

**'Attractive Grace':**

**The Role of Appearance in the Evangelical Ideology of Femininity**

**Corrie Lanelle Agnolutto**

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis, *‘Attractive Grace’: The Role of Appearance in the Evangelical Ideology of Femininity*, will offer an original contribution to research in so far as it focuses on the specific and, to date, under-researched experiences of young women in evangelical churches. It will argue that the way young women attempt to conform to the ideology of evangelical Christian femininity promotes not so much young women’s faith in the kerygma of the Gospel, but in the rewards of attaining an appearance in compliance with a specific body-aesthetic. Yet, Lisa Isherwood's theology, articulated in her recent book *The Fat Jesus* (2007) and other texts, offers hope that the evangelical Christian woman can embrace both her body and her sexuality, despite the social, cultural, and spiritual pressure on women produced by the beauty and diet industries, as exposed by Natasha Walter and Naomi Wolf in their studies of those closely-related industries. The thesis seeks, then, to explore what it means for the evangelical Christian woman to feel acceptable before God and other Christians when her body, diet, beauty, and sexuality as a whole are seen as a visual indicator of her Christian self-discipline, virtue, and faith, and how Christian evangelical feminist theology can help us address and revisit this oppressive ideology. It also must be considered how the evangelical Christian church can better support women who are struggling with a degree of low self-esteem and body dysmorphia. For these latter might, in fact, be exacerbated by evangelical missions such as Gwen Shamblin’s *Weigh Down Diet* (2002) and Christian dating sites such as *Christian Mingle*, rather than finding emotional healing and freedom through the salvific works of Christ. It is not that enhancement of female appearance should not be a source of pleasure and confidence, but rather that Christian feminist theology can be read as suggesting how an aesthetically enhanced female appearance need not be the precondition of acceptance before God, self, and other Christians.



## Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed ..... Date .....



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## Preface

I grew up in an evangelical Christian church in America, near Washington, D.C. As a teenager and a young woman, I struggled with bulimia and anorexia, and spent approximately nine years away from the Church, in great part due to feeling a lack of acceptability before God, other Christians, and myself. At the age of twenty-eight, I joined an evangelical Christian church in the United Kingdom, where I had been living for several years. As an evangelical Christian woman who has struggled with attaining the prescribed feminine ideal, and who has observed young girls and women within the Church struggling with their appearance as well, it has prompted me to revisit the evangelical ideology of femininity from an evangelical feminist perspective. I would like to preface this study with a personal experience from within an evangelical Christian church in England: I was speaking with a middle-aged woman, presumably in the age bracket of late fifties or early sixties, and she was mentioning how wonderful it was to see so many young women at a particular church conference, and she spoke about how much she enjoyed watching young women grow in their Christian faith. Then, she unforgettably remarked, “You can really tell when these girls are becoming strong in their faith, because the make-up comes off and they realize that they are just so much happier without it!” In this moment, I was standing in front of her with a full face of make-up on. Her comment struck a particular nerve, for a feeling of being judged had washed over me; not only did I feel strong in my Christian faith and my identity felt firmly rooted in who I was in Christ, but I had days where I simply *enjoyed* wearing make-up, and that day was one of them. Equally, there are many days where I also enjoy wearing little-to-no makeup. A concern was raised in my mind that day; a concern that a

woman's faith was being calculated in relation to how she looked and how much make-up she was wearing – not just by men, but by other women – *within* the Church. Although this has not been exemplary of my entire experience within the evangelical Church, and the majority of my experiences within the evangelical Church in the United Kingdom have been extremely positive and liberative, I thought it interesting that women are profoundly, and in very complex ways, implicated in the strategies of patriarchal ideologies of femininity that have become so engrained in the minds of women that they hold one another to the patriarchal standards through endless comparison, competition, scrutiny, and judgment.

If we are all seen as acceptable through the salvific works of Jesus Christ, it should not matter whether a woman wears no make-up, or full-faced make-up; the outside does not matter, should not matter, if her identity is rooted in being loved and valued for exactly how she looks because she is a creation of God, made in his image; and through the salvific works of Jesus Christ, her value is permanent and her identity secured through Him; she is acceptable before God, self, and other Christians. The problem lies with those whose identity is in their good looks, so much so that they are not happy or comfortable apart from their possession.

## Introduction

The evangelical ideology of femininity, from the early nineteenth century to the present, has been defined through an equation of female virtue and piety with a conformist bodily appearance and modesty of demeanor. Even today, the evangelical ideology of femininity sexualizes female virtue in ways that render its attainment as difficult as that of the idealised Victorian 'Angel in the House'. The ideal evangelical woman has her purity popularly defined in a variety of media, including the content of profiles on evangelical dating sites and in the exhortations of evangelical weight reduction movements, all of which present that ideal in terms of her compliance: a submissive, disciplined, slim body and pretty face.

However, following, among other studies, Rudolph Bell's analysis of the link between the attainment of spiritual virtue through ascetic self-starvation (1987), and Jo Ind's examination of the spiritually harmful effects of diet culture on young women (1993), Lisa Isherwood's *The Fat Jesus* (2007) presented a theological portrayal of the pressures on women surrounding bodies and sexuality in today's culture that offered a countercultural Christology and body theology. She suggested that women do not need to be controlled or alienated by their bodies or food intake by a 'thin Christ', but rather women should feel rested, nourished, and empowered in their skin no matter their size because, in the body of Christ, spiritual and material divisions between different sorts of bodies are at once broken and healed. She argues that a truly ecclesial and eschatological theology is one that is predicated on the communal meal whose goodness, or sweet savour, is produced, distributed and eaten in celebratory justice, including that which celebrates and values free, diverse bodies. The opinions of Evangelical theologians

and biblical scholars such as Werner Neuer, Wayne Grudem and Gordon Wenham will be used to interpret biblical texts and critique the secular ideology of femininity, although it is noted that they are very socially conservative and anti-feminist. Wayne Grudem was president of the Evangelical Theological Society, and was also president and founder of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which promotes a complementarian theology, and holds conservative views on same sex marriage and the roles of men and women within the church and home.<sup>1</sup> In the *Danvers Statement* made by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in the late 1980s, Grudem's council attempt to prevent the spread of evangelical feminism, opposes female ordination, and gender-neutral translations of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> The works of feminist theologians such as Lisa Isherwood, Elaine Storkey, Melissa Raphael, Carter Heyward, and Rosemary Reuther will also be brought into conversation. From a secular perspective, feminists such as Natasha Walter have also discussed the increasing aesthetic pressures on young women. In *Living Dolls* (2010) she echoes the feminist concerns of writers such as Naomi Wolf and Paula Black, who have also called for a reassessment of these ideals that, rather than waning, seem to be intensifying in the current visual regime. In other words, secular and religious feminist criticism of the sexualisation and aestheticization of female embodiment can be brought together to provide the basis for a feminist theology of embodiment in which the politics of the size and shape of women is addressed by making it salvifically irrelevant.

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<sup>1</sup> "Wayne Grudem," *Phoenix Seminary*, accessed October 27, 2015, <http://www.ps.edu/about/faculty-staff/faculty/wayne-a-grudem/>

<sup>2</sup> "The Danvers Statement," *International Church Council Project*, accessed October 28, 2015, [http://www.churchcouncil.org/iccp\\_org/Documents\\_ICCP/English/17\\_Male\\_Female\\_Distinctives\\_A&D.pdf](http://www.churchcouncil.org/iccp_org/Documents_ICCP/English/17_Male_Female_Distinctives_A&D.pdf).

I would consider myself to have a liberal evangelical perspective with strong sympathies with evangelical feminism as presented by Lisa Isherwood and Elaine Storkey. I am approaching this thesis from my personal belief that women should be allowed to speak, pastorally counsel, and prophesy within the church - but as women, not as honorary men. There are many evangelical feminist bodies that advocate egalitarianism and equality for women within the Church, particularly the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus, which was founded in 1973, and today is known as the organization *Christian Feminism Today*.<sup>3</sup> They encourage women to use their gifts (i.e. teaching, speaking, prophesying) within the Christian vocation, and promote mutuality within the Christian community. They also are a resource of educational material for Christian feminists who want to grow in their Christian faith and their understanding of Christian feminism.<sup>4</sup>

Although this thesis has an empirical origin in my professional work within an evangelical church in England, and personal experience in evangelical churches in the United States and England, the thesis will be comprised of literary research that correlates a Christian feminist reading of popular evangelical texts and websites on the ideal young Christian woman with the critical insights of both body theology and feminist criticism of the diet and beauty industry. Since the late 1970s, Christian feminist theology has drawn upon the findings and insights of secular feminist criticism to present a liberative critique that is as much sociologically as theologically informed. The present thesis stands in that methodological tradition. There will be a focus on the ways that today's diet and beauty industries, as mediated in diet and dating

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<sup>3</sup> "Our Origin," *Christian Feminism Today*, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.eewc.com/about/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Mission and Purpose," *Christian Feminism Today*, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.eewc.com/about/>.

websites, shape (or are shaping) young women's values and consciousness in the Anglophone evangelical churches, between the ages of 20-30. While young girls' body image can begin to consolidate from around the age of five years old, the interest of this thesis lies in young, single, post-pubescent evangelical Christian women, before they become married women and the pressures on achieving an acceptable appearance either change or diminish. Research-ethical considerations do not apply as this is a literary study and case studies will not be presented. This research will be contextualized by sociological attention to research into both the problematics of contemporary young women's body-image and historical attention to how today's ideology of femininity compares to that instantiated in the roles and expectations of women in the nineteenth-century evangelical church. Secular feminist historiographical and sociological perspectives on the diet and beauty industry will be brought into fruitful conversation with the feminist theological literature. A central element of that literature is feminist biblical hermeneutics, as typified by the reading practices of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Her work, and that of others, will be used to interpret the scriptural (especially Pauline) ideology of femininity and to ask not only how women might be seen through the eyes of Christ, but also how biblical texts are relevant to contemporary women seeking to understand what it means to be made in the image of God. All biblical quotes within this thesis are from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

The feminist biblical hermeneutic deployed will be a body of theory that allows the researcher to approach biblical texts using gender as a category of analysis in research; it approaches biblical texts from a feminist perspective, in the interest of women and with a stance for



desiring movement or change for contemporary women.<sup>5</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza discusses the importance of feminist biblical hermeneutics on the secular world in her book *Wisdom Ways*:<sup>6</sup>

Since the Bible is one of the main resources for traditional spirituality it is important to explore different understandings of spirituality and to inquire into the links between a critical feminist spirituality and the global feminist struggles for liberation and well-being. However, the Bible cannot simply be taken as a feminist source or resource insofar as it has been indicted by feminists for inculcating patriarchal, or better *kyriarchal* (i.e. lord, slave-master, father, elite male domination) values and visions. Yet, whether as a source of well-being or of dependence on authority, the Bible is still central in many wo/men's lives. Its visions of justice and love still inspire many wo/men in their struggles for dignity and well-being. If the spiritual challenge for all of us is today to recuperate and regain the capacity for becoming outraged about injustice and for caring about the well-being of every wo/man on the globe, then feminists cannot afford to jettison the Bible and to disregard its power in wo/men's lives<sup>7</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza stresses the important relationship between secular feminism and feminist biblical hermeneutics. For secular feminists, the Bible is a body of text that, if it is to promote the well-being for women, must continue to be read in order to understand how it still contributes today to history, literature and law.<sup>8</sup> For feminist theologians, it is important to approach biblical texts not only as Scripture – the sacred word of God<sup>9</sup>, but also with consideration of the secular feminist movement, so that biblical texts can be approached with the needs of the contemporary woman and the significance these texts can hold for her.

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<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Corrie Agnolutto, *Approaches to Research: Engaging The Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic Theory of Interpretation Analytically in the Research of the Evangelical Ideology of Femininity* (MR401, University of Gloucestershire, 2014), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Randolph W. Tate, *Interpreting the Bible; a Handbook of Terms and Methods* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), p. 330.

Feminist biblical hermeneutics forms a body of theory through which I can approach this thesis' research questions and objectives. This body of work will help me approach the continuities and shifts in evangelical ideologies of femininity as well as articulate a correlation between the contemporary evangelical Christian woman's faith and her body and what it truly means for her to feel acceptable before God, self, and other Christians when an enhanced or disciplined appearance is often seen as a precondition of her moral and existential acceptability and an indicator of her virtue.<sup>10</sup>

### **A Feminist Critique of the Contemporary Beauty Industry**

When considering how to break the idol that is a patriarchal ideal of the feminine, it is questioned whether that idol quite literally takes the form and quality of a doll. The beauty industry has seemingly done everything within its power to instill this ideal into secular society, though the application of cosmetics, skin care, hair extensions and hair care, plastic surgery, and liposuction; only to be crowned with a 'photoshopped,' air-brushed finish by the secular media. In assessing the success and influence of the contemporary beauty industry, its strength, as Susie Orbach states, is in the expectation that to be loveable and successful, "women must be petite, demure, giving, passive, receptive in the home and, above all, attractive. Women are discouraged from being active, assertive, competitive, large and, above all, unattractive. To be unattractive is not to be a woman."<sup>11</sup> The beauty industry is an orchestrated arena of competition in contemporary society; the patriarchy moderating its influence so that the

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<sup>10</sup> Agnolutto, *Approaches to Research*, p. 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue I: The Anti-Diet Guide for Women, and Fat is a Feminist Issue II* (London: Arrow Books, 1998), p. 128.

aspiration of women is not in competition with men for financial gain and high-positioned careers, but rather in competition with one another for this ideal of physical perfection.<sup>12</sup>

In her recent feminist critique of the beauty industry, *Living Dolls*, Natasha Walter opens with a criticism of the Barbie doll, and how this doll was rejected from the start by feminists due so to its representation of an ideal of womanhood to young girls; a slim - disproportionately so - waist, perky breasts, pretty face and bright blonde hair. Instead of progressing away from such an unattainable doll-like aesthetic, today we have Bratz dolls, which present an even more skimpily dressed and sexualized ideal to young girls.<sup>13</sup>

When you wander into a toy shop and find this new, altogether more slutty and sultry ideal pouting up at you from a thousand figurines, you realize that there has been a genuine change in the culture aimed at young girls. While girls have always been encouraged to see self-decoration as a central part of their lives, they are also exposed to a deluge of messages, even at an early age, about the importance of becoming sexually attractive. These dolls are just a fragment of a much wider culture in which young women are encouraged to see their sexual allure as their primary passport to success.<sup>14</sup>

This created ideal of a woman, the living doll, has begun, itself, to create women out of young girls, and it functions as a source of professional and social inspiration that young women compete to become, spending most of their available money to do so.

Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, exemplifies a young woman who is influenced by the secular

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<sup>12</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago Press, 2010), p. 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

beauty industry and media: “They give me a weird mixture of anticipation and dread, a sort of stirred-up euphoria. Yes! Wow! I can be better starting from right this minute! Look at her! Look at her! But right afterward, I feel like throwing out all my clothes and everything in my refrigerator and telling me boyfriend never to call me again and blowtorching my whole life. I’m ashamed to admit that I read them every month.”<sup>15</sup> Through websites, advertisements, television, social media, and magazines, there are beauty campaigns promoting this acceptability through the conformity of self-adornment, self-discipline, and body-enhancement. This infiltration of imagery of the ideal, which promotes the aesthetic enhancement of female appearance and a slim body is discussed by Jo Ind, in *Fat is a Spiritual Issue*, who refers to this ideal woman as ‘Media Woman.’

