as evidenced today in popular literature and cinema as well as the arts.[[164]](#footnote-164) John’s vision shows true beauty is achieved not by denying death but rather by embracing it, passing through the veil of death to glorious splendour where death will be no more.

John’s description of Babylon (Rev. 17:1-19:10) clearly shows the human tendency towards idolatry and self-deification. This city is the opposite of the new Jerusalem, symbolised by a ravenous beast and shameless prostitute, marked by rebellion, exploitation, deception and a beauty that is glittering but fleeting. There is no throne in Babylon because God is not exalted but blasphemed. Richard Bauckham notes the only antidote to the human default position of idolatry is ‘a purified vision of the transcendence of God’.[[165]](#footnote-165) Worship re-orientates us around our proper centre[[166]](#footnote-166) and reminds us of the victorious Lamb who has defeated the beast and reversed the curse of Eden.

The divine throne reveals the truth about who and what is truly beautiful, showing that the pursuit of beauty for anything other than glorifying God leads ultimately to the second death. There is no neutral ground[[167]](#footnote-167) and everyone is called to forsake Babylon and focus our worship upon the sovereign God. Where eternal realities are ignored or downplayed, such as in the modern view of an afterlife without hell, the promise of heaven is diminished.[[168]](#footnote-168) As John Calvin notes, meditating upon the future life counteracts the human tendency to fix our immortality upon the earth,[[169]](#footnote-169) while it also helps resist the dominant ideologies of the present age.[[170]](#footnote-170)

To sum up, our rejection of God in Eden has led to a deification of self and distortion of beauty, with subsequent misuse of physical beauty to gain approval or validation.

John’s vision of the new Jerusalem allows us to see into the future where women’s deep longing for beauty will be quenched as God welcomes us into fellowship, delighting in his Bride who worships and serves.

**Chapter 3: How can women be beautiful now?**

The beauty John glimpsed in his vision can seem far away from our world of ugliness, deterioration and death. Yet since Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection the forces of the future world of the kingdom have been streaming into the present.[[171]](#footnote-171) The new age has begun and is closer than we think, the fullness and completion of what we see now in part.[[172]](#footnote-172) In midst of these in-between times Christians are called to work for the recovery of what has been wrecked, the republication of God’s thesis and re-enchantment of a disenchanted world.[[173]](#footnote-173) This means although there is tension between the yearning of now and the possession of the not-yet, women can begin to reclaim their beauty. In order to explore how women can be beautiful now, I will apply our biblical definition of beauty to the priestly aspect of the mandate given to believers, discussing how this offers both a restoration of wholeness and holiness. Including biblical and more recent examples, I will demonstrate that such whole and holy beauty can provide a catalyst in empowering and motivating women to respond to and engage in mission.

**Wholeness**

Following our biblical definition, being beautiful signifies delighting God and fulfilling our divinely ordained function. A key part of our role as those made in God’s image is implementing the priestly mandate first given to Adam and Eve, then to the Levites serving in the tabernacle and temple as well as to Israel as God’s chosen nation (Ex. 19:5). As believers we are designated to be a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5), mediators between God and humanity, called like Paul to proclaim the gospel to the peoples (Rom. 15:16) and a restoration of *shalom* with God (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

One of the requirements for the Old Testament priesthood was physical and spiritual wholeness, made possible through animal sacrifice and a series of purification rituals and rules (Lev. 21-22). Likewise today wholeness is a prerequisite for the priesthood of believers, but instead of needing a healthy and defect-free body we depend on the broken and disfigured body of Jesus. The paradox of ‘consummate splendour in monstrous horror’ of Jesus’ passion and death[[174]](#footnote-174) as he took up his dual role of great High Priest and sinless sacrifice was the means of our restoration (Heb. 9:11-14). ‘The transfiguring power of supernatural beauty to change evil to good, suffering to delight, ugliness to splendour is seen on the hill of Calvary.’[[175]](#footnote-175) The gospel invites us to life as it should be, one of union with Christ, transformation, harmony and fulfilment of our deepest longings (John 4:13-14; 10:10), in which we are liberated to delight God[[176]](#footnote-176) and obey our calling to glorify and exalt him.[[177]](#footnote-177) We are made pure of heart and enabled to see the beauty of God (Matt. 5:8), empowered to be who we truly are as his children, living with integrity lives of beauty, truth and goodness.

This wholeness includes a new way of being beautiful, deeper than the modern obsession with appearance. We are enabled to see beauty in what others call ugly (Matt. 26:10) and discern ugliness underneath apparent beauty (Amos 5:23-24).[[178]](#footnote-178) While the Bible recognises the transience of physical beauty, viewing it as inferior to inner integrity (Prov. 31:30; 11:22), it is nonetheless not insignificant. The Bible describes women’s outward beauty in positive terms, most notably throughout the Song of Songs, and gospel wholeness does include a bodily aspect. As Wright remarks ‘We are saved, not as souls, but as wholes.’[[179]](#footnote-179) John Barclay explains ‘Once appropriated by sin, the body is reappropriated by Christ. The very location where sin once held most visible sway, and where its former grip still draws our bodily selves towards death, is now the location where the “newness of life” breaks through into action’[[180]](#footnote-180) (Rom. 8:11, 23). While this transformation does not turn us into supermodels, pause the ageing process or obliterate all infirmity and disability, our new wholeness is lived out and expressed via the body. This has important consequences for how women view their physical selves, warning against either self-loathing or flaunting, encouraging them to see their bodies as gifts for glorifying God.

A biblical instance of someone who experienced this wholeness is the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42). She had been living a fragmented life with broken marital relationships, committing sexual immorality and no doubt marginalised by her community. Jesus’ offer of life-giving wholeness immediately compelled her to share this good news with folk in her town. Joni Eareckson Tada is a contemporary example of wholeness in midst of severe physical limitations. Like the Samaritan woman, she has a passion for sharing Jesus and has had a unique global ministry spanning over forty years.[[181]](#footnote-181) Both women demonstrate that experiencing gospel wholeness leads naturally to mission, with witness authenticated and strengthened through personal brokenness and weakness (1 Cor. 1:26-29). In contrast to a narcissistic approach, this outward and upward perspective switches the focus away from our individual needs yet paradoxically fulfils us. As John Piper states ‘*God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*.’[[182]](#footnote-182)

Rubem Alves, one of the founders of liberation theology turned storyteller, philosopher and poet, raises interesting questions regarding longings for wholeness and mission. Throughout his life he gradually moved away from activism based on ethics to a recognition of the power of beauty to touch us deeply and draw us to the beautiful Jesus.[[183]](#footnote-183) Alves developed a vision of spirituality called ‘theo-poetics’,[[184]](#footnote-184) an interdisciplinary engagement with aesthetics, theology and literature, through which he saw mission as awakening dreams and hopes via the beauty in art, poetry and nature.[[185]](#footnote-185) He argues the poor need the hope and transformation stimulated by beauty as well as bread, shelter and justice. Although not explicitly evangelistic, Alves’ creative approach acknowledges the connection between human yearning and beauty, offering a model for reaching out and working for the transformation of society based on beauty. It also challenges the activist thinking that can often dominate mission activity and encourages greater awareness of beauty among those engaging in outreach. Michael Pasquarello takes up this latter concern calling for preachers to delight in God’s beauty both in their preaching and personal devotions in order to cultivate doxology and keep the glory of God paramount.[[186]](#footnote-186) Pasquarello’s comments are applicable not only to preaching but mission activities in general and a reminder that contemplation of divine beauty inspires praise of God’s glory which motivates mission[[187]](#footnote-187) and fosters our own wholeness. Alves and Pasquarello show that wholeness through relationship with Jesus can draw people to respond to the gospel as well as fire them up for reaching out.