Media Woman was right - she drove the right car, wore the right perfume, seduced the right men. She had status. She was the ideal woman. She was the stereotype of sexuality, the epitome of good looks. Her body was juxtaposed with the signs of success. No wonder I wanted to look like her. Were there many women who didn’t? No. Wanting to look like Media Woman was a common complaint. It was so common that there were magazines devoted solely to suggesting unworkable methods of losing weight<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, these women do not reject this ideology of the beautiful, slim woman; however much it oppresses them, it seems that many desire to attain it. On the contrary, it is noted that a sense of guilt is exhibited as a result of the indulgence in reading beauty magazines, and aspiring to attain the feminine ideology presented. Raphael suggests that women who feel a

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<sup>15</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Jo Ind, *Fat is a Spiritual Issue* (London: Mowbray, 1993), p. 62.

hatred towards their own bodies lose self-respect and their relations to other women are ‘filtered through envy;’<sup>17</sup> they become estranged from themselves, and to those around them: “When a woman is reduced to a shape, she and the women around her turn into outlines bigger or smaller than herself.”<sup>18</sup>

Under a condition of ‘divide and rule’ it is, however, important to note that it is not the ideals which women envy that are hated, but rather that hate is projected on themselves, as the ideal woman is idolized. Through the enhancement of cosmetic surgery and even the technological enhancement of Photoshop and airbrushing photos, women have strived to become the young, ‘doll-like’ ideal so impressed upon them in contemporary society. However, Raphael notes that, “one of the theological problems of surgically or technologically retouched faces is that they standardize rather than particularize the face of one who is loved, and whose creation in the divine image makes possible the historical particularity of love.”<sup>19</sup> The beauty industry also targets middle-aged women; as women grow older and their grasp on the ‘doll-like’ ideal begins to wane, they are targets for cosmetic surgery and age-defying products; even though the beauty industry has devalued their femininity from youth, there is an understanding that women will do anything to hold onto their youth and to ‘fix’ themselves:

“Lacking the sacral, ritual legitimation of the passage of the female body through time, many Western women try to sacralize their embodiment by fixing themselves in time. The apparent stasis of permanent youth is, however, a kind of parody of the scared which, like a relic on velvet and preserved under glass, does not rot. Women who

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<sup>17</sup> Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Melissa Raphael, “Idolatry and Fixation: Modern Jewish Thought and the Criticism of Cosmetically and Technologically Perfected Female Faces in Contemporary Popular Culture,” in *International Journal of Public Theology*, 7 (2013), p. 152-153. See also: Melissa Raphael, “A Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion,” in *Sophia* 53 (2014), p. 241-259.

profoundly fear the effects of time on their bodies fear being feared as women who have lost the will and energy to withstand their own profanity or naturalness.

Patriarchal concepts of female embodiment are notorious for their casting women as negative magical space bounded by flesh. Certainly patriarchy can idealize the young, married, pregnant female body that holds an even younger body within itself. But when the patriarchal female 'hold-all' loosens and softens she loses her aesthetic value and becomes an 'old bag' of mere skin.<sup>20</sup>

This social construction of the female self, the ideal woman, is beautiful and young, therefore signifiers of aging on a body are indicative of failure – failure to maintain the ideal. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf discusses how women are taught to dismiss the beauty, sex, and diet advice given to them by their mothers since their mothers are aging, and subconsciously, this aging is seen as a sign of failure.<sup>21</sup> They failed at maintaining this prescribed disciplined body and pretty face. Wolf also critiques the pressure on women from men to conform to this ideal, which effectively ensures they place pressure on their own selves to maintain the prescribed ideology, and she refers to a quote by critic John Berger: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to themselves.’ Critic John Berger’s well-known quote has been true throughout history of Western culture, and it is more true now than ever.”<sup>22</sup> Women do not only fear judgment from men, but the pressure to attain this disciplined body and pretty face has caused women to become alienated from and judgmental towards their own selves.

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<sup>20</sup> Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, p. 81-82.

<sup>21</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

## Eating Disorders and Body Dysmorphia as a Cultural and Spiritual Issue

The pressures surrounding this prescribed ideal feminine has, too, come with consequences. Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, and body dysmorphia, have received increasing attention since the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Anorexia and bulimia are the result of self-control and self-discipline taken to the extreme; “Anorexia and bulimia are unknown outside the affluent world. They affect young women mainly, especially in college. Clinical diagnosis is infrequent, but in milder forms these disorders affect substantial numbers. Serious depression rose strongly in the 1970s and 1980s, affecting young women (25-35) at almost twice the rate as young men.”<sup>24</sup> In *Therapy for Eating Disorders: Theory, Research & Practice*, Sara Gilbert describes these mental health diseases as prevalent in and particular to modern society, due to the idolization of the slim, disciplined body and its correlation to health, and the shame and putative ill-health associated with being over-weight. She asserts that it is an attitude created by Western culture.<sup>25</sup> Naomi Wolf refers to this western attitude as a cult; the internalized battle with food associated with eating disorders is a ‘one-woman hunger camp,’ which one tenth of young women, particularly university students, in the United States struggle with.<sup>26</sup> In her book *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, Orbach notes that, “women come in all shapes and sizes...but the extraordinary variety that is woman’s body is systematically ignored in our culture. The richness of our different shapes is reduced to the overriding images of slimness. Advertisements for

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<sup>23</sup> Offer, “Epidemics,” p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sara Gilbert, *Therapy for Eating Disorders: Theory, Research & Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2014), p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 181.

women's clothes feature pre-pubescent girls (especially in swimsuits), models with anorexic bodies display clothes designed to make women into objects, and shop mannequins are literally shaved down each year to present the newest fashions on figures that correspond to fewer and fewer bodies."<sup>27</sup> Not only is slimness worshipped and promoted in the secular Western culture, but slimness has also become an idol in today's evangelical community. Just as the nineteenth-century 'Angel in the House' was an ethereal, angelic woman, the contemporary evangelical ideal of femininity is also an idol whose power resides in its beauty as a thing not a spiritual agent.

In the 2000 article *The Weigh and the Truth*, university counsellors were asked to share their thoughts on *Weigh Down*, an evangelical weight-loss programme which will be discussed further in chapter two of this thesis. The following response was given by Wheaton University, a Christian university in mid-west America: "For young women who tend to be perfectionistic and concerned about having the perfect body," said Don Ferrell, the director of the Wheaton College Counselling Center, "being fat is one of the most terrible things in the whole world. To have a lot of young, thin, perfectionist women going into a programme to lose weight is contrary to what they really need. Women can make use of *Weigh Down* in a very unhealthy way, like an alcoholic who reads that drinking a glass of wine every day will be good for him and uses that information to keep drinking."<sup>28</sup> Wheaton College denied female students' request to open a *Weigh Down* workshop on campus, in the fear that the weight loss programme could

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<sup>27</sup> Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, p. 167.

<sup>28</sup> Lauren F. Winner, "The Weigh and the Truth" in *Christianity Today* 44, no. 10 (September 2000), p. 52



exacerbate eating disorders such as anorexia.<sup>29</sup> Although some diet and weight-loss programmes can be beneficial for the promotion of eating in moderation and reducing fear of food, for women struggling with low self-esteem or a distorted sense of body-image, the focus on food becomes obsessive and controlling. Gilbert asserts that those at risk for developing eating disorders are already struggling with low self-esteem and larger issues surrounding control.<sup>30</sup> Orbach's claim that "dieting turns 'normal eaters' into people who are afraid of food"<sup>31</sup>, is particularly relevant to those with a self-hatred and fear of their own bodies which compels them to resort to a form of extreme self-starvation encouraged by patriarchal ideology.<sup>32</sup> As the woman's body disappears, it makes a normative statement about the required invisibility of women in a patriarchal society.<sup>33</sup> In *Womanhood*, Kim Chernin discusses the dilemma surrounding this idolization of slimness; "This condition has a peculiar fascination for all of us who diet chronically. And no wonder. For these girls [who struggle with anorexia], in their very excess, are living out the logical extension of our shared obsession. Consequently, it is revealing that anorexia is actually an illness that can be fatal."<sup>34</sup> The woman who achieves ultra-slimness is applauded for her attainment of the contemporary ideology. For this reason, the anorexic girl has become a 'cultural heroine' – she is seen as one who in total control of her hunger and her will to eat, and effectively, in control of her whole body.<sup>35</sup> Lisa Isherwood discusses this desire to be in control in *The Fat Jesus*: "Modern day anorexics, we are told, are looking for control in a world they believe does not give them any. Indeed, so sure are they that

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> Gilbert, *Therapy for Eating Disorders*, p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue Issue I: The Anti-Diet Guide for Women, and Fat is a Feminist Issue II* (London: Arrow Books, 1998), p. 170.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> Kim Chernin, *Womansize: The Tyranny of Slenderness* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1983), p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 46-47.

they have no control that their desire for it does not extend beyond the very edges of their skin; their bodies they can control and so they do. In this way they believe they get a unique identity and one that shows they are in control.”<sup>36</sup> There are even websites which promote a pseudo-religious ‘ten commandments for anorexics’, encouraging women to eat as little as possible, lose as much weight as possible, and not eat anything without punishing themselves or feeling shame and guilt afterwards.<sup>37</sup> It is with hope that, through the revisiting of the evangelical ideology through feminist theology, women can begin to be liberated from the confines of their bodies and also be at peace within them, no matter their size.

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<sup>36</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Feminist Explorations in Boundaries and Transgressions* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2007), p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Isherwood, “Will You Slim for Him or Bake Cakes for the Queen of Heaven?” in *Controversies of Body Theology*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London, SCM Press, 2008), p. 176.

## Chapter 1

### The Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Ideology of Femininity

#### A Brief History of the British Evangelical Church

The origins of the modern Evangelical church lie in the eighteenth-century, a Protestant movement founded by revivalists, amongst them brothers Charles and John Wesley, and George Whitefield.<sup>38</sup> George Whitefield began preaching in Britain in 1736, with the intention of eventually taking his preaching abroad to America. Whitefield spent that year preaching in London and the surrounding counties, thus ushering in the beginnings of the Evangelical Church:<sup>39</sup> “It was a novelty to hear such eloquent extempore preaching of an evangelical gospel by a man with most uncommon gifts of voice and manner. From the outset the effect was sensational. He was heard in wonder, and his fame spread with astonishing rapidity.”<sup>40</sup> In 1738, Charles and John Wesley, both Anglicans, shifted towards an Evangelical style, and began preaching the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup> “The word ‘evangelical’ has carried several different senses throughout history, but almost all are related to its etymological meaning of ‘good news’. The English word ‘evangelical’ comes from a transliteration of the Greek noun *euangelion*, which was regularly employed by authors of the Christian Scriptures to signify glad tidings – the good news, the gospel, of Jesus who appeared on earth as the Son of

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<sup>38</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004), p. 12-13.

<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1988), p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

God to accomplish God's plan of salvation for needy humans."<sup>42</sup> This movement of bringing 'good news' to a previously theologically and spiritually complacent Church, was propelled by the preaching of revivalists such as Whitefield and the Wesley brothers. Whitefield called men and women to convert and receive salvation through Jesus Christ, and live a Godly lifestyle.<sup>43</sup> "The concentration on conversion and holy living that marked Whitefield's activity, as well as his flexibility with respect to church forms and inherited religious traditions, have always been important characteristics of evangelical movements."<sup>44</sup> When Whitefield returned from America, he joined the Wesley brothers in preaching across the whole of Britain, in fields, markets, and pulpits alike – wherever people would stop and listen - on their crusade to spread Evangelicalism.<sup>45</sup> "Masses assembled to hear them. A countless number responded and joined themselves together in special societies. Faced with evangelistic and pastoral responsibilities which could not be realized by the unaided efforts of three men, lay preachers and leaders were appointed."<sup>46</sup> As the early Evangelical church strengthened in numbers, a sense of revival and renewal for the Church of England amongst those who converted was reinforced by the formation of societies that served as worship services and communities, thus bringing about the birth of the Evangelical movement.<sup>47</sup>

From its infancy, the Evangelical church emphasized living a Godly lifestyle: "Evangelicals' stress on individual moral discipline and self-control had implications for social regulation and order.

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<sup>42</sup> Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Their emphasis on duty and conscience ensured that they treated political issues less according to the measure of social utility than of moral propriety and scriptural injunction.”<sup>48</sup> There grew a responsibility in which the evangelical church felt obligated to promote a society that was ethical and moral, through a Protestant-based political agenda. By the early nineteenth century, in both America and Britain, most male evangelicals had involved themselves in politics, with a crusade to eliminate sin through a society propelled by a form of moral well-being that conformed to the gospel of Christ.<sup>49</sup> Through this aspiration, social organizations within the church were created in order to reform society and reach those who were on the ‘outskirts’ of society. Evangelicals created societies and charities to fund and assist any in need; this included orphans, the mentally and physically ill, the disabled, the uneducated, prostitutes, prisoners, the elderly, and others individuals and communities who were in need.<sup>50</sup> The majority of these charities and societies were led by women; prohibited from speaking out or preaching in the church, women were gradually permitted to serve in social work over the course of the century.<sup>51</sup> They were women who had little theological or practical training but usually had the domestic experience of managing large Victorian households.<sup>52</sup> The mission for women was set forth in part due to the expectation that they already held a submissive, serving role, where domestic skills, moral virtues, and pieties could then be established in the home, church, and society as a whole. In this way the redemption of humanity could, in part at least, be brought about by women.

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Carwardine, “Evangelicals, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War: A Transatlantic Perspective” in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond 1700-1990*, edited by Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 201.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199-202.

<sup>50</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, p. 195.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Nineteenth Century Woman and Christian Ideologies of Subordination

By mid-nineteenth century, the Evangelical Church in America and Britain was comprised largely of women and children.<sup>53</sup> In *The Women's Movement in the Church of England, 1850-1930*, Brian Heeney notes that the number of women in church congregations in the nineteenth century were nearly double the population of evangelical men, yet it was a church body which was rooted in male headship.<sup>54</sup> "The institution was widely seen, and many of its leaders confirmed this view, as a guardian of basic patriarchal doctrine rooted in the Pentateuch and enshrined in the Pauline epistles. It was easy for Christians, speaking and preaching to largely uncritical or traditionalist congregations, to define as God's law both woman's subordination to man and the propriety of her prime concern with home and family."<sup>55</sup> As women of the nineteenth century evangelical Christian church were taught to be subordinate, submissive, quiet and pious companionable servants, they were also expected to rescue and reform those, particularly women, who were not. As discussed, evangelicals had a clear agenda for social reform and 'purification'. The 'purification' into this pious and submissive ideology of femininity was reinforced through a heavy focus on the long-established doctrine of female subordination, which most women accepted without question as divinely ordained, and which Protestantism had done so much to domesticate and maternalize (particularly through the destruction of Marian devotion).

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>54</sup> Brian Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

A doctrine, which is a belief that is held to be true by a church, can be written or spoken, and holding the belief in a doctrine is considered a standard for all members of the particular church or religious community that holds the doctrine to be true.<sup>56</sup> Doctrines are derived from and supported by biblical texts, and this particular doctrine of subordination was imposed on women of the nineteenth-century evangelical church in a way which they felt obliged to strive for in order to hold membership in the church.<sup>57</sup> “Among church people, the doctrine of submission assumed a theological, indeed a biblical form, for it had been cast in this form by leaders who relentlessly hammered home the ‘obvious’ lesson of Genesis and St. Paul. The creation story in Genesis, according to which woman was created from man, after man, and for man’s advantage, together with the regrettable incidents that follow, were the biblical foundations of subordination. Thus one finds the ‘divine’ law that ‘man should be head of woman’ clearly based on Genesis 3:16.”<sup>58</sup> Paul’s later teaching on women in 1 Corinthians was believed to have stemmed from this Hebrew Bible foundation of submission.<sup>59</sup> “To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). Gordon J. Wenham, an Evangelical and author of *World Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, interprets the sentence that God places on woman as not a curse but rather a disruption of the task that he gave her to be the helper of man and bear his children.<sup>60</sup> Wenham, although stating that it is difficult to understand the author’s original intention regarding the woman’s desire to her

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<sup>56</sup> Randolph W. Tate, *Interpreting the Bible; A Handbook of Terms and Methods* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> Agnolutto, *Approaches to Research*, p. 708.

<sup>58</sup> Heeney, *The Women’s Movement*, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *World Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), p. 81.

husband and her husband's rule over her, writes that "Evidently he does not regard female subordination to be a judgment on her sin. In that woman was made from man to be his helper and is twice named by man, indicates his authority over her. It is therefore usually argued that 'rule' here represents harsh exploitive subjugation, which so often characterizes women's lot in all sorts of societies. Women often allow themselves to be exploited in this way because of their urge toward their husband: their sexual appetite may sometimes make them submit to quite unreasonable male demands. Once again, woman's life is blighted at the most profound level."<sup>61</sup> Wenham then goes on to discuss feminist theologian Susan Foh's interpretation of Genesis 3:16 – which Wenham believes to be incorrect due to a mistranslation of the word 'urge' or 'desire' in the original text. However, Foh interprets the verse to mean that a woman does not necessarily desire to meet all of her husband's demands sexually, but rather craves for independence from man and wants to rule over him, yet she is unable to attain such a position of authority over man - instead man will always rule over her.<sup>62</sup> Wenham's interpretation of Genesis 3:16 very differently concludes that women must submit to their husbands, which is not far from their intended created role, namely, to be man's helper and child-bearer and for him to have authority over her. Although this ruling may be harsh or unreasonable at times, where a woman wants to be loved and cherished at the most profound sexual level, she will be dominated.<sup>63</sup> While Foh offers the interpretation that women desire independence from, and authority over, man - yet will not be able to achieve either, both Wenham and Foh interpret Genesis 3:16 as the foundation of the long-standing plight of women; that they were created under the authority of man and continue to be sexually and socially dominated. The place of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Susan T. Foh, "What is the Woman's Desire?", in *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974/75), p. 376-83.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 81-82.



woman is under man's authority, in submission to him. Genesis founded the doctrine of female subordination within the church; the obedience of women submitting themselves to men was, crucially equated to, or seen as an index to, their level of faith.

If one were to argue that the subordination of women to men was a sin done away with through Christ's death and resurrection, the doctrine of subordination is still seemingly reaffirmed in Paul's writings to the Corinthians in the Christian Scriptures.<sup>64</sup> Women, he writes, "should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35). There has been much dispute over the hermeneutical and exegetical interpretation of the Pauline Scriptures regarding the silencing of women. Through Robert Louis Wilken's compilation of early Christian commentary on the texts of 1 Corinthians, we can understand how Paul's writing was interpreted by first millennial Bible scholars and Christian theologians such as: Theodoret of Greece, Origen Adimantius of Egypt, and St. John Chrysostom of Greece. Origen's commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 argued that it is shameful for women to speak out in a church publicly. It is not that she is incapable of prophesying or teaching, but that she should not do so in public churches. Even if she is capable of speaking 'holy words', Origen comments that women should only do so with her husband, father, or brothers at home. "I will demonstrate this same point from another text. 'The older women should be reverent in behavior. They are to be teachers of what is good, and so train the young women' (Titus 2:3).

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<sup>64</sup> Heeney, *The Women's Movement*, p. 8.

They are not to have general license to teach. Women are to be teachers of what is good, but not so that men sit and listen to them, as if there were a lack of men capable of presenting the word of God.”<sup>65</sup> Early Christian commentary and interpretation of the Pauline letters, such as Origen’s, set the expectation and role of women within the Church, and contributed to the formation of the doctrine of subordination of women and the privatization of her faith in the home and in the quality of her demeanor as wife and daughter.

However, by the nineteenth century, the doctrine of subordination also shamed women who stepped out of line and literally equated their obedience with their relationship to God and as a receipt of grace.<sup>66</sup> Whereas these early Christian commentaries do not interpret Paul as denying women all spiritual gifts of teaching and prophecy, they do tend to interpret Paul’s instruction as indicating that women are capable of teaching, and should teach and prophesy, but only to the right audience: other women, and at home. Their reasoning is that the church should have a male headship, and as long as there are men capable of leading and speaking within the public church, women should not.

Theologian Antionette Wire offers a feminist interpretation in her book entitled *1 Corinthians*. Wire discusses 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, which she refers to as a ‘stranglehold move’<sup>67</sup>, and also offers her own research into the placement in Scripture of Paul’s address to women of the Corinthian church:

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<sup>65</sup> Judith L. Kovacs, trans., *1 Corinthians: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 237-238.

<sup>66</sup> Heeney, *The Women’s Movement*, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Antionette Wire, “1 Corinthians” in *Searching the Scriptures Volume 2: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), p. 188.

The two or three sentences silencing women have been found to be so offensive in our time that many scholars argue that they are not written by Paul or are peripheral to his argument (14:34-35 or 36). In the Old Latin and major Greek-Latin bilingual manuscripts, 1 Cor. 14:34-35 is found at the end of the chapter, giving rise in recent years to the theory that it was added by early copyists. But no manuscript survives without the gloss, and the lines appear in no third place, which makes a simple displacement of the passage far more likely. This is supported by the fact that these Latin and Greek-Latin manuscripts, which have these verses after chapter 14, share many readings that are unlike the earliest Greek papyri and codices, including three readings which would change the translation of these two verses alone, aside from the new location. Therefore the only solid hypothesis is that an innovative copyist at the root of the Latin-related tradition omitted these verses, whether by accident or on purpose to defend women prophets, and she/he or a corrector put them back hurriedly in the wrong place.<sup>68</sup>

Wire explains that those scholars who conclude that a copyist moved these verses to the end of 1 Corinthians argue that if this were so, then Paul could have either not written these verses, or he did not mean what they say because they do not fit into his argument in the chapter or letter as a whole, and they also did not fit into Paul's worship rules. Wire argues that these scholars neglect the possibility that Paul's argument was developed as he wrote the letter to the Corinthians, continuing to increase restrictions on women's participation in worship until he feels he can finally demand silence.<sup>69</sup> Despite the discrepancies today over the misplaced location of these texts, Wire highlights that Paul had already mentioned the role of women in prayer and prophecy in 1 Corinthians 11, and in this context, his writings on the silence of women is merely controversial rather than out of place. Therefore, she concludes that the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 186-187.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

location of his writing on the silencing of women in the 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, serves to clarify its importance in the matter of spiritual instruction rather than confuse it.<sup>70</sup> “Paul’s stranglehold move on these women’s voices gives us the measure of their influence in the Corinthian church. In the first place, the culminating position of his instruction on women shows how significant they are among the spiritual.”<sup>71</sup> Wire argues that Paul would not be silencing the women if they did not already have a voice in the Corinthian church, which she said must indicate that they not only had an intelligent presence, but that Paul felt in some way that his mission could be threatened by it; perhaps because the women “act in public statements rather than in indirect inquiries.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, Paul looked to the men in the Corinthian church to support his instruction in 1 Corinthians 14:35, by speaking to their women about such spiritual things at home, in order to prevent women from speaking out in church. Wire concludes however, that instead of silencing these women further, Paul actually succeeded in identifying these women as prophets, and through his forbidding them to speak out he thereby qualified them in the Spirit to prophesy.<sup>73</sup> “2 Corinthians is evidence that the Spirit in the Corinthian church did not verify the cutting off of these voices as the Lord’s command but threw Paul’s own spiritual credentials into question and called forth from him a different kind of self-defense.”<sup>74</sup>

Although Wire’s thesis suggests that the original intention of 1 Corinthians 14:35 is unclear, it was read conservatively enough to shape the treatment of women in the nineteenth-century church, and the expectations placed upon them. Mirroring Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian church, the male headship of the nineteenth-century Evangelical church made sure to silence

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 188.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

the voices of the women who so heavily populated the Evangelical churches. Indeed, due to this increasing feminization of the Victorian Church, Heeney describes it as a period where men in the Church were on the defensive,<sup>75</sup> therefore the doctrine of female subordination was reinforced through the teachings, sermons, hymns, and instructions of the Church in the Victorian era, which served to set boundaries and clear instruction on the women's role and influence in her church and her home. Even nineteenth-century fictional writing, poetry, advice manuals and art influenced the Victorian ideology of femininity. For example, "nineteenth-century Christian advice manuals and conduct-books are "extremely ambivalent" regarding the mothering of sons. Mothers necessarily have to assume their "influence" on sons "because a part of the 'angel's' identity resides in her moral effect on the male population," but these manuals also stress that this influence must not be too profound, otherwise it threatens the development of 'normal' masculinity."<sup>76</sup> The Victorian woman was not to do anything to interfere with the development or headship of the patriarchal male, and the majority of women accepted their place in the church and home, believing that their submission of self to men was demanded by their faith.<sup>77</sup> Watson further illustrates women's expected role of submission to men through the medium of nineteenth century poetry:

The parameters of women's hymn-writing seem fairly generally established in these patterns of sensitivity to suffering and anxiety for the well-being of little children; above all, in the acceptance of a subordinate role, in which the woman waits and is passive rather than works (which is the preserve of the man). A poem by Anna Montague, called

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<sup>75</sup> Heeney, *The Women's Movement*, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Siv Jansson, "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: Rejecting the Angel's Influence" in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, edited by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 31.

<sup>77</sup> J.R. Watson, "Quiet Angels: Some Women Hymn Writers" in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, edited by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 131.

*Women* sets it out clearly. The woman stands by the master's vineyard, longing to go in and work; as she turns to enter, she meets the 'Master' who tells her:

'Daughter/I know thy longing heart/In the toil of my laden vineyard/Is eager to bear a part.'

The master tells her that her duty is to do 'no active labour'. She is to stay in her cottage and 'sit with folded hands', so that the hymn ends by adapting Milton for the condition of women -

They also serve who patiently/ But fold their hands, and wait.<sup>78</sup>

Even in the verse of hymns sung in church was it made clear how women were expected to behave, with submission and patience; women had no place in the 'man's world' of work – she was to do as her 'Master' told her. A variety of nineteenth-century artistic, literary, and homiletical sources in the nineteenth century implied that women who broke the expectation of submission, piety and silence would in turn lose their standing: dignity, grace and beauty. They held firm in the belief that the Pauline letters in 1 Corinthians supported the doctrine of subordination, which was rooted in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>79</sup> "Bishop Wordsworth based himself on such texts [1 Corinthians 14] when he lashed out, in 1884, against those 'who flatter woman with specious words and tempt her to claim for herself an independent position and one in all respects of equality to that of Man'. Such agitations disturb her divinely-constituted relationship to man and to God, and despoil her of her true dignity and most attractive grace."<sup>80</sup> Bishop Christopher Wordsworth is well-known for his sermon entitled *Christian Womanhood*, which was based on Genesis 2, in which woman was formed out of man, and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 130-131.

<sup>79</sup> Heeney, *The Women's Movement*, p. 9-10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

therefore her existence was created for man, and she was subsequent, always second, to him.<sup>81</sup>

“He went on to develop the theme that ‘anything that disturbs the subordination weakens her authority and mars her dignity and beauty. Her true strength is in loyal submission.’”<sup>82</sup> Such sermons seemed to serve the purpose of instilling shame and guilt in those who encouraged women to be independent or outspoken, as well as instilling fear into women that they could somehow lose their beauty, dignity, and grace if they challenged the expectation of subordination and silence placed upon them – thus equating their obedience to men with this moral perfection and validating their faith through discipline, rather than through the acceptance of the grace of the salvific works of Jesus Christ.

### **The Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Ideology of Femininity: The ‘Angel in the House’**

The teaching and reinforcement of the Christian doctrine of feminine subordination in the Victorian church shaped a broader nineteenth century ideology of femininity - an ideology that is commonly symbolized in the phrase ‘Angel in the House.’ Coventry Patmore first used the phrase in his poem *The Angel in the House*. The poem is inspired by his first wife, is representative of an ideal marriage,<sup>83</sup> and characterizes the ideology of femininity through verses such as “Anne lived so truly from above/and was so gentle and so good”<sup>84</sup>, and “The lack of lovely pride, in her/who strives to please, my pleasure numbs.”<sup>85</sup> This ideal woman was a

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Frederick Page, ed., *The Poems of Coventry Patmore* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. viii.

<sup>84</sup> Coventry Patmore, “The Angel in the House” in *The Poems of Coventry Patmore*, edited by Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 73.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

being that was imagined to be 'from above', and was a humble woman, submissive and obedient in her duties, always striving to please her husband, while pleasure in her is not erotic but 'numb' or pure in character. Thus, Patmore's characterization of this hyper-idealised woman birthed the fitting phrase, 'The Angel in the House.' As Siv Jansson explains,

The ideology of the Angel in the House is part of the iconography of the nineteenth century. Coventry Patmore's phrase provided a name for the ideal, all-encompassing image of Victorian woman-hood, which combined the perfection of purity, spirituality, love, and beauty. The Angel has, however, also come to represent submission, immobility, and confinement: and, as Nina Auerbach<sup>86</sup> has pointed out, contains within its phraseology a conflicting and problematic schism between the real and the ideal<sup>87</sup>

Siv Jansson, author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: Rejecting the Angel's Influence*, refers to this ideology as a 'cult,' which was strengthened through the influence of art, advice columns and magazine articles, and fiction written in the nineteenth century, which encouraged an interest in and a striving to be 'The Angel'.<sup>88</sup> Just as Jansson discusses the reinforcement of this ideology through art and nineteenth-century media, Susan Casteras also refers to the ideology of 'The Angel in the House', dubbing her the 'Modern Madonna.'<sup>89</sup> Casteras elucidates this comparison of 'The Angel in the House' to the Madonna through her description of the painting *Prayer*

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<sup>86</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Woman & the Demon* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 69-70.

<sup>87</sup> Siv Jansson, "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: Rejecting the Angel's Influence" in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, edited by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Susan P. Casteras, "The Victorian Lady's Domestic Threat: The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent Female Adversary" in *Contemporary Art in Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, edited by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 186.



*Time*<sup>90</sup> by Charles West Cope, painted around 1860, which was a portrait of his wife and daughter:

The sitter and her daughter are portrayed in an intimate moment of evening prayer; the mother does not merely listen, she too joins in prayer with folded hands. All the details are seemingly perfectly orchestrated: from the Bible on the table to the statue of holy motherhood above, to the faithful dog at the lady's feet. As a role model, she is an iconic embodiment of the cult of Victorian womanhood and perfect Christianity, and her total absorption in a prayerful attitude emphasizes her purity, innocence, and humility. She does not tend to flowers or gaze at objects: all her energies are focused upon her child and the act of prayer. This 'Angel in the House' is, in fact, almost Christ-like as she listens to the outpourings of her kneeling daughter, in whose pose is arguably a visual reminder of the fallen woman and Christ's acceptance of human repentance. The message conveyed is that this Victorian woman is watchful, attentive and angelic, mindful of her duties in a way that is didactic, if not blatantly propagandistic. In Cope's visual homily, the construction of womanhood is total, and her moral virtues are all subtly and not so subtly conveyed in a vignette of contemporary female quasi-divinity<sup>91</sup>

Just as the Madonna had been an iconographic figure of the ideal woman in the Catholic Church, the 'Angel in the House' became iconographic of the ideal woman in the nineteenth-century Protestant Church. Piety, silence and submissiveness were elevated to the epitome of femininity, sexuality and beauty: "The equating of beautiful behavior with morality underlies

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<sup>90</sup> Charles W. Cope, "Prayer Time," oil on canvas, c. 1860. (Harris Art Gallery, Preston). In "The Victorian Lady's Domestic Threat: The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent Female Adversary in Contemporary Art" by Susan P. Casteras, in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, edited by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 187.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187-188.

the superficial attractiveness of the etherealized sexuality of the Victorian Angel.”<sup>92</sup> John Angell James, a preacher in Birmingham in the mid-nineteenth-century, preached his sermon titled ‘Female Piety’ in 1852, which typified the ideology of the Victorian ‘Angel.’ He believed that women exist to sanctify man with her presence through purity, as well as redeem herself for the sin she brought upon mankind in Genesis.<sup>93</sup> This ideology of femininity placed upon women their responsibility for influencing their husbands and families toward a more holy life. Women’s purity and piety would not only earn her own salvation but would ensure the holiness and salvation of those around her as well. Her power carried no actual public, religious, or political authority but was manifest in her bodily presence as moral guardian of the home.

### **Reassessing the ‘Angel in the House’**

The late nineteenth-century was the pinnacle of the women’s movement in the Evangelical Christian church. In *The Women’s Movement in the Church of England 1850-1930*, Brian Heeney discusses the feminist reassessment of the Victorian ideology of femininity. “Early Christian feminism was a movement which rejected the doctrine of female subordination, a doctrine which, the movement’s exponents believed, had frequently trapped women into narrow roles and often enfeebled their lives. The women’s movement was against belief in women’s subordination to a male ruling class, against automatic submission to husband, father, or

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<sup>92</sup> Terry Phillips. “From Hearth to Heath”: Angelic Transformations in May Sinclair’s Major Novels” in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, edited by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 102.

<sup>93</sup> Linda Wilson, “Nonconformist Obituaries: How Stereotyped Was Their View of Women?” in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, edited by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 147.

brother. This opposition took many forms as women in different situations sought to break out of the protective and confining boxes into which the tradition of submission had placed them in home and Church.”<sup>94</sup> Preceding and propelling the movement forward were women such as Anne Brontë, author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Agnes Grey*; and Elizabeth Gaskell, author of *Ruth*. Both novels were revolutionary and controversial for the mid-nineteenth-century Church.