**Holiness**

Holiness is the primary moral virtue associated with beauty in scripture (Ps. 50:2; 29:2)[[188]](#footnote-188) and was a must for Old Testament priests as it is for believers today (Lev. 21:6, 1 Pet. 1:15-16). A key aspect of holiness is moral purity, something we are both granted and work towards through definitive and progressive sanctification.[[189]](#footnote-189) While the latter is often viewed in terms of spiritual formation, it involves the whole person, affecting our physical body as well as intellect, personality and emotions.[[190]](#footnote-190) In fact, our body becomes the ‘Most Holy Place’ as the presence of God indwells us as his temple (1 Cor. 3:16). Christopher Wright’s view ‘If the earth has a sanctity derived from its relation to the Creator, then our treatment of the earth will be a reflex and a measure of our own relationship with the creator’[[191]](#footnote-191) can be extended to include our bodies, implying how we view and treat our physical selves is connected with our faith.

Christian women should therefore be the most beautiful women on the planet, filled with the Spirit and being ‘little Christs’ embodying the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus as they conform their spirits to his.[[192]](#footnote-192) Just as God created a stunning garden-temple in Eden and gave instructions for an exquisitely adorned tabernacle, we can cherish and look after our bodies as instruments for God’s glory to shine through to the world. In this light, cultivating physical beauty is not trivial or self-indulgent but an act of sacred significance, motivated by giving God glory in all things (1 Cor. 10:31; 6:20). Like other secondary issues, the extent to which we apply make-up or curl our hair is a matter for each individual, as long as biblical parameters of Christian behaviour are maintained, such as not causing others to stumble (Rom. 14:13-23). For seventeenth century French mystic Madame Guyon the loss of her feted beauty to smallpox was source of relief, freeing her from vanity and drawing her closer to Christ.[[193]](#footnote-193) On the other hand, in God’s providence Esther underwent a year of beauty treatments and won a throne on account of her loveliness (Esther 2).

However although our physical beauty is God-given and our ability to appreciate beauty is God-ordained,[[194]](#footnote-194) Christian women can often slavishly follow western culture’s frantic pursuit of fashion and physical perfection. Mbubaegbu’s informal mini-survey among her female Christian contacts showed 80% were dissatisfied with their bodies.[[195]](#footnote-195) Helen Sterk notes this beauty obsession can take time and attention away from building God’s kingdom as well as consolidate sex and class divisions.[[196]](#footnote-196) Her solution is to see clothing not as a display of seductive capacities but as an opportunity for ‘conversation and ritual’, in selecting garments that express personality, relationships or membership of communities. These are practical suggestions which demonstrate our identity as believers can shape our clothing choices. This is something taken seriously by monks and nuns whose habit is a symbol of their devotion and faith. The Council of Trent’s documents imply that although wearing a habit does not make someone a monk, it does strengthen identity and commitment.[[197]](#footnote-197) Dwi Maria Handayani echoes this idea of mutual reinforcement between identity and appearance in her discussion of *hijab* wearing in Indonesia. She calls for Christian women to see fashion as missional, stating ‘As our Muslim sisters use fashion to declare their faith, we need to consider our choice of fashion as a declaration of faith as well.’[[198]](#footnote-198) This attitude that the ultimate purpose of fashion is to reflect the beauty and glory of God invites us to dress and act in ways that exalt Jesus, based on Christian freedom and love rather than simply following religious obligation or cultural trends.

Transformation through developing holiness does not start or finish with physical appearance but is rooted in a renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:1-2).[[199]](#footnote-199) This works its way outwards to display character and behaviour increasingly like Christ in the lives of individual believers as well as churches.[[200]](#footnote-200) Balthasar optimistically claims such ‘attestation of Christ is immediately evident, it can become so dazzling in the testimony of Christians that its beauty and rightness will be visible and evident’,[[201]](#footnote-201) attracting outsiders even without direct evangelism (1 Thess. 1:8).[[202]](#footnote-202) This kind of holy and powerful witness may become all the more vital in the post-Christian west as in contexts where open evangelism is not permitted, the beauty of lives earning the right to be heard in midst of opposition. Incredibly, our godliness can enhance the beauty of the gospel itself (Titus 2:10)[[203]](#footnote-203) whereas lack of integrity can destroy years of testimony. This calls for those involved in mission to engage in intentional discipleship with others as well as seek ongoing growth in personal spirituality. Mind renewal through looking into the true mirror of God’s Word (James 1:22-25) is also crucial with regards to developing a biblical understanding of holy beauty, especially in view of the myriads of images depicting society’s perception of female attractiveness bombarding us daily.[[204]](#footnote-204)