In Siv Jansson’s contribution to *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, she writes, “Elizabeth Gaskell will offer a further confrontation with the angelic role, by presenting, in *Ruth*, a sexually impure woman who functions impeccably as an ‘Angel in the House,’ and who also nurses, appears at death-beds, is a wonderful mother and heals the man who has wronged her, in the process contracting his illness and dying from it, thereby enacting the ultimate sacrifice.”<sup>95</sup> Gaskell presents Ruth as a woman who “is identified with images of spirituality and purity,”<sup>96</sup> and because of this, Ruth is seen as redeemed for her sexual impurity in her past.<sup>97</sup> *Ruth* was considered controversial for its time not because of its theme of redemption, but because Gaskell contended that women who were seen as socially and spiritually ‘impure’ deserved a second chance. “Gaskell’s radicalism lies, first, in her assertion of the right of ‘fallen women’ to be given another chance, and second, and more significantly, in presenting a woman who is both angelic and sinful, who is the embodiment of the perfection of

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<sup>94</sup> Heeney, *The Women’s Movement*, p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> Jansson, “The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”, p. 45.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Jansson, “The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”, p. 45.

influence while lacking the sexual purity that the image demands.”<sup>98</sup> *Ruth* was revolutionary and controversial for its time in the mid-nineteenth century because of the stigma that sexual impurity had in society, particularly for women: “Sexual wrongdoing was prominent on the catalogue of wrongdoing. Social purity, as the campaign against sexual vice was called, led to movements for the rehabilitation of prostitutes, especially in the mid-nineteenth century, and to organized demands for the closure of brothels.”<sup>99</sup> Alan Shelston wrote an introduction to *Ruth* in 1985, and discussed the criticism that Gaskell feared, as she presented *Ruth* in 1853, a time when the ‘Angel in the House’ ideology was prevalent in the Evangelical church. “Even while working on the novel she feared its publication, recording that she had lost ‘her power of judging,’ and that she could not tell ‘whether I had done it well or ill.’ On its appearance it immediately became ‘a prohibited book’ (by her husband, presumably) in her own household, and ‘not a book for young people, unless read with somebody older.’”<sup>100</sup>

Anne Brontë’s writing in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* focused on the lack of influence that women actually had, despite their striving to be the ideal Victorian woman,<sup>101</sup> and *The Tenant* is emphatic “that women’s influence is worthless, unless the target of it chooses to be influenced”<sup>102</sup> This was the redemptive message of Brontë’s writing, freeing women from the responsibility of influencing her husband’s ‘holiness’ through the Victorian ideology of femininity, for even the most ideal of women could not redeem or save one who did not wish

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> David Bebbington, “Evangelicalism in its Settings: The British and American Movements since 1940” in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, edited by Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 381-382.

<sup>100</sup> Alan Shelston, introduction to *Ruth*, by Elizabeth Gaskell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. ix.

<sup>101</sup> Jansson, “The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”, p. 33.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

to be. “Anne Brontë’s own religious beliefs centered on a liberal doctrine of eternal love and the possibility of salvation for even the most unregenerate sinner. Her novel is both a tribute to this possibility and an acknowledgement of its potential ineffectuality, particularly because of the social, moral and economic constraints surrounding the woman as saviour, which rendered her ultimately powerless to effect the redemption which was a part of her sacred duty and trust.”<sup>103</sup> Margaret Lane’s introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, gives an insight into the life of Anne Brontë and its inspiration for the novel. Brontë is described as the quietest and most devout out of herself and her two sisters, which may explain in part *why The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was first published under the pseudonym Acton Bell.<sup>104</sup> Brontë’s brother Branwell was an alcoholic; he turned to drinking due to pressures put on him by their father, Reverend Patrick Brontë, who desired Branwell to utilize his charm, creativity and intelligence through writing literature, as his three sisters did. As Branwell failed to live up to the expectations placed upon him; he sought confidence instead in drinking. When he was dismissed from his employment, Anne assisted her brother in finding a job as a tutor for the children in the home of Reverend and Mrs. Edmund Robinson, in which she was a governess. In time, Branwell was accused of having an affair with Mrs. Robinson and once again was dismissed from his position; in his despair and shame he ultimately drank himself to death.<sup>105</sup> Branwell is assumed to be the inspiration for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. “It is the story of a young girl who falls in love with and marries – not a rake and drunkard yet, but a young man of great charm and bad reputation, who makes no effort to correct his propensity to vice, and sordidly drinks himself to death in

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>104</sup> Çağla Narter, “Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: An Opposition to the Patriarchal Society of 19th Century Britain,” *Academia*, accessed September 19, 2015, <http://www.academia.edu/1224712/>

<sup>105</sup> Margaret Lane, introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and Agnes Grey*, by Anne Brontë (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1969), p. vii-viii.

the end.”<sup>106</sup> The young girl, Helen, is unable to save her husband; although she is meant to be the influence of all things pure and redemptive in his life, and strives to conform to the Angelic ideology in every way, she is unable to be his saviour, for he will not allow her to be; Brontë places the blame for his damnation entirely on him, not on Helen. “The novel is therefore radical on two levels: it demonstrates the problematic nature of the ‘Angel’ role, and also reassesses the requirements of ‘angelic-ness’ of offering an alternative definition which rests on courage, integrity and piety rather than simple submission.”<sup>107</sup> Brontë emphasizes through her writing that one’s redemption is only a choice for oneself; that women should not and cannot bear the responsibility for the redemption of her husband through her piety and submissiveness.

Siv Jansson discusses the impossible standards that the Angel in the House ideology placed on Victorian Women. The influence that women were under, she argues, is an extremely important issue.<sup>108</sup> In the late nineteenth century, thanks to the works of mid-century authors such as Gaskell and Brontë, a rejection of the silent, submissive, ‘Angel in the House’ in evangelical ideology had begun to fester. “Church feminism became evident in the 1890s, first mixed with the movement for democratic churchmanship, an effort by women to share in Church councils. It was also apparent in a reinterpretation of the ideology of domesticity and the traditional understanding of the relationship of the sexes. Church feminists sought a reasonable share in Church government, in lay leadership of public worship, and in the charter role of the Church’s professional ministry.”<sup>109</sup> Women began to step out of their silence with a

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>107</sup> Jansson, “The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”, p. 43.

<sup>108</sup> Jansson, “The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”, p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> Heaney, *The Women’s Movement*, p. 1.

desire to be heard and to have an active role in the church; this has, over the course of the twentieth century, progressed to the contemporary era, where women are prevalent in speaking, teaching, and leading movements within parts of the Evangelical church, if not the whole.

### **The Development of the Evangelical Ideology of Femininity from the Early Nineteenth Century to Today**

As the twentieth century began, a dissatisfaction amongst women regarding their role in the church began to shape their role in church missions, teaching Sunday school, and running charities. Women were no longer satisfied in their socio-political mission to reform and redeem broken women through the 'Angel in the House': "By 1930 Church feminism had achieved a measure of success, although it was far short of achieving equal status and professional opportunity for women in the Church."<sup>110</sup> In 1948, the Lambeth Committee, a body of bishops which reflected the wider opinion and vote of the Church, voted to recognize and approve the contributions that women were making in their parishes and communities, although they stated that women's 'normal' vocation still remained in the home.<sup>111</sup> In 1958, they restated their approval of women working in society "and urged fuller use of talents."<sup>112</sup> This transformation of women's role in the church transpired not only in Britain, but also in America.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> V. Nelle Bellamy, "Participation of Women in the Public Life of the Anglican Communion" in *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History*, edited by Richard L. Greaves (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 238.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

“Bible-believing Christians in Britain have followed approximately the same trajectory as American evangelicals during the era since the opening of the Second World War, and there has been much two-way interaction across the Atlantic during the period. Neither point is surprising, since the four hallmarks of the movement – the emphases on conversion, activism, Bible, and the cross – have been equally evident in the two countries. (If there have been differences, they have been matters of degree, not kind).”<sup>113</sup> Evangelicalism in Britain and America has grown in the same direction from the 1930s as they envisioned similar goals. The American evangelicals aimed ‘to penetrate their culture for Christ.’ British evangelicals’ goal was ‘the subjection of all life to the sovereignty of Christ as Lord and Saviour.’<sup>114</sup> As the Evangelical movements in Britain and America have grown in similar directions, they have continued to influence one another - particularly with the advancement of technology and the Internet. Evangelical missions in America, such as Gwen Shamblin’s *Weigh Down Diet* and Christian dating sites such as *Christian Mingle* have contributed to the shaping of the contemporary Evangelical ideology of Femininity. These missions and their influences on this contemporary ideology will be discussed in further detail in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Not all Evangelicals are pro-feminist. Many oppose feminism on scriptural and generally conservative political grounds. However, contributing to the development and transformation of the contemporary evangelical ideology of femininity has been, among others, Kenneth Hylson-Smith, whose writing is indicative of an egalitarian theology in his approach of biblical

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<sup>113</sup> Bebbington, “Evangelicalism in its Settings”, p. 381.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381-382.



texts. In *Evangelicals in the Church of England: 1734-1984*, Hylson-Smith presented the reasoning behind the advocates for evangelical women having a voice in the church in the mid-to-late twentieth century. He believes their reasoning lies with the evidence of prophetesses of the Hebrew Bible who were gifted leaders, and the creation story; "In origin man and woman were two sexes sharing the generic name Adam. Both were made in the image of God. The biblical emphasis was upon their equality and complementarity. Their relationship was marred by the fall, but Christ had swept away all social, sexual, religious and cultural barriers."<sup>115</sup>

Hylson-Smith argues that if the sacrifice of Christ on the cross has been for all of creation and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit was meant for the whole of the church body, both male and female, then the church has no right to suppress the pouring out of the Holy Spirit or the gifts of teaching and prophesy that accompany Him. The works of Jesus Christ should be redemptive of all barriers for women.<sup>116</sup> Elaine Storkey called this doctrine a 'reawakening;' "Women were no longer basically inferior. God himself had said that in Christ there was no male or female, but that all were one."<sup>117</sup> As the evangelical church went through changes in the nineteenth and twentieth century, women began to find their voice not only in the church, but also in society.

A dilemma still lies, however, not so much with the suppression of the voice of women, but with the shift in the expectations held within the contemporary popular evangelical ideology of femininity. Even today, the evangelical ideology of femininity sexualizes female virtue in ways that render its attainment as difficult as that of the idealised Victorian 'Angel in the House'.

Whereas the unachievable and unrealistic nineteenth-century evangelical ideology of femininity

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<sup>115</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, p. 330-331.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Elaine Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 138-139.

revolved around the religious sexualisation of women and its equation of female virtue and piety, so too does the contemporary evangelical ideology of femininity sexualize female virtue in ways that render it unattainable and oppressive. The ideal contemporary evangelical woman has her purity popularly defined in a variety of media, including the content of profiles on evangelical dating sites and in the exhortations of evangelical weight reduction movements, all of which present that ideal in terms of her submissive, disciplined, slim body and pretty face. In both the Victorian and the contemporary evangelical church, there is a paradigm in which young women attempt to conform to the ideology of evangelical Christian femininity that promotes not so much young women's faith in the kerygma of the Gospel, but in the rewards of attaining compliance with a specific demeanor and/or body-aesthetic. It will be important in the following chapters to understand what it means for the evangelical Christian woman to feel acceptable before God and other Christians when her body, diet, beauty, and her sexuality are seen as a visual indicator of her Christian self-discipline, virtue, and faith. In the twentieth century, there was a transition from the submissive and pious demeanor of the nineteenth century ideology, to a contemporary focus on modesty and physical perfection through diet, beauty and sexuality, which has been equated to moral perfection, as it has come to signify Christian discipline and obedience. The particular political and ethical problem with these equations are that they are a means of owning and controlling women's minds and bodies, thus promoting highly conservative authoritarian domestic and national political stances that favor male structures of dominance over not just women but society and nature itself.





## Chapter 2

### The Modern Christian Diet Industry

#### The Influence of Charlie Shedd and the 1950's House Wife

An understanding of the contemporary evangelical ideology of femininity would not be complete without an investigation into the ideology of the 1950's housewife and the modern Christian diet industry. An evangelical focus on diet and body commenced in the late 1950s. It was 1957 when Presbyterian minister Charlie Shedd published *Pray Your Weight Away*, marking the start of the modern Christian diet industry.<sup>118</sup> *Pray Your Weight Away* encourages the recitation of devotionals and prayers; Shedd believed that these guided prayers and devotionals, combined with a daily workout routine, would assist those who are struggling to lose weight in a manner that is spiritually and physically healthy. "The book, which would never fly in today's Christian self-help market, used the guilt-trip style of a folksy preacher to persuade readers that God never intended for 'one hundred pounds of excess avoirdupois' to be hanging around their belts."<sup>119</sup> Charlie Shedd also continued writing weight-loss publications in the 1970s and 1980s, authoring diet books such as *Devotions for Dieters* and *The Fat is in Your Head*, which focus heavily on meditating over scriptures and spending time in prayer, rather than a focus on specific meal plans and exercise routines. Shedd suggests that dealing with the inner spiritual turmoil and underlying emotional issues of the overweight is more important than aesthetic considerations. But he also believes that people's physical shape makes a statement about their emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. He believes that the

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<sup>118</sup> Lauren F. Winner, "The Weigh & the Truth" in *Christianity Today* 44, no. 10 (September 2000), p. 51.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

underlying issue for those who struggle with weight is never entirely a physical health problem, but that it is rooted more deeply in emotional or mental struggles, and that the ‘cure’ comes through addressing these struggles spiritually; through prayer.<sup>120</sup> Shedd’s *The Fat is in Your Head* dedicated six chapters specifically to address the correlation of mother issues to food consumption. Shedd discusses the disordered eating habits which he misogynistically insists are caused by maternal influence such as the controlling mother, the critical mother, the mother who lacked nutritional knowledge, the bribing mother, and the comforting mother; he addresses his own mother as well, stating that she did the best that she could in raising him while struggling with her own ‘issues.’ Shedd even claims himself to be one of his mother’s problems, although he does not bring to light the detail as to why. He also claims that his personal struggles with food stem from his mother’s behavior and treatment toward him. He claims that scholars support his own insight and experience:<sup>121</sup> “I have learned that men of the mind are right about this – my compulsive obsessive drives are often mother-oriented.”<sup>122</sup> Significantly, Shedd hardly discusses how paternal influence affects eating habits, stating, “Psychiatrists do not say much about the fat person’s father relationships. Perhaps it is because our food recall is mostly on the maternal side.”<sup>123</sup> In a brief, two-page chapter titled *And Then There Was Dad*, Shedd argues that perhaps one’s paternal relationship would affect one’s response to God more than it would affect one’s eating. Since Christians pray to a ‘Father’ in heaven, if one has had a negative paternal relationship, then it could affect the way we pray or

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<sup>120</sup> Charlie W. Shedd, *The Fat is in Your Head* (Waco: Word Books, 1972), p. 14.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61-62.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

feel towards God.<sup>124</sup> In other words, the realm of the problematic body is a feminine one and the realm of the relationship to God is masculine. This was not the first time that Shedd focused heavily on the maternal influence on food consumption and weight struggles. Lisa Isherwood critiques Shedd's stance on the struggles of weight-loss and women's role in the blame in *The Controversies of Body Theology*:

In 1957, Charlie Shedd wrote a book entitled *Pray Your Weight Away*, in which it is claimed that fatties are people who literally can weigh their sin. Fat, he argued, is the embodiment of disobedience to God since it prohibits the Holy Spirit from penetrating one's heart – it cannot get through the layers of fat. Shedd says that God did not ever imagine fat, and his justification for this statement is that the slender are those who succeed in the world. At this early stage the huge responsibility of women in this matter was emerging because Shedd dedicates six chapters of his book to explaining how women ruin other people's diets through their out-of-control gluttonous behavior. Mothers are particularly to blame in his view since they set in place very sinful patterns in their children; they are the ruin of their children<sup>125</sup>

What must be considered in the case of Shedd's conviction that women are to blame, is that *Pray Your Weight Away* was published in the 1950s. In 1950s America and Britain, weight was not only indicative of social status, but achieving a slim figure was viewed as extremely important for a successful life, particularly for women.<sup>126</sup> "Overweight is an advertisement of moral failure: 'my body remains a visible-to-all-the-world sign that I am not in control of my life', wrote Rosemary Green, 'fat parents are forever a sign of self-indulgence, a perfect example of lack of self-control.' Food has symbolic power, signifying masculinity and femininity,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>125</sup> Isherwood, "Will You Slim for Him," 187-188.

<sup>126</sup> Avner Offer, "Epidemics of Abundance: Overeating and Slimming in the USA and Britain Since the 1950's" in *Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History*, no. 25 (Nuffield College: University of Oxford, 1998), 14-18.

weakness and strength, high and low prestige. Some foods acquire an association with virtue or with moral failing: the self-help slimming movement (like its model Alcoholics Anonymous) has evangelical undertones.<sup>127</sup> As Offer exemplifies, not only is a woman's personal struggle with weight a submission to failure in her life, but having overweight parents was also an advertisement of failure within the family, as though the parents' shame in their struggle with weight was transferred directly to their child; the children were seen as extensions of their parents, and vice versa. In a society where appearance was heavily indicative of social status and home life, it is understandable perhaps where Shedd's calamities with his mother, who he uses as a representative of all mothers, was deep rooted; however, this does not justify his aggression towards women; it only sheds light on the patriarchal society and era in which Shedd began his writing, a post-World War II era in which women had achieved new economic power, independence and practical skills in the absence of men serving in armies. These women had to be put back in their (domestic) place.

For young women in the 1950s, the retention of a slim figure and having pretty face also held importance in a competitive dating society. In a society where women were progressing away from the 'Angel in the House' ideology of the nineteenth century, women wanted to not only be heard, but seen. However, this is not a cultural or professional visibility. It is to be seen as desirable, in-control, and attractive. Although the slim-body and pretty face fell into the long-standing variants of the ideal aesthetic that men were looking for<sup>128</sup>, women also placed pressure on one another; dating and sexuality became an area of competitiveness amongst one

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



another.<sup>129</sup> “Body-weight is one way for women to compete with each other. The weight target was set at the low end of the normal range, and indeed, below it. American women sought a lower weight for themselves than that which men generally found attractive. This is consistent with the view that low weight is not desirable in itself, but is rather a credible signal of self-control and virtue.”<sup>130</sup> The social class that a woman was born into was not something she could control – however, weight and appearance was, and it heavily influenced the male attention in which she received:

“Many more women diet than men, and (comparing BMI outcomes) women succeed better than men, suggesting that more is at stake for women. ‘Physical attractiveness and weight are still the chief and most wholeheartedly sanctioned domains in which women are encouraged to contend with each other. In one study, women of average weight reported one to two dates per week, overweight women about one per month. Women did not reject ‘the Beauty Myth’. Many more read *Cosmopolitan* than the feminist magazines. Body weight affects the outcomes of courtship. Being slim has been conducive to social mobility.”<sup>131</sup>

This post-war correlation of low weight with self-control, success, and virtue fed into the formation of the contemporary evangelical ideology of femininity. Women of the 1950s not only began to embrace their sexuality and focus on the aesthetics of their appearance, but they were expected to if they wanted to climb the social ladder, be successful in courtship, and maintain their husbands’ affections and sexual appetite. At the same time, women were also

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

expected to keep a clean house, and feed and nurture their families. Betty Friedan exemplified this dilemma and the pressure it placed on the 1950s-1960s housewife in her *Writings on the Women's Movement*. "A woman's other biggest problem is how to keep doing all that cleaning and still keep her hands 'feminine.' She is so unattractive and feels so insecure that she needs all the help and mechanical contrivances modern science and industry can supply to keep her man from leaving her. ('How long has it been since your husband took you dancing...brought you flowers...really listened to what you said? Could it be that gray in your hair? Bad breath? Irregular bowels?')." <sup>132</sup> In 1964, Friedan further wrote on this crisis in women's identity, "I say that the only thing that stands in women's way today is this false image, this feminine mystique, and the self-denigration of women that it perpetuates." This 'feminine mystique' of the 'perfect housewife', which Friedan referred to as a cult, "was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife: freed by science and labour-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth, and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, and her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment." <sup>133</sup> As a slim figure became the goal of women in the 1950s and 1960s, so too did a desire for perfection in the home. After nearly a century of women fighting for their rights to be seen and heard in society, and transitioning away from the 'Angel in the House', by the 1950s, diet, weight, and body image had become the primary utilities that women were permitted – indeed required – to control in their lives. The diet and beauty industry began to take advantage of this ideology, promoting and exacerbating it further.

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<sup>132</sup> Betty Friedan, *"It Changed My Life": Writing on the Women's Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 61.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

With the cult of a perfect weight becoming more prevalent from the 1950s onward, Shedd's publications pushed the evangelical Christian diet industry forward. From the late 1950s to the late 1980s, *Pray Your Weight Away* was followed by Christian literature and evangelical diet programmes such as: *I Prayed Myself Slim* by Deborah Pierce, *Help Lord – The Devil Wants Me Fat!* by C.S. Lovett, and *Slim for Him* by Patricia B. Kreml; all of which suggested a precondition of a slim body in order to feel acceptance before God and other Christians, as well as oneself.<sup>134</sup>

The desire of women to achieve physical perfection was correlated into a moral perfection within the Church, something not so very different from the moral perfection that the Victorian 'Angel in the House' strived to achieve through her silence, submissiveness and piety. This aesthetic ideology of femininity – part of the evangelical mission- has grown into a billion-dollar industry, with programmes such as *Slim for Him* and *Weigh Down Diet* leading this modern Christian diet industry.<sup>135</sup> It is estimated that the secular diet industry is worth upward of thirty billion dollars, and at least five percent of that is specifically monopolized by the Christian diet industry.<sup>136</sup> Lisa Isherwood describes these contemporary Christian diet programmes as promoting themselves in a way "which extol the religious virtue of being slim, and frame fat as sin. This movement is particularly popular with women, and becoming slim for Jesus appears to almost be part of what good Christian womanhood implies in some circles."<sup>137</sup> Slightly differently, Lauren Winner of *Christianity Today* believes that the focal point on fat as sin has been filtered out of the evangelical weight-loss movement; "Today's Christian dieting and

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<sup>134</sup> Lauren F. Winner, "The Weigh & the Truth" in *Christianity Today* 44, no. 10, (September 2000), p. 52.

<sup>135</sup> Lisa Isherwood, "Will You Slim for Him or Bake Cakes for the Queen of Heaven?" in *Controversies of Body Theology*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London, SCM Press, 2008), p. 174.

<sup>136</sup> Winner, "The Weigh & The Truth", p. 52.

<sup>137</sup> Isherwood, "Will You Slim for Him", p. 174.

fitness movement focuses less on sin and more on the individual's addiction and recovery. With Shamblin as its most popular guru, the industry has exploded."<sup>138</sup> However, Isherwood seems to dispute this progression of the message communicated through contemporary evangelical weight-loss programmes; "With the move into the 1980s much of the language changed, although I wish to argue that the fundamental message remained the same."<sup>139</sup> Isherwood is right. The message behind these evangelical weight loss programmes has not seemed to change much from the 1950's; to be overweight is still, inherently, seen as source of shame and an indication of moral failure. Rather than referring to this failure nominally as 'sin', contemporary programmes such as *Weigh Down* refer to it as 'over-indulgence', or 'addiction'. 'Sin,' relating to weight, carries a connotation that the action of weight gain is a personal choice; and in the Christian faith, sin should be repented of and the act should be brought under control. 'Over-indulgence' hints at giving into temptation of food quantity or variety, perhaps more often than one should; in Christianity, gluttony is still considered a sin, yet the word 'over-indulge' does not have the same harshness in its tone as 'sin' or 'gluttony,' and therefore provokes less defensiveness in the consumer. 'Addiction' relieves consumers of all personal responsibility for their weight – the food addiction controls them, and they are merely victims of addiction. Although the addiction still needs rectifying, for addiction in itself is considered an oppressive behavioral pattern, it colloquially relieves one of personal responsibility and draws the consumer in to the weigh-loss program through a less apparently judgmental approach. The softer the language usage is, the more receiving the audience, even if the fundamental message remains the same. Exemplifying this approach is *Weigh Down*, one of the most successful

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<sup>138</sup> Winner, "The Weigh and the Truth", p. 52.

<sup>139</sup> Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, p. 74.

weight-loss programmes in the Christian diet industry;<sup>140</sup> however, it has been criticized by feminists and theologians alike as a new means of controlling women's behaviors and diverting their energies and focus from movements for political and theological change.

### **Gwen Shamblin's Weigh Down Diet**

Gwen Shamblin, author of *Weigh Down Diet*, is the founder of *Weigh Down*, an evangelical weight-loss programme that began in 1986 as *Weigh Down Workshop*. Today, over a million people are participating in *Weigh Down*<sup>141</sup>, which is presented as a 'bible-based' and 'faith-based' weight-loss programme that does not focus on diet or exercise. Rather, *Weigh Down's* claim to success is its primary focus on God. Shamblin promises her clients that they will not ever need to diet, count calories, follow regimented exercise plans to burn off calories consumed, or purchase diet pills, diet foods, or exercise equipment ever again if they follow the *Weigh Down Diet*. She believes diet foods are problematic in so far as the low-calorie and fat-free foods actually enable weight-watchers to eat larger quantities without feeling guilty – thereby concluding that diet foods only exacerbating the inherent problem that the overweight struggle with, which is the volume of calories they are consuming rather than the variety. Claiming that God created pizza, brownies, and full-fat salad dressing and that He does not wish to limit the types of food we eat, she believes that the change needs to lie in breaking the addiction to overindulgence that the overweight struggle with. God, she claims, programmed humankind to desire to be thin and gives us the ability to achieve said desire, and if her clients

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<sup>140</sup> Winner, "The Weigh and the Truth", p. 52.

<sup>141</sup> Don Veinot and Joy Veinot, "Weighed and Found Wanting," in *Christian Research Journal* 23 (2009): 1, accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.equip.org/DS570>.

listen to their God-given bodily signals when they are hungry and full, then they can learn portion-control and lose weight, and put an end to the “greed” of the overweight.<sup>142</sup> “We are going to find your natural, God-given hunger and fullness cues. In *Weigh Down*, the only exercise God requires is surrendering your will to His perfect system of hunger and fullness. Once you pay attention to only that-with no distractions-you will be able to sense when your body might need to get out and move those muscles to keep them fit and tone. You will lose the weight permanently and no longer be dependent upon forced exercise routines.”<sup>143</sup>

Shamblin introduces herself on her website with an explanation of how she was inspired to create *Weigh Down*, as she managed her own weight and followed the progress or lack of in those participating in her *Weigh Down Workshop*, which she founded in 1986.<sup>144</sup> “I gathered and organized needed statistics in the first decade of *Weigh Down* to guide me in producing the seminar. Why did I lose weight instantly and keep it off, while others did not? I spent hours contemplating this issue. I experimented with various things such as increasing exercise or allowing dieting along with teaching hunger and fullness principles. This only made things worse! I had left religion out, but I began incorporating it into some classes, and the results were clear: the outcome was better with the use of faith!”<sup>145</sup> By 1992, *Weigh Down* was becoming a widespread movement, as churches across the United States and internationally inquired about hosting *Weigh Down* seminars and acquiring *Weigh Down* workbooks. By the end of the twentieth century, Shamblin and *Weigh Down* had received international renown in

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<sup>142</sup> “General FAQs”, *Weigh Down Ministries*, accessed September 2, 2015, <http://www.weighdown.com/About-Us/Frequently-Asked-Questions/General-FAQs>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> “What is Weigh Down Ministries,” *Weigh Down Ministries*, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.weighdown.com/Gwen-Shamblin/Note-from-the-Founder>.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

evangelical Christian churches.<sup>146</sup> Shamblin's newfound popularity in the 1990s gained her celebrity status and popularity as she was featured in newspapers, journals, and American and foreign talk shows.<sup>147</sup> Today Shamblin is the leader of Remnant Bible Fellowship Church, which is the official sponsor church of her still-popular *Weigh Down* diet.

### **Gwen Shamblin's Intensification of the Evangelical Ideology of Femininity**

Shamblin promotes the Christian faith not purely for the sake of grace and salvation through Christ, but rather for the reward of attaining a slim figure, which fits the contemporary social, consumerist ideology of femininity of a disciplined, slim body and pretty face. It is also part of an evangelical mission in so far as it equates physical perfection with moral perfection. This type of precondition of acceptability in the evangelical church, mediated by the modern diet and beauty industries, influences young evangelical Christian women to turn to faith-based weight loss programs. The desperation to conform to this contemporary evangelical ideology of femininity is driven by the consequence of not complying with this specific body-aesthetic, which is, ultimately, moral and spiritual failure, and failure to find love.

*Weigh Down* equates a greater faith with a greater weight loss success. Gwen Shamblin claims that she maintained her personal weight loss when others were unable to, simply due to a stronger faith. With millions of evangelical Christian woman internationally following *Weigh Down*, one must consider the discouragement this correlation festers for women who have not

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<sup>146</sup> Veinot and Veinot, "Weighed", p. 2.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

achieved their weight-loss goals, or are slow in their progression. Shamblin's equation of weight loss to faith is suggesting that if one is not successful in losing weight or maintaining a slim figure, that faith must be lacking somewhere; for if it was not lacking, the weight would be shed. "Once you are obedient to God's rules in the area of eating (hunger and fullness), you not only lose the excess weight, but you will lose the desire to overeat. Food will no longer tempt you, and you will be free to live life without a heavy heart."<sup>148</sup> Faithful obedience to God is the accelerator behind successful weight loss, *Weigh Down* claims. For the many evangelical Christian women who are overweight, this brings them to question their faith; and propels them to seek a deeper faith not so much in the positive, life-giving kerygma of the Gospel but for the immediate social rewards of attaining an appearance that complies with a slim body aesthetic. Christ becomes a mere means to social success.<sup>149</sup>

Despite the advancement of women's rights and feminism, Naomi Wolf discusses this 'Iron Maiden' (the unattainable standard of beauty throughout the centuries which is meant as punishment to women for not conforming to it) and the reaction to the emancipation of women has been a gradual chipping away of this 'Maiden's' body to the slim body-standard today.<sup>150</sup> "For more than 200 years, feminists have been criticizing the way that artificial images of feminine beauty are held up as the ideal to which women should aspire. From Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949, to Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* in 1970, to Naomi Wolf's *The*

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<sup>148</sup> "General FAQs", *Weigh Down Ministries*.

<sup>149</sup> See also: Melissa Raphael, "A Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion" in *Sophia* 53 (2014), p. 241-259.

<sup>150</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 183-185.



*Beauty Myth* in 1991, brilliant and angry women have demanded a change in these ideals. Yet far from fading away, they have become narrower and more powerful than ever.”<sup>151</sup> Jo Ind agonizes over this narrowing of the meaning of the female body in *Fat is a Spiritual Issue*, by drawing God into the conversation; particularly where the Christian God fits into the diet industry’s ‘self-hate’ propaganda, and how the evangelical woman’s body-image is influenced by the social, cultural, and spiritual pressures on women. “It was certain that I hated my body. And wasn’t God love? Wasn’t hatred nothing other than wrong, like a cancer propagating malignancies in uncontrollable destruction? Wasn’t it plain negative and crippling? If being slim was a good thing, how could it be brought about by hatred? How could a foul means bring about a beautiful, whole and godly end?”<sup>152</sup>

This festering of hatred for one’s body is encouraged through evangelical missions such as *Weigh Down*. Through pointing to the guilt of ‘over-indulgence’, and through fat-shaming, overweight women can be ‘corrected’, and ‘cured’ of their fat. There is no mention of the doctrine of grace or the evangelical belief that “therefore there is now no condemnation in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Gwen Shamblin herself has said, “Grace does not lie in the pig-pens,” in reference to the over-weight.<sup>153</sup> This belief that those who over-weight are unworthy of the grace of Jesus Christ, along with the notion that grace cannot lie with those who are unclean, sinful or dirty is far from the biblical doctrine of grace, that through the salvific works of Jesus Christ, all who believe in Him are redeemed and saved, not through works of their own, but through the grace

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<sup>151</sup> Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>152</sup> Ind, *Fat is a Spiritual Issue*, p. 48-49.

<sup>153</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Feminist Explorations in Boundaries and Transgressions* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2007), p. 83.

of Jesus Christ. However, if *Weigh Down* were to adopt this theology, they would have no foundation to shame and guilt their clients into weight loss, so instead have adopted what *Weigh Down Ministries* justifies as a 'correct' use of guilt and shame: "Every religion references rewards and punishments, and every person has felt guilt when they know that something is wrong. Guilt, when used correctly and not dwelt upon, can be used as a guide for your conscience and used for positive change. For over 3,000 years, guilt has been a widely-accepted motivation, and it has only been rejected as a negative phenomenon for a few short years."<sup>154</sup> This justification serves to motivate women through the influence of guilt and shame towards their own bodies so that through *Weigh Down*, they achieve the higher level of faith that will result in weight-loss.

What is unique about Gwen Shamblin's contemporary version of the evangelical ideology of femininity is its significant link between a disciplined, contemporary body and the submissive, pious ideology of the nineteenth century 'Angel in the House'. Shamblin also believes in the submission and silence of women - that women should not speak up or speak out in the church. As Meade reports, "In the church Shamblin attended as a child, women were not permitted to preach. That, she believes, is the way things should be. "How could anyone read the Bible and not see that men are meant to lead?" she asked me. It is ordained that women should be subservient to their husbands, but the lesson of wifely submission is a hard one for modern women to learn."<sup>155</sup> Shamblin has been quoted as saying that it grieves her that there are no men who can lead her *Weigh Down* mission or her church, Remnant Bible Fellowship, of which

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<sup>154</sup> *Weigh Down Ministries*.