In addition to holy purity, we demonstrate our beauty through a second aspect of holiness: consecration. God’s people stand in a special relationship with him and have been set apart for God’s use.[[205]](#footnote-205) We have been called to continue the creational intention for humans to image God as priests and transform the earth into a sacred place whereby humanity might experience the joy of the presence of God and so mediate divine blessing throughout all the earth.[[206]](#footnote-206) United with Jesus the great High Priest, we stand in the middle between God and the rest of humanity, with the twofold task of representing God before humanity and humanity before God.[[207]](#footnote-207)

John Webster reminds us this consecrated holiness is not the stereotypical ‘holier-than-thou’ judgemental separation from the world decried by Jesus himself (Matt. 23).[[208]](#footnote-208) While we are called to be radically different from unbelievers in terms of behaviour, our grace-given holiness enables us to reach out, declaring God’s praises and causing others to do the same on account of our good deeds (1 Pet. 2:9,12). Stefan Paas notes this holy priesthood is collective before it is individual, with believers receiving priestly status as a result of their relationship with Christ and other Christians.[[209]](#footnote-209) Paas’ emphasis on community is a helpful corrective to the highly individualised western approach to faith today. In particular his critique challenges us to counter in-house spiritual competition by putting ‘us’ before ‘me’ in our churches and seeing personal relationships as opportunities to encounter God. This community focus holds much potential for engaging those seeking deep friendships in an increasingly fragmented society and an area in which western Christians can learn from their Majority World brothers and sisters. It also underlines the importance of long-term church commitment, the value of small fellowships as well as meeting and sharing together in person as opposed to church-hopping or mere online attendance.

Just as the priesthood is communal it is also a ministry for all Christians. Unlike the Old Testament paradigm which restricted the priesthood to the Levites, Jesus broke with Jewish tradition when he gathered followers not from the priestly class but from among fisherfolk, tax-collectors and the like[[210]](#footnote-210) including women (Mark 15:40-41). However for almost nineteen centuries ministry was generally considered the monopoly of ordained males, with a dividing line between clergy and laity. David Bosch claims even Martin Luther, credited with the rediscovery of the priesthood-of-all-believers concept, reverted to the powerful clergyman model.[[211]](#footnote-211) Although today there is an awareness of the central role of the laity, in part catalysed by the female-dominated lay Protestant missionary movement,[[212]](#footnote-212) its potential is not fully realised in many congregations.[[213]](#footnote-213) This is attributed to a false dualism in which secular professions are downplayed and faith is relegated to the private sphere.[[214]](#footnote-214) Michael Goheen’s call for a rethink of how churches can equip and encourage the laity is welcome[[215]](#footnote-215) but will be effective only if led by those with experience in the secular work-place. The enormous evangelistic and transformational opportunities offered by lay ministry[[216]](#footnote-216) remind us that each congregation is far more than the ministry of one person upfront. It is a crucial interface between believers and non-believers in an age of dwindling church attendance. Lydia is a New Testament example of a lay-person singled out for her ministry of hospitality (Acts 16:13-15), with others including the group of women who helped finance Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:1-3).

Related to this is the church’s responsibility to engage with the current western obsession with physical beauty. Not simply a private concern, this is a key area largely unaddressed by the church, profoundly affecting both men and women as consumers and participants. Although physical beauty is God-given, much of the contemporary fixation is based on idolatry, greed and exploitation. A recovery of the countercultural dimension of the church’s mission,[[217]](#footnote-217) including critical awareness of the influence of the media,[[218]](#footnote-218) is necessary for a faithful embodiment of the kingdom as well as a gospel that is relevant to women’s lives.[[219]](#footnote-219) ‘The worldly world has hardly a clue as to where genuine human beauty can be found and in what it consists.’[[220]](#footnote-220) The church has an opportunity to show what true beauty is but first needs to recognise and confront cultural idols.

One factor which perhaps blinds the church with regards to idolatry is a lack of focus on the beauty of God.[[221]](#footnote-221) Our primary purpose is to worship and glorify God, to gaze upon divine beauty and respond in delight and praise (Ps. 96:1-10). As we focus on God’s beauty we fulfil our divinely ordained function and become truly beautiful ourselves. Yet a historical emphasis on divine power, wisdom and knowledge followed by a contemporary focus on love have marginalised God’s beauty from western theology.[[222]](#footnote-222) In conjunction with a hyperactive work ethic and pleasure-centred lifestyle,[[223]](#footnote-223) this has contributed to a Christianity which can be superficial and self-centred or dry, jaded and abstract. This is nothing short of tragic since as priests we are set apart to minister before the Lord and declare his incomparable beauty. ‘To sing to God, to sing his perfections, in a word to sing his Beauty, this is man’s unique preoccupation, his unique and totally free “work.”’[[224]](#footnote-224) Thomas Dubay invites us to cultivate the passion of the psalmists who ‘were beside themselves to express what was and is beyond human words’ as well as the raptures of the patristics.[[225]](#footnote-225) His criticism of a sterile professional competence devoid of a prayerful milieu, which neither inspires heroism nor lights fires provides food for thought not only for theology academics but all believers. As Piper rightly notes the centrality of God in the life of the church is the most crucial issue in mission.[[226]](#footnote-226) A focus on his glory and beauty should predominate everything we do, including discussion on strategy, cultural trends, the state of the world and general chitchat, so that our mission claims and activities are undergirded and authorised by a real and big vision of God.[[227]](#footnote-227)

Two Old Testament women who led public praise for God’s victory over enemies were Miriam and Deborah (Ex. 15:20-21, Judges 5). Their songs not only inspired their communities to worship and glorify God for liberation but also stood as a witness to the surrounding nations of God’s greatness. Our worship as priests is both Godward and outward as we glorify God and call the nations to join the white-hot enjoyment of God’s glory.[[228]](#footnote-228) ‘The mission of God’s people…is derived from the fact that they were created to bring praise and glory to God *and* to bring the nations of the world into the same orchestra of doxology.’[[229]](#footnote-229) Paas points out if the church’s purpose is to glorify God, the starting point for mission should be the *gloria Dei* rather than a traditional missionary emphasis on saving the lost.[[230]](#footnote-230) While much good was and is done motivated by compassion for the unsaved, a focus on doxology puts God rather than ourselves at the centre of mission,[[231]](#footnote-231) both as the recipient of praise and the prime mover and shaker. It reminds us that mission success is not defined by numbers of converts or the coolness of our efforts, but rather by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit.[[232]](#footnote-232) In addition it also encourages us in bold evangelism, seeing it as an opportunity to invite others to glorify God and live for an eternal cause, also balancing the biblical reality of judgement and guarding against a missionary attitude of paternalism, anxiety or guilt. However while worship precedes mission, both are essential since one without the other makes worship fake or mission deceptive. ‘As a healthy organism breathes in and breathes out, so the church goes out in mission and returns for community worship.’[[233]](#footnote-233) When we worship we remember who God is and this renews our covenant relationship with him and each other[[234]](#footnote-234) plus empowers us for outreach.[[235]](#footnote-235)

Although worship is wider than Sunday church, John Dickson claims that corporate praise can be a powerful means of gospel proclamation. Drawing evidence from the Psalm singing of ancient Israel to the synagogue services of Jesus’ day, he notes how praise had a missionary function.[[236]](#footnote-236) Paas notes the potential of church worship to show unchurched folks what faith is all about, especially since it is one of the few places where Christian language is used freely.[[237]](#footnote-237) This does not require a ‘seeker-sensitive’ approach or fancy technology but rather the practice of authentic, enthusiastic worship and a commitment from church members to have confidence in the significance of corporate worship and invite unbelieving friends along.[[238]](#footnote-238) Public worship as mission is receiving fresh attention from a relatively new branch of missiology called ‘ethnodoxology’: the ‘interdisciplinary study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions.’[[239]](#footnote-239) This development is exciting not only because it places worship at the forefront of mission activity but because it provides opportunities for using indigenous arts to express faith, something that was perhaps frowned upon in earlier decades.[[240]](#footnote-240) However this initiative requires intentional focus on empowering grassroots, local composition within a biblically sound paradigm to avoid becoming simply a new-fangled mission fad for artsy enthusiasts.