<sup>155</sup> Rebecca Meade, "Slim for Him: God is Watching what You're Eating," *The Spirit Watch*, January 15, 2001, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.spiritwatch.org/rebeccamead.htm>, p. 6.

she is head. Shamblin justifies her leadership position in the church through the prophecy found in Joel:<sup>156</sup> “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-29). During Rebecca Meade’s interview with Gwen Shamblin, she discussed her leadership position: “I knew when I wrote this stuff that it was not right for a woman to do this. I felt so sorry for God that there wasn’t a man doing it. I felt sorry for God that everyone wasn’t bowing down.”<sup>157</sup> Lisa Isherwood identifies this paradox of Shamblin’s stance on the submission of women and her status, as well as Shamblin’s theological justification of it, in *The Fat Jesus*. Shamblin repudiates the doctrine of subordination through her headship of Remnant Bible Fellowship and her many lucrative public speaking engagements, yet justifies it by admonishing of the unavailability of male headship behind her mission, thereby relieving herself of the guilt of disobedience to the doctrine of subordination that she claims belief in. Although Shamblin seems unable to exemplify the ideology of the submissive, silent woman in the church, through what she would claim is no fault of her own, she aesthetically fits the contemporary ideology of femininity, of the disciplined body and pretty face, and is described so by many of her critics: “Shamblin is a petite and pretty woman with shoulder-length blonde hair swept into a two-inch bouffant in a manner that passes for subtle.”<sup>158</sup> Shamblin professes that she dresses in designer clothes for God, and describes God to her mainly female audience as a rich and handsome husband.<sup>159</sup> “Shamblin says she takes this rich husband of hers on shopping trips because she likes to dress

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<sup>156</sup> Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, p. 85.

<sup>157</sup> Meade, “Slim for Him”, p. 6.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84-85.

for him, but also because he has superb taste and is amazing at colour-coordination. On her trips she asks if God likes her outfit and then she buys, and these are designer clothes because, as she says of God ‘He is fabulous, wonderfully good looking. He is so powerful, so rich, and so famous. He has got on designer clothes.’ One must not let the side down and so must dress accordingly.” This grotesquely idolatrous presentation of God as celebrity, and the condition that one must dress for him in designer clothes, always being aesthetically pleasing, exemplifies Shamblin’s catering to her core consumer audience of middle and upper-class women. “The position of fashion accessory on the arm of God also extends to how Shamblin views the role of women;”<sup>160</sup> she indicates through this position her stance on the subservient role of women, however linking it with a contemporary consumerist, free-market ideology of femininity, one that is aesthetically and politically compliant as well; not only compliant in demeanor.

### **Feminist Theological Criticism of Weigh Down**

*Weigh Down* is marketed toward evangelical Christian churches, however it is not referred to as a specifically Christian weight-loss programme. The website for *Weigh Down Ministries* rather refers to it as ‘bible-based’<sup>161</sup>, which is something of a presupposition around evangelical Christianity. Since the 1970s, Christian feminists have drawn from the secular feminist criticism of the diet and beauty industry to offer critiques that are both sociologically and theologically informed. Lisa Isherwood critiques Gwen Shamblin’s theology behind *Weigh Down*, and believes Shamblin’s ‘bible-based’ weight-loss programme was created through the influence of

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<sup>160</sup> Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, p. 85.

<sup>161</sup> *Weigh Down Ministries*

biblical texts which Shamblin has pulled out of context to support her mission and her ideologies. Isherwood is not the only critic to bring Shamblin's theology and understanding of Christian doctrine under scrutiny. "To have become such an influential voice on spiritual matters, Shamblin has very little theological heft behind her teachings – and she doesn't see the need for oversight from outside pastors or theologians. Her approach to Scripture relies heavily on freestyle proof-texting."<sup>162</sup> Particularly controversial is Shamblin's assertion that the Christian Trinity is a hierarchy<sup>163</sup>, which was met with Christian publishers severing ties with *Weigh Down*, evangelical churches cancelling *Weigh Down* programmes, and perpetuated a fear in many *Weigh Down* participants that they had formed a cult.<sup>164</sup> In his online article *The Gwen Shamblin Controversy*, Wayne Jackson also refers to the theology of Shamblin: "It could be the case that she has taken her new-found popularity as a dietician and attempted to capitalize on that as a means of sharing her religious views. While that is a noble objective, it appears that she has a seriously flawed comprehension of some very important elements of the Christian system. She has ventured into areas she is ill-prepared to discuss, hence, has become involved in a controversy that has damaged her reputation."<sup>165</sup> This examination of the theology behind Shamblin has been intrigued by statements that she has made through her teachings, interviews, publications, and the *Weigh Down Ministries* website. "Shamblin hit the headlines with her bold assertion that fat people do not go to heaven because 'grace does not go down to the pig-pen' In short, then, Shamblin was offering slim hips and eternal salvation

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<sup>162</sup> Winner, "The Weigh and the Truth", p. 55.

<sup>163</sup> See Don Veinot and Joy Veinot, "Weighed and Found Wanting," *Christian Research Journal* 23 (2009), accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.equip.org/DS570>.

<sup>164</sup> Meade, "Slim for Him", p. 5.

<sup>165</sup> Wayne Jackson, "The Gwen Shamblin Controversy," *Christian Courier*, accessed July 22, 2015, <http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/301-gwen-shamblin-controversy-the>.

because of her contention that the fatness of Americans is due to a profound spiritual crisis.”<sup>166</sup> Shamblin’s statement about grace is contradicting to the evangelical Christian doctrine that through the salvific grace of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, all who believe in him and repent of their moral sin (or their ‘unattractiveness’) are cleansed from sin and seen as acceptable before God. However, through the insistence on the overweight being in ‘spiritual crisis,’ the Christian diet industry has advanced evangelical weight-loss programs such as *Weigh Down*, which have capitalized on the unnecessary and innocent suffering of women (and some men), thus exacerbating the plight of the over-weight through the suggestion that their weight-gain is due to their lack of spirituality and faith, not to psychological factors such as depression or abuse, or political factors such as poor access to fresh, healthy foods.

### **The Problematic Weigh Down ‘Diet’**

To achieve the contemporary feminine ideal, evangelical women are promised through *Weigh Down* that rather than diet and physical exercise, obedience to God will achieve the desired weight-loss. *Weigh Down* has received much criticism and little praise for its diet and exercise programme, as dieticians, feminists, counselors and theologians alike have scrutinized the weight-loss programme’s lack of attention to nutrition. Rebecca Meade describes her experience of attending a *Weigh Down* meeting in a Tennessee church in *Slim for Him: God is Watching What You’re Eating*, with one of Shamblin’s employees, Lee Suddeath, who had been participating in the weight-loss programme. Meade describes Suddeath’s weigh-loss diet as ‘a

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<sup>166</sup> Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, p. 83.

weight watcher's fantasy binge,' which consisted of a chocolate PopTart, a fun-sized candy bar, lasagne, corn with butter and salt, a deep-fried taco from Taco Bell topped with cheese, and ice cream for dessert. Suddeth claimed to never stop eating the foods he enjoyed, but instead just ate smaller quantities. He described *Weigh Down* as a 'life-long programme' that does not exclude the consumption of any particular food, and is not considered a diet, but rather encourages eating the food that one loves.<sup>167</sup> Shamblin promotes this sort of moderated-indulgence, explaining that her body tells her what she needs, and that there is no reason to 'diet,' but instead one should focus on the bodily signals that indicate a fullness or hunger.<sup>168</sup> However, despite its teaching of the importance of moderation, *Weigh Down* offers no guidelines as to what a healthy diet and food variety should consist of, for those who have been habitual over-indulgers; cutting calories and quantities does not necessarily equate to increased nutritional value or over-all health.<sup>169</sup>

Nutritionists and dieticians alike in both Christian and secular profession have expressed concern over the lack of nutritional guidance accompanying *Weigh Down*. Christian nutritionist Pam Smith says that from a medical perspective, *Weigh Down* is frightening, and even the most successful of participants could exit the programme having no idea what their body requires nutritionally. Shamblin seems to understand that her clients find appeal in the strategy of *Weigh Down*, which allows them to eat whatever they desire, whenever they desire, and still attain this ideology of the slim, disciplined body.<sup>170</sup> It is not difficult to understand that those

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<sup>167</sup> Meade, "Slim for Him."

<sup>168</sup> *Weigh Down Ministries*.

<sup>169</sup> Winner, "The Weigh & The Truth", p. 55.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

engaged in a continuous struggle with weight-loss, accompanied by an ever-increasing sense of desperation to attain its rewards of acceptability and moral perfection, are consumers who already feel defeated, whether they have given up on their bodies or feel as though their bodies have given up on them. Many of those struggling want to hear that weight loss will be easily attainable. That is what *Weigh Down* promotes itself as: a weight-loss programme for the over-indulgers, which requires no dieting at all while permitting the continuation of one's favorite indulgences, only in lesser quantities. Orbach discusses this compulsive eater and the various strategies and measures of weight loss they practice, in her early work, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*: "Some women say that if only there was a magic pill that allowed them to eat and eat incessantly while still remaining at their ideal size, they would be quite happy. Indeed, women have had bypass surgery to achieve this state. So it is clear that people do see a connection between overeating and obesity and they attempt, through various deprivation schemes, to keep their overeating to a minimum so that they are not too fat."<sup>171</sup> Perhaps this is why programmes such as *Weigh Down* are so successful; they appeal to the abandoned and discouraged. "For a best-selling diet author, Gwen Shamblin has some unusual ideas. She encourages the consumption of brownies with whipped cream, claims that too many vegetables will make you sick, and thinks that having to drink eight glasses of water a day is absurd. She scorns exercise and forbids the counting of calories or fat grams. Another significant difference between her diet and those offered by people like Suzanne Somers and Dean Ornish is that Shamblin promises followers of her diet that, in addition to losing weight, they will be granted eternal life."<sup>172</sup> On behalf of *Christianity Today*, journalist Lauren Winner

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<sup>171</sup> Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, p. 35.

<sup>172</sup> Meade, "Slim for Him", p. 1.



interviewed nutritionist David Meinz, who judged *Weigh Down* to be ‘worrisome’ and ‘nutritionally irresponsible.’<sup>173</sup> “*Weigh Down* has tapped into the issue that people overeat for spiritual or emotional reasons, but you should not turn to *The Weigh Down Diet* for nutritional information” says Meinz, although he appreciates that Shamblin is a registered dietician with a master’s degree in nutrition. “Shamblin needs to rethink her perspective on exercise,” which has little place in her message.”<sup>174</sup> Perhaps exemplifying Shamblin’s stance on exercise is her website *Weigh Down Ministries*, where Shamblin proclaims that exercise will not help one to lose weight faster, but rather only allows for the consumption of more food and water.<sup>175</sup> The exercise of one’s spirituality and time spent in prayer is promoted over physical exercise and dieting. “Shamblin does suggest that people eat in moderation, which is good, and she also notes that whereas the secular diet industry makes a great deal of money from diet foods, she has not yet branched out in this way, but she also says that the only exercise a person needs is getting on their knees to pray.”<sup>176</sup> From the perspective of a young evangelical Christian woman, the encouragement of other women towards an increased seeking of and relationship with God through prayer would be praised. However, from a feminist perspective, they are once more ceding their ownership and power over their body to a controlling male God with happiness (principally in the form of being loveable) and success being promised only on condition of physical obedience.

There are also implications here for inter-faith relations. Do those with a stronger Christian faith lose weight faster than those who have no faith? Is this their ‘reward’?. Gwen Shamblin has

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Winner, “The Weigh and the Truth”, p. 54.

<sup>175</sup> *Weigh Down Ministries*.

<sup>176</sup> Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, p. 84.

argued that those who question *Weigh Down* methods are the ones who are sinful; “Sin is these people who keep telling people that God requires you to exercise.”<sup>177</sup> However, this ‘sin’ does not seem to differ in message from *Weigh Down*’s own insinuation that God requires one to appeal to a certain slim body aesthetic in order to feel and be acceptable before self, others, and God - it only differs in method. This acceptability of women of varying body sizes is still discouraged through evangelical programmes such as *Weigh Down*, and both secularly and within the evangelical church, there is a deeper issue that requires addressing. Feminist Susie Orbach acknowledges this underlying need to feel valued, which women desire: “Food and its place in women’s lives continues to be painful and troublesome. I wish it weren’t so. I wish that little girls were growing up knowing that they didn’t have to muck about with their appetites, that they were valued and felt valued for all the beauty they possess in the variety of their minds and the variety of their bodies.”<sup>178</sup> Within the evangelical church, what requires addressing is the inherent value of women of all shapes and sizes, not because of their attainment of an ideal feminine shape or their compliance with a certain slim, pretty aesthetic or virtuous demeanor; but rather, they are inherently valued because they have been made in God’s image, and are seen as acceptable before God in every regard because of their own acceptance of the grace of Jesus Christ. Women’s self-love in relation to God and Christ<sup>179</sup> is where the root of the evangelistic message for women should lie.

Lisa Isherwood importantly discusses the shift in female identity; “As we have come to see,

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<sup>177</sup> Winner, “The Weigh and the Truth”, p. 54.

<sup>178</sup> Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, p. vii.

<sup>179</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (London: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), p. 67.

body size has increasingly taken a role in the production of female identity, worth and subjectivity over the last century.”<sup>180</sup> In light of this growing equation in the contemporary diet and beauty industry of female body size to self-worth, evangelical missions such as *Weigh Down* which claim weight-loss success and acceptability for those with a higher faith, could be detrimental to women who are already struggling with worth and low self-esteem, and merely serve to exacerbate eating disorders and body dysmorphia. What is needed is renewed relationality and connection with the women and non-human world, not more self-castigation.

### **The Diet-Centered Kerygma as a Trivialisation and Distortion of the Gospel**

It is hoped that a feminist biblical hermeneutic may empower women to feel at home in their skin no matter their size because, in the body of Christ, spiritual and material divisions between different sorts of bodies are at once broken and healed. Through the application of a feminist biblical interpretation it is hoped that the evangelical diet centered hermeneutic used by those such as Charlie Shedd and Gwen Shamblin can then in turn be broken down and critiqued. This thesis will now explore the biblical texts that both Shedd and Shamblin used as foundations for their diet movements, while suggesting that the diet centered hermeneutic is a trivialization and a moral and political distortion of the Gospel. The research will use a variety of evangelical biblical scholars’ work to understand the original meaning of the biblical texts that form the basis of these diets, and will use feminist biblical hermeneutics in particular to see if these texts were ever intended to suggest guidelines for women’s diets at all, and also to explore what

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<sup>180</sup> Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, p. 123.

they now might mean to the contemporary evangelical woman, if anything. The writings of Lisa Isherwood will also play a key role; as Lisa Isherwood interprets biblical texts in the interest of women's well-being, rather than the diet-centered hermeneutic adopted by Shamblin, which interprets biblical text in the interest of diet and, effectively, in the interest of capitalism and the control of women's minds and bodies.

In *The Fat Jesus*, Isherwood criticizes the theology behind the likes of *Weigh Down*, and the 'fanciful grasp' of the Bible that such Christian diet missions have, and how far from liberating they are.<sup>181</sup> Isherwood is also heavily critical of Gwen Shamblin; "It is difficult not to totally dismiss Shamblin as a lunatic, because the way in which she speaks of the Bible, faith, the Trinity, and the body are nothing short of laughable. What stops me laughing is the message of advanced capitalism that lurks beneath this holy foolery and, as always, keeping that in place, the gendered message of inequality."<sup>182</sup> Isherwood considers the multi-million dollar Christian diet industry, and reasons that the motivation behind their missions is merely financial.