Another aspect of our priestly function with regards to worship is the way believers exercise their role to represent others. This is something often overlooked in an emphasis on the need for individual conversion. While the necessity of a personal faith commitment remains, ‘Christians worship God in the name of God’s world that does not recognize God.’[[241]](#footnote-241) This ministry of worshipping on behalf of unsaved family or communities heightens the importance of corporate worship and also grants a strong and positive identity to small fellowships in hostile or indifferent environments, switching the focus from the survival of the church to ‘a longing for multi-coloured and variegated worship of God and a rich witness to Christ.’[[242]](#footnote-242) A strength of this approach is the ensuing openness to diversity and desire for each group in the community to be represented in and by the local priesthood of believers. It does not rely on numbers or finances but rather the faithfulness and faith of the local congregation.

Representing humanity in worship is an important way we fulfil our priestly calling and exhibit our beauty as believers. We do not need to do this on behalf of the rest of creation because both animate and inanimate creation are already praising God (Ps. 148).[[243]](#footnote-243) Indeed, we join the whole cosmos in exalting Jesus in anticipation of the restoration of all things.[[244]](#footnote-244) Everything we do can become a way of shining God’s beauty of wholeness and holiness upon the world. Ion Bria refers to the overspill of the corporate celebration of worship into a lifestyle of service as ‘the liturgy after the liturgy’.[[245]](#footnote-245) Evdokimov echoes this idea of life as liturgy, stating every act and gesture can become a doxology, a hymn to the Lord.[[246]](#footnote-246) He promotes the idea of ‘interiorised monasticism’, advocating that the spirituality of the early monks formed a pattern of Christian holiness which can be internalised and adapted to modern times. Evaluating this approach, Michael Plekon notes ‘The world becomes a monastery, every state in life is a vocation, all areas of life are places for the exercise of the universal priesthood, each Christian is a *monachos*, the one who alone seeks only God.’[[247]](#footnote-247) This focus on spirituality and service challenges us to view the ancient monastic disciplines as spiritual beauty routines which can help develop consecrated and humble service. Thus concerns about lipstick, manicures or appearance can give way to saying kind words, giving a helping hand or doing the right thing for someone else.[[248]](#footnote-248)

Women have long proved their willingness to worship God through service. From the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with perfume (Mark 14:1-9) to Tabitha’s acts of charity for the poor (Acts 9:36), women throughout history have done ‘beautiful things’ for the Lord. This includes the ‘enormous and sacrificial contribution’ made by women to world mission,[[249]](#footnote-249) with innumerable women of ‘beautiful feet’ bringing good news (Is. 52:7) by serving in many different ways. The martyr Perpetua, abbess Hilda of Whitby, mystic Teresa of Avila, hymn writer Fanny Crosby, mobiliser Pandita Ramabai, nun Mother Teresa, evangelist Anne Graham Lotz, missionary Jackie Pullinger and Bible scholar Elizabeth Mburu are representatives of millions of beautiful Christian women who have shared Jesus with others. Today demographically speaking Christianity is a woman’s religion, with female believers proving instrumental under God in the flourishing of faith in the southern hemisphere.[[250]](#footnote-250) In contrast to a worldly notion of beauty that can portray women as decorative, passive and fragile, God appoints us to serve as priests undergirded by the limitless power of the Holy Spirit. Although this is often implemented from below through service that is humble and self-sacrificing, God is using women in transformational ways to make an eternal impact.

To summarise, God calls Christian women to be beautiful in a radically countercultural way, living lives of wholeness and holiness carrying out our divinely ordained purpose as priests. Through focusing on glorifying God above all else, we receive fulfilment and challenge as we worship and serve, inviting others to join us in exulting God’s beauty and in so doing to become beautiful too.