Although many Christian diet books and programmes promote diets which they claim to be Biblical, such as Jesus' diet of honey, locusts and lamb, Isherwood believes the insistence behind knowing Jesus' diet serves only to give the diet a more 'Christian' appearance in order to cater to its niche market.<sup>183</sup> Exposing the diet hermeneutic as a financial phenomenon, Meade discusses Shamblin's diet-centered hermeneutical approach to biblical texts:

Shamblin takes every word of the Bible as divinely inspired, but she interprets it as if it were a contemporary diet manual. Thus the fatted calf that was prepared for the Prodigal

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

Son is evidence that God approves of filet mignon. Other dietary directives from God that are found in the Good Book begin with original sin – the cardinal instance of overeating – and extends to divine refutations of low-carbohydrate diets. “It is sad to see that so many professional dieters have gone against the body’s need for bread” Shamblin writes. “Jesus said ‘I am the bread of life’ She cites the second chapter of Leviticus, in which there is an account of the preparation of a grain offering made with flour, oil, and salt. “My, that grain offering is very similar to our present-day Frito!” she writes <sup>184</sup>

Perhaps one might speculate that it is in her interest for people to eat unhealthily to ensure they remain trapped in the lucrative diet culture of slimming magazines and other products.

The grain offering of Leviticus 2, for example, has been proof-text in order to relate this biblical example of fried grain to a contemporary audience familiar with the fried corn-chip brand *Frito*. “If you bring a grain offering baked in an oven, it is to consist of the finest flour: either thick loaves made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in or thin loaves made without yeast and brushed with olive oil” (Lev. 2:4). The grain offering was a holy offering to God, a “gift for a soothing aroma to Yahweh”<sup>185</sup> and an act of dedicating one’s harvest to God, in recognition of His holy authority. Of no similarity to the contemporary snack-food *Frito*, the grain offering described in Leviticus had to be prepared in a very specific way, and the leftover grain was considered holy; it became property of the Aaronites and was to be eaten exclusively in the holy Temple.<sup>186</sup> Leviticus 2 is descriptive of a process for making a grain offering that all the people of Israel were meant to follow. The addition of salt was meant to be symbolic of the

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<sup>184</sup> Meade, “Slim for Him”, p. 4.

<sup>185</sup> John E. Hartley, *World Biblical Commentary: Leviticus* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), p. 28.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

covenant between God and His people, and its binding authority<sup>187</sup>: “Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings” (Lev. 2:13).

John Hartley even discusses the relation of the grain common reference of Jesus as ‘the Bread of Life’ (John 6:35). “There may also be a connection between the grain offering and Jesus’s claim “I am the bread of life”. Therefore, Jesus encourages all who believe on him to partake of sacrificial food freely when he invites them to eat his flesh and drink his blood so that they may have eternal life (John 6:47-58).”<sup>188</sup> The grain offering was not meant to be exemplary of a diet for the Israelites or for today’s contemporary dieter, and the notion that it would be trivializes its holy significance that it held for the Israelites at the time; it was an offering to God by His people, not a purchase of a branded product. Jesus’ referring to himself as ‘the Bread of Life’ in the Christian Scriptures was possibly, as interpreted by Hartley in *World Biblical Commentary: Leviticus*, a metaphor for the invitation to partake in his sacrificial offering of self to God on behalf of humanity; thus breaking the exclusivity of the grain offering in Leviticus, since all are seen as worthy before God through their Eucharistic acceptance of the sacrificial and salvific works of Jesus Christ. What is important is that physical suffering should be in imitation of Christ’s sacrificial suffering. Bodily suffering is worth noting itself, but only in so far as it is instrumental to the Gospel and its closeness to Christ, not to personal fulfillment or social success. Feminist theology is rightly wary of sacralising suffering as a good in itself, but it’s meaning, if it has any at all, is cosmic, not aesthetic. This is just one exemplary instance of an

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

evangelical weight-loss programme's reference to biblical texts in their writings and their diet programmes; they have approached these texts with a trivializing diet-centered hermeneutic and have interpreted these texts in a way that makes them significantly relevant to contemporary evangelical Christian women who are struggling with diet, body and beauty, not for the sake of preserving their original significance or intention but rather in order to promote the weight-loss missions in the Christian diet industry, and possibly as a means of 'product-placement'.

Another example of this distorted diet-centered hermeneutic is Charlie Shedd's presumption that the 'thorn' in Paul's side, which Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, had to do with Paul's struggle with weight. "My guess is that he had a weight problem. I think he might have been a fatty just like us."<sup>189</sup> Shedd came to this absurd conclusion when he read through Paul's writings and found that they spoke to him and his struggles with diet and weight. Shedd also acknowledges that Paul learned to deal with this 'thorn in his side' more as time went on, thus assuming that Paul had found a way to control his weight as time went on. Shedd acknowledges that this is his only basis for assuming Paul struggled with his weight<sup>190</sup>, however, the 'thorn in his side' that Paul was referring to has not, of course, been otherwise interpreted as to referring to a struggle with weight. In the original context, Paul writes, "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast

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<sup>189</sup> Charlie Shedd, *The Fat is In Your Head* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1972), p. 87.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Cor. 12:7-9). In *World Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, Ralph Martin, another evangelical biblical scholar, discusses this 'thorn' and concludes that there is not enough evidence given in the original translation of the text to determine exactly what it is,<sup>191</sup> however, there is evidence in the original translation of the text that it was a painful physical ailment, as the phrase 'thorn in the flesh' was a common figure of speech in the time period when Paul was writing 2 Corinthians, and the original Greek term *sarx* or *skolops* was often used to refer to something physical, and this particular physical ailment hindered Paul at times, in his ministry.<sup>192</sup> Linda Bellville appeals to supporting evidence from other biblical texts written by Paul in Galatians, in order to speculate that it was an eye problem: "Galatians 4:4 ("my illness was a trial to you") and 4:15 ("you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me") lend support to the theory that this was some sort of eye problem. In fact, Paul closes his letter to the Galatians with "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand" (6:11) – a statement one is tempted to understand in terms of some sort of ophthalmic disability."<sup>193</sup> Although it is not, and may never be, entirely clear what the original translation of Paul's 'thorn in his flesh' was referring to, there is enough evidence to suggest that it was not merely that Paul was 'a fatty', as Shedd concludes, but rather a painful physical ailment.

In the evangelical Christian church, the Bible is commonly referred to for examples of how to practice self-discipline and find strength in the trials of life. Both Charlie Shedd and Gwen

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<sup>191</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *World Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1986), p. 411.

<sup>192</sup> Linda L. Bellville, *2 Corinthians*, edited by Grant R. Osborne, Stuart D. Briscoe and Haddon Robinson (Leicester: IntVarsity Press, 1996), p. 305-306.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.



Shamblin use quotes from the Bible to justify the diet plans they are marketing to the evangelical church. Anthony Thiselton notes that, “What is important for hermeneutics is how texts impinge on readers: what processes they set in motion, and whether these processes are valid.”<sup>194</sup> Shedd and Shamblin, however, have successfully impinged on Christians’ consciousness, and the processes they have set in motion are trivializations of the original biblical *Sitz im Leben*.

Although Shedd’s hermeneutical approach to 2 Corinthians was used, upon first inspection, as a way for his readers to relate to and find consolation from a biblical figure who also struggled with weight –even one who physically walked with Christ, who, like them, could struggle with food and weight - one could argue that the purpose behind Shedd’s writing was to sell his book and his patriarchal world-view, which was being sold under the pretense of a biblically founded diet.

What needs addressing, then, is the message that society and evangelical churches send to young women. There is the prioritization of female appearance in the evangelical Christian church, evidenced in its complicity with patriarchal aesthetic norms through its approach to slimness and dating, success in the latter being predicated on success in the first.

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<sup>194</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p. 5.



### Chapter 3

## Evangelical Internet Dating and the Primacy of Female Appearance

### An Investigation of Female Appearance through the Dating Website Christian Mingle

The contemporary aesthetic ideal for a feminine appearance shapes the sexuality of evangelical Christian women as well; even though a Christian aesthetic should be counter-cultural. This chapter will investigate cognate sexual and dating expectations placed upon women within the contemporary evangelical church, including a sample taken from the evangelical Christian dating website *Christian Mingle*. Of particular interest here is the way in which evangelical women present themselves to men, and the way men present their expectations of women to these women.

*Christian Mingle* is an American Christian dating website, which was founded in 2001. To date, *Christian Mingle* is the most popular Christian dating website, and has over ten million members internationally.<sup>195</sup> As part of the initial membership sign-up, *Christian Mingle* requires one to fill out a survey of questions inquiring about the denomination of the church one grew up in, the denomination of the church one attends now and how frequent one is in attendance. It also asks one to specify what one is looking for in a mate in terms of height, body-type, church attendance/faith, education, and age range. The answers one provides help match the results to other members with a similar faith background and interests. Of course, indicating requirements such as body-type, height, education and age-range are generally standard for

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<sup>195</sup> "Ten Million Members," *Christian Mingle*, accessed September 25, 2015, <http://www.christianmingle.com/ten-million/>.

most dating websites and not exclusive to the Christian niche. Yet it seems surprising that while secular dating websites place immediate importance on interests in terms of physical attraction, above character, when filtering matches, so too do evangelical sites.

Interestingly, *Christian Mingle* moderates profiles and photos before approving any changes or uploaded photos, in the claim and interest of the safety of all members, and to monitor and filter inappropriate or profane subject matter.<sup>196</sup> However, the approval of photos on *Christian Mingle* seems to be more of a moderation of modesty, particularly for women, than a matter regarding safety. In stark contrast to secular dating websites and ‘hook-up’ apps such as *eHarmony* and *Tinder*, uploaded photos of women on *Christian Mingle* are moderated and cropped to eliminate cleavage and ‘revealing’ low-cut tops, as well as short skirts and dresses: it is notable that Christian women present themselves at all in such sexualized ways, but there seem to be no guidelines for what is considered ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ – the standard of modesty seems to change per the moderator’s opinion. One woman critiqued the moderation of photos on *Christian Mingle*, complaining that she did not understand the criteria which was being used in the photos’ approval process:

I received verification that they had approved my profile and pictures-however, they "cropped" my pictures to remove a family member from one. On another picture, they cropped out my entire body - and there's nothing objectable about my body; I was just wearing jeans and a t-shirt. I didn't get it. I sent them an email and complained. [The following day] I saw that this guy from Minnesota looked at my profile. He was making an obscene gesture with his fingers shaped into a "V" in front of his mouth-looking into his web-cam. I wrote another email to *Christian Mingle* to report him and said that I was

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<sup>196</sup> “Christian Dating Sites and Safety,” *Christian Mingle*, accessed July 21, 2015, [http://www.christianmingle.com/online\\_dating\\_safety.html](http://www.christianmingle.com/online_dating_safety.html).

disappointed that they had 'approved' this guy's picture (but rejected mine). What criteria were they using?<sup>197</sup>

Not only are family members and friends cropped out of the photos of female members (perhaps for reasons of clarity and privacy), but it is noted that majority of women's profile photos on *Christian Mingle* have been cropped and reduced to smiling head-shots. Make-up coverage on women vary from profile to profile, however the majority of profiles views depict women with a modest amount of make-up coverage, or no make-up at all. Profile photos of women with drink-in-hand or bikini-clad, as one would find on the majority of other secular dating websites, are noticeably absent from *Christian Mingle*. Breasts and bodies, even clothed, have been cropped out of the majority of photos, indicative, arguably, of Christian gynophobia of women and women's conformity to an a-sexual and moralistic evangelical ideology of modesty. In contrast, there is little or no moderation of male members' photos on *Christian Mingle*. Although there seem to be no topless photos of male members, the majority of the men's profile photos include full-body photos, some profiles completely lacking any clear, head-shot photos of their faces, where one can actually see distinct facial features. There are photos of men as active, powerful agents and subjects: playing sport, and sitting in the pilot seat of airplanes. There are photos of men skateboarding with their faces pointed toward the ground; there are photos of men wearing sunglasses, with little of their face visible; and full-body profile photos of male members vary wearing anything from t-shirts and jeans to a full suit. It is important, as well, to point out that there is a notably large number of male members' photos which include other friends in the photos with them; there seems to be little-to-no cropping

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<sup>197</sup> "Christian Mingle Review," *Dating Site Reviews*, published July 11, 2012, accessed September 25, 2015, <http://www.datingsitesreviews.com/comment.php?mode=view&cid=2962>.

involved in the photo moderation process of male members. The arguably heavy moderation and cropping process of female photos, in attempt to provide 'safety,' and encourage modesty and prevent objectification, seems to sever women from their true selves; they are presented to male members as an 'appearance,' rather than as a whole person, whereas male members seem more at liberty to present themselves as a whole body, engaging with the world in all sorts of personal interests.

I have collected an indicative, illustrative sample of percentages of the various self-specifications and match requirements of evangelical Christian dating profiles from member profiles of one hundred evangelical Christian men, and one hundred evangelical Christian women on *Christian Mingle*. The sample was accessed and collected through the registration of membership on *Christian Mingle*, which then allows one to browse, search, and filter member profiles on *Christian Mingle*. I quote from the profiles of some *Christian Mingle* members, as their text is made publicly available and anonymous. Members' true identity, such as birth names and contact information is protected from view of other members on all *Christian Mingle* members' profiles; rather, members are presented to one another under 'member ID' names, which consist of member-chosen combinations of letters and/or numbers. In the present thesis, the sample has been collected and presented anonymously. Not even member ID's are presented here or used in the research, which has therefore breached no ethical guidelines. The purpose of this sample is to investigate and discuss any correlations found between the specifications for a girlfriend, wife, or mother that single evangelical Christian men between the ages of 20-30 years are searching for, and how single evangelical Christian women between the ages of 20-30 years present themselves to men on the site. The sample consisted

of the first 100 randomly generated profiles of single, evangelical Christian men between the ages of 20-30 years, located within 300 miles of Washington, D.C. in the United States of America, with the requirement that their profile also presented at least one photograph. The same conditions applied when searching for evangelical Christian women. The ages of 20-30 years was chosen as an age bracket as it is between the ages of 20-30 that many singles begin looking for a relationship or marriage partner. Washington D.C. was chosen as the location, as *Christian Mingle* is an American-founded company, although the niche dating website does provide matches internationally.

Male Member Match-Specifications for Women	Percentage out of 100 profiles
Specified desire for a woman 10+ years younger	6%
Specified desire for a woman 5-9 years younger	75%
Specified desire for a woman 1-4 years younger	19%
Specified importance of a 'slender', 'athletic', or 'washboard' female body type	41%
Specified importance of women's regular church attendance and/or faith	46%
Specified importance of women's higher education (a BA degree or higher)	19%
Specified importance of women's positive character traits (i.e. kind, loyal, trustworthy, etc.)	5%
Specified importance of women desiring to settle down (i.e. marriage)	15%

**Table 1A: Match Specifications of Single Evangelical Christian Men Ages 20-30, on *Christian Mingle*, c. 2015, Based within a 300 Mile Radius of Washington, D.C., USA**

Table 1A shows percentages of evangelical Christian men, ages 20-30, who have specific requirements in regard to being 'desirable' evangelical Christian women. Out of one hundred

profiles, almost all males specified that they wanted a woman who is significantly younger than them. The overwhelming 75 percent of men who are looking for a woman 5-9 years younger than their own age, rather than someone their own age or older, raises the question of whether men are looking for compliance and dependency in a woman? Women who are younger could be easier to dominate; they still appear youthful, their bodies have no evidence of post-pregnancy, such as stretch marks, or ageing. Interestingly, however, the requirement of physical attraction at 41 percent was almost equivalent in importance for male members' match-specifications to a woman's attendance at church. In other words her appearance is more or less as important as her Christian faith. Significantly, the other 54 percent of male profiles sampled for this specification of faith left this field in their profiles blank. 41 percent of male members indicated on *Christian Mingle* that they wanted a slim female body type. When given the choice of searching for women with a body type categorized under 'slender', 'athletic', 'washboard', 'I could lose a few', 'full-figured', or 'a few extra pounds', 41 percent of male members specified that they desired a female body type of 'slender', 'athletic', or 'washboard' [washboard abdominals]. The other 59 percent of male profiles sampled did not indicate any specific female body-type requirement for their matches, which is the default setting for those who have not yet filled out that particular match-specification. This suggests that not all men are confident enough of their own looks to be too prescriptive, or they may not be aesthetically preoccupied. This is a relatively hopeful statistic, but worryingly, only 19 percent of men were interested in finding a woman with a degree in higher education - specifically one who has obtained a BA degree, a Masters' degree, or Doctorate-level degree -



indicating that finding a woman of developed intelligence is unimportant for 81 percent of evangelical Christian men, ages 20-30.