**Conclusion**

Beauty is central to God and his purposes for the cosmos. Yet ever since Adam and Eve succumbed to a deceptive beauty that concealed ugliness,[[251]](#footnote-251) beauty has been a battlefield where God and the devil contend for the hearts of human beings.[[252]](#footnote-252) Today many women seek the beauty of the ‘lost garden’[[253]](#footnote-253) through a pursuit of physical beauty. Although this desire can result in idolatry and self-glorification, it demonstrates the echo of eternity inside each one of us. Such yearning for physical beauty carries tremendous mission potential, as Jesus offers women the opportunity to reclaim true beauty in relationship with him. Through fulfilling their calling to be whole and holy priests by living lives of worship and service, Christian women can reclaim their beauty, participating in God’s mission to restore beauty to the world. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of beauty and ‘all the beauty in the world is either a remembrance of paradise or a prophecy of a transfigured world.’[[254]](#footnote-254) By looking back to the beauty instigated by God in creation and forward to the beauty promised in the new Jerusalem, we are inspired to give glory to our beautiful God during this age of the now-and-not-yet. While we continue to meet ugliness both within and without, as we delight God and fulfil his purposes we become increasingly beautiful, standing as a ‘proleptic reality’ of the new age to come.[[255]](#footnote-255)

The mission potential of feminine beauty highlighted by this paper is ripe for further investigation, especially in light of the influence on young women of social media and its emphasis on appearance.[[256]](#footnote-256) Research is needed to assess the attitudes and practices of women both inside and outside the church, with a view to explore ways of tapping into women’s quest for fulfilment through beauty and relating this to biblical truth. This would make a significant contribution to the current interest in theological aesthetics, offering a different approach to female beauty in contrast to seeing it as off-limits, dangerous, patriarchal or replicating contemporary culture. Perhaps this issue can be picked up and thrown into the wider academic conversation by the rising numbers of female missiologists, many of whom have no doubt experienced a yearning for physical beauty first-hand. It is hoped attempts to understand and evaluate the longing underneath this phenomenon will go beyond activities such as manicure meetings or dress-swopping to address underlying spiritual yearnings and inspire women with the challenge of accepting and spreading the gospel.

Women’s quest for physical perfection also raises questions concerning the significance of the body. This is related to sensitive issues such as disability, transgenderism and transhumanism in which the body can be viewed as ‘incomplete’ for various reasons and in need of human intervention. As evidenced in this study, a holistic and big-picture missiology[[257]](#footnote-257) can feed into such concerns, underlining the dignity and value of the physical as well as its temporal nature. Since beauty and wholeness are features of the physicality of the new creation, greater attention could be given to eschatology in mission, as was the case in New Testament times, while still taking seriously concerns of the present.

This paper is also relevant to mission among Muslim women, many of whom comply with their religion’s strict clothing rules. A biblical view of beauty transcends both the extreme modesty of Islam and the equally extreme bare-all western attitude, offering a holistic beauty which grants women respect, acceptance, freedom and responsibility.

The current obsession for physical beauty grants opportunity to invite women to bypass cultural beauty norms and enter into an eternal beauty that will not fade away. This has potential to transform many women’s lives and, given women’s effectiveness in mission from biblical times to the present, anything that is good for women is good for mission.

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2. Chine Mbubaegbu, *Am I Beautiful? Finding Freedom in the Answer* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2013), 18. I reference this popular book throughout my paper since it reflects the attitudes and practices of many women. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Annelies Knoppers, ‘Using the Body to Endorse Meanings about Gender’, in *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation*, ed. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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28. Mohler, ‘A Christian Vision of Beauty’. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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31. Thomas Aquinas, ‘Summa Theologica’, I 5.4, accessed 13 August 2021, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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35. Wis. 13:3. Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, Kindle, 1834, chap. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
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56. Augustine, ‘True Religion’, 51. 18:35. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Kidner, *Genesis*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. McKeown, *Genesis*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
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62. Augustine, ‘True Religion’, 69. 32:59. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Walton, *Genesis*, 128–30. Walton discusses different interpretations on the text’s use of plurals ‘us’ and ‘our’. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
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