Only 5 percent of male profiles mentioned specific positive character traits (i.e. kind, loyal, trustworthy, etc.) that they desired in a woman; in fact, *Christian Mingle* offers no pre-formatted list of options for desired character traits in a partner at all. It is left to members to specify character qualities that they are searching for in their own profiles. It is important to note that *Christian Mingle* provides an option to specify a desired height, body-type, eye-color, hair-color, church denomination, and regular church attendance, in a partner when searching for matches; however, there is no existence of an option allowing one to choose from a list of desired character traits. It appears, that *Christian Mingle*, like many other dating websites, is encouraging physical attractiveness primarily over character, yet moderates photos through a 'modesty filter,' and also companions the option of specifying physical preferences in a mate with specifications for church and faith, in order to fit the website into the 'Christian' niche of dating websites. A dating website review on *Singleroots* indicated that this too caught their attention. "Sometimes it feels as if *Spark Networks* [owner of *Christian Mingle*] created a site for the online Christian dating stereotype. Take guys + girls + Bible study options + prayer requests, add some chat features and a dash of sending smiles to each other, top it off with an *ichthus* logo, and voila! A Christian dating site."<sup>198</sup>

15 percent of male profiles sampled also indicated that they were specifically looking for a wife.

Even though 85 percent of men did not specifically mention an immediate desire for marriage,

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<sup>198</sup> *Singleroots*, "Christian Mingle Review 2015: Christian Singles Tell it Like it is", published June 12, 2015, accessed August 20, 2015, <http://www.singleroots.com/christian-mingle-review/>.

many men did mention in their self- 'introduction' that long-term they were searching for women who would be happy to stay at home and start a family. The ideal they evoked seemed to be a contemporary incarnation of the 'Angel in the House', embodying, also, the 1950's domestic ideal with a slim body. For example, one male member, age 26, writes in his introduction that the top requirements he has for his future partner are: that she does not easily take offense; she must not hold grudges; she cannot want to nor try to lead in the relationship or in the home; she must love her family and must have no interest in a career apart from being a wife and mother; and, most importantly, she must love God.<sup>199</sup> Another male member, age 29, indicates the importance of virtue and faith, and desires someone who can influence him to be stronger in his own faith. He states that he is looking for a woman who he can spend the rest of his life with – a woman who can help him to grow in his faith, develop as a man, and build a family.<sup>200</sup> This seems to echo the ideal of the 'Angel in the House', in which the woman is seen as man's helper and redeemer. Male member, age 24, simply expresses his desire for a wife and children, by stating that he wants to find the woman that God wants him to find. He expresses that his greatest desire is to be a husband and a father.<sup>201</sup> Yet another male member, age 29, introduces his profile with the following:

My ideal match has her own unique personality, but still has respect, love, and honor even if we don't agree on everything. She loves old-fashioned values and the domestic arts, doesn't think it's boring or backwards to be a wife and mother, or means she's any less independent to raise a family. She takes care of herself, maybe likes sports or outdoor activities, and hopefully cooks healthy when she can! (Major points if she loves Pinterest, interior design, and vintage fashion.) She loves babies, and welcomes the

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<sup>199</sup> *Christian Mingle*, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://christianmingle.com>.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

challenges and joys of parenthood. She has a sense of humor and isn't super-serious or over-sensitive. Maybe she has quirks and flaws and shortcomings, and that's okay. She also needs to be someone who is gracious and patient as we grow together. Plus, wouldn't it be nice to have someone to do the laundry and dishes with, and snuggle on the sofa with?<sup>202</sup>

It appears that although this person does not want a servant, the overall desire of evangelical Christian men has not changed much over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although, again, there is no clear evidence in the collected *Christian Mingle* sample that all evangelical Christian men expect a woman to submit to male headship, there is supporting evidence found in this sample that it is not entirely an ideology of the past; the contemporary ideology of femininity seems to be an all-encompassing godly girlfriend, wife and/or mother, with a slim body and pretty face. The profiles of men which were indicative of a desire to marry, however, also expressed a desire to want to love and provide for their future wives; there did not seem to be a pervasively dominant desire to rule over their wives with an iron rod. Male member, age 29, writes in his 'Introduction' that he believes his spouse should be viewed by him as his queen and a princess of God. He states that if he loves God, he should, therefore, love his spouse and treat her 'right'. Another male, age 28, expresses a desire to serve and provide for a woman, and have a godly life together.<sup>203</sup> Given that male headship is characteristic of evangelical couples, it may be that conformity to this norm is assured and does not need to be specified by men.

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

Female Member Self-Specifications to Men	Percentage out of 100 profiles
Specified desire for a man 10+ years older	17%
Specified desire for a man 5-9 years older	62%
Specified desire for a man 1-4 years older	21%
Specified their own body type	95%
Specified their own body type as 'slender', 'athletic' or 'washboard' female body type	48%
Specified they attend church regularly and/or place importance on their faith	84%
Specified they have a higher education (a BA degree or higher)	54%
Specified their own positive character traits (i.e. kind, loyal, trustworthy, etc.)	54%
Specified they are looking to settle down (i.e. desire husband)	33%

**Table 1B: Self-Specifications of Single Evangelical Christian Women Ages 20-30, on *Christian Mingle*, c. 2015, Based within a 300 Mile Radius of Washington, D.C., USA**

Table 1B shows percentages regarding self-representation within a group of one hundred evangelical Christian women's, aged 20-30, profiles on *Christian Mingle*. 17 percent of women, in regard to the age-range they were seeking a partner in, specified that they desired a man who was 10 or more years older, 62 percent of women specified that they desired a man who was 5-9 years older, and 21 percent of women specified that they desired a man who was 1-4 years older. There was little indication of desire for seniority over men. This correlated fairly evenly with the age-range specifications that evangelical Christian men were looking for. It's important to note that although the majority of men were seeking women who were significantly younger, the majority of women were equally specifying a desire for being matched with a significantly older man.

95 percent of women specified their body type on their dating profile, and the remaining 5 percent left the field blank, ranking it the highest specification to be filled out for women, when

it came to what they wanted their matches to know about them. Of those women who specified their body type, 48 percent labeled their physique as 'slender', 'athletic' or 'washboard'. The other 52 percent of women had either 'average', 'I should lose a few', 'full-figured' or 'a few extra pounds' listed as their body type. In correlation to the 41 percent of males who specified 'slender', 'athletic', or 'washboard' body types as preconditions to dating, it is assumed that the latter 52 percent of women who did not fit this body type would be filtered out of the search requirements of nearly half the sample of men's profiles. In considering the women who have listed a sort of slim, fit, body-type, it is wondered, if they truly are this body type, or if they have felt some sort of pressure to attain to this contemporary evangelical ideology of femininity. If they are not truly of a slim, fit, body-type, It is wondered if they have merely labeled themselves as such on *Christian Mingle* in order to attract a higher quantity of matches and interest from men. 52 percent of the women sampled on *Christian Mingle* who specified their own body type listed a body type other than 'slender', 'athletic', or 'washboard', however, the 2010 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources provided statistics that showed 64 percent of adult American women ages 20 or older were considered to be overweight (BMI of 25 to 29.9) or obese (BMI of 30 or higher).<sup>204</sup> Also, although *Christian Mingle* itself seems to moderate the way women present themselves, many of the women sampled strived to be perceived in a way which indicated their a physical modesty. For example, a female member, age 20, introduces herself as an 'old-fashioned' girl, who believes in modesty. Another female member, age 23, even felt it was important to offer information regarding her virginity to male members who

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<sup>204</sup> "Overweight and Obesity Statistics," *National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases*, October 2012, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-statistics/Pages/overweight-obesity-statistics.aspx>.

she could potentially match with, stating publicly in her profile that she is still a virgin because she is waiting for the right man to come into her life, and also desires to know a man on a deeper level before becoming sexually intimate with him. She even invites male members to message her if they would like to know more.<sup>205</sup> It is key to note that although *Christian Mingle* and similar missions of the evangelical church attempt to moderate modesty and place importance on the ideal of modesty, that the majority of evangelical Christian women themselves do not seem reject it; instead they desire to attain it and present their sexuality and demeanor in way which exhibits modesty.

Table 1B also indicates that 84 percent of women specify that their faith is important to them, ranking it the second-highest self-specification indicated after body-size. By comparison, only 46 percent of men indicated so. The higher percentage of women who listed faith may simply be due to the fact that it men did not fill out as many match-specification fields as women did. In fact, it seemed overall that women put greater effort into completing their dating profiles than men did, as evidenced by the higher percentages and, although not calculated exactly, there was a much larger quantity of profiles which had an 'Introduction' by women, rather than men. It appears that women were looking for men to equally support them in their faith, and not fulfill a domestic role. Female member, age 20, indicates this desire to grow with a man in faith, not merely be an influence to him, stating that she is looking for someone who she can grow with together in their relationship with God, and she expresses that their faith should be central to their relationship. Female member, age 29, also expresses the importance of equality in sharing a faith, stating that foremost, Jesus is her savior and the most important thing in her

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<sup>205</sup> *Christian Mingle*, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://christianmingle.com>.

life, and it is important that she is 'equally yoked' with a Christian man who holds the same beliefs.<sup>206</sup> This sample supports the notion that men were less likely to express a desire to share faith equally with a partner, rather than be supported in his faith.

54 percent of women also specified that they had been awarded a degree in higher education on their *Christian Mingle* profiles, placing an emphasis on their intelligence and desiring it to be noticed by their matches. This contrasts starkly with only 19 percent of men who placed importance on their matches being in possession of a degree in higher education. Women on such sites are therefore likely to experience a sense of intellectual devaluation from men. 54 percent of women also specified positive character traits (i.e. kind, loyal, trustworthy, etc.) about themselves to present to male members. 28 year old female member described herself as a vibrant, 'happy-go lucky', and independent woman, who is easy-going and enjoys laughter. Another member, age 20, describes herself as extremely family-oriented, and loyal to her family and friends.<sup>207</sup> Since *Christian Mingle* does not allow for pre-formatted options to describe character traits, unlike the physical, it is to be wondered whether these young women see their 'Introduction' as an opportunity to present themselves as more than just a 'pretty face,' but rather a whole person with developed interests, personality and intelligence. However, only 5 percent of males sampled specified any particular character traits that they required of a partner; character traits were far succeeded by faith and body-type specification in male members' match requirements. Although this *Christian Mingle* sample is focused on the self-specifications of women to men, and the specifications that men are seeking in women, it

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

is important to note that the majority of women's profiles sampled did specify that they were seeking men who were intelligent, had positive character traits, were physically in-shape, and were looking to settle down. This is evidence of a prescribed male ideology that men are being held against, and yet it is notable that women in this sample were not expecting men to support them economically, as they might have done before the advent of Second Wave feminism, which appears to have had an impact on evangelical as well as secular women. They have at least low-level expectations of self-reliance and economic independence.

Finally, as one might expect from a site that is prescriptively heterosexual in character, 33 percent of women sampled indicated that they were searching for a husband and/or marriage in a match, nearly double the 15 percent of male profiles that indicated that they were searching for a wife. A female member, age 28, introduced her profile with her desire to marry, stating that she is looking for a Christian man who is emotionally and mentally ready to commit to a long-term, 'Christ-centered' relationship, that will hopefully lead to marriage and having children together.<sup>208</sup> However, what is notable here is that far from presenting themselves in terms of a 1950s housewife, the majority of women searching for a husband also indicated that they have been accustomed to an independent and 'adventurous' lifestyle. One female member, age 25, expresses her desire for a home life and a career, stating that she is a hard working professional, who is looking to settle down and build a career-empire.<sup>209</sup> Many women valorized their independence, implying a desire for a man, rather than a need. Female member, age 27, clarifies to male members that she has her own house, car, and views on life, and is

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.



extremely hard working, attending school and work full-time. She expresses that she does not have any children of her own, but would like at least one, eventually. Her profile concludes with a brief self-description, stating that she is adventurous, spontaneous, relaxed, and 'silly.'<sup>210</sup>

There is no clear evidence that the young women sampled present themselves as willing subordinates of men and male headship. Rather, it seems that they are seeking men with whom they can share their faith; to encourage and be encouraged by; to start a family with, yet still retain a sense of independence and individuality, as many expressed their unique interests, intelligence, and character traits. In expressing their independence and education, the women sampled give evidence of the impact of loosely feminist ideas. The men, in this admittedly small indicative sample, were more socially conservative. Evangelical Christian men were more specific in proclaiming their need of women who would support them in their faith, and care for them and the family, if they were to start one together. Interestingly, it was the men who specified a desire for a wife who expressed the need to be supportive and ancillary, rather than independent. Let us now attempt to contextualize these findings in evangelical theology and hermeneutics.

### **The Sexuality and Modesty of the Evangelical Christian Woman**

Conservative evangelical author Stasi Eldredge looks at the Genesis narrative of creation quite differently from the female doctrine of subordination; it is exemplary of God's design that men, she insists, *need* women. "When God creates Eve, he calls her an *ezer kenegdo*. 'It is not good

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

for the man to be alone, I shall make him [an *ezer kenegdo*]’ (Gen. 2:18). Robert Alter, a biblical text translator and interpreter, notes that this phrase is ‘notoriously difficult to translate.’ The various attempts we have in English are ‘helper’ or ‘companion.’ The word *ezer* is used only twenty other places in the entire Hebrew Bible. And in every other instance the person being described is God himself, when you need him to come through for you desperately.”<sup>211</sup>

Eldredge believes God intrinsically created woman to be a companion and helper to man. It is not good for *man* to be alone; thus woman was created, to provide a companion for him in his most desperate need. A patriarchal society suggests that women need men, are helpless without men, and require a man to provide for her, so women should focus on attaining physical beauty so as to attract a man to do such for her. However, Eldredge implies that it is rather men who need women, desperately. Despite this translation and interpretation provided by Eldredge, however, women in the church have continued to be held to a precondition of acceptability, through their submissiveness, piety, modesty, nurturing demeanor and slim, disciplined body and pretty face, and this understanding of women has been long-developing in the Christian church. As Nicola Slee points out, “Christianity developed a distinctive understanding of woman as the ‘weaker sex’, which has had catastrophic effects on women’s self-image, well-being and treatment by men down the ages.”<sup>212</sup> This has been detrimental to both men and women, as the emotional and physical needs of men from women are ignored, and the role of women in a male-female relationship is belittled. It would seem that a classic patriarchal reversal is at work here. As men’s dependency on women is ignored, women are

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<sup>211</sup> Stasi Eldredge and John Eldredge. *Captivating: Discovering the Secret of a Woman’s Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2005), eBook edition, p. 52-53.

<sup>212</sup> Nicola Slee, *Faith and Feminism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2003), p. 37.

rendered economically and psychologically dependent on men, out of fear that men's intrinsic need for women will be discovered, and women will therefore seek to dominate men.

However, domination is not the aim of feminists or feminist theologians. As Elaine Storkey, herself an evangelical, states, "feminists are not interested in living a man's life. The whole point is that they want to live an oppression-free woman's life."<sup>213</sup> This desire is echoed in the profiles of the women sampled on *Christian Mingle*; women who want a husband and a family, yet still want to be known for their intelligence, character, individuality and independence.

Evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem also makes a case for this equality amongst men and women in the first chapter of his book *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*:

Every time we talk to each other as men and women, we should remember that the person we are talking to is a creature of God who is more like God than anything else in the universe, and men and women share that status equally. Therefore we should treat men and women with equal dignity and we should think of men and women as having equal value. We are both in the image of God, and we have been since the very first day that God created us. "In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Nowhere does the Bible say that men are more in God's image than women. Men and women share equally in the tremendous privilege of being in the image of God. The Bible thus corrects the errors of male dominance and male superiority that have come as a result of sin and that have been seen in nearly all cultures in the history of the world. Wherever men are thought to be better than women, wherever husbands act as selfish "dictators," wherever wives are forbidden to have their own jobs outside the home or to vote or to own property or to be educated, wherever women are treated as inferior, wherever there is abuse or violence against women or rape of female infanticide or polygamy or harems, the biblical truth of equality in the image of God is being denied. To all societies and cultures where these

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<sup>213</sup> Elaine Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 116.

things occur, we must proclaim that the very first page of God's Word bears a fundamental and irrefutable witness against these evils<sup>214</sup>

Although Grudem considers himself to be anti-feminist and a promoter of complementarian theology, he seems to be self-contradictory in the above statement. Complementarity is not a notion of equality, but rather holds that men and women have different yet complimentary roles in their churches, homes, and marriages, and is inclusive of a belief in male headship within these roles. Complementarian theology asserts that men and women are equal but different, however, the notion of male headship and exclusion of women from certain roles suggests that men and women are in fact not equal. So, it is interesting to note that Grudem does, in this instance, acknowledge the equality of men and women in the image of God, and refers to male dominance and superiority as an error and a sin. However, as long as women are held against certain preconditions of acceptability, not merely in the evangelical church but in secular society as well, this oppression-free ideal of men and women as equals in the image of God will not commence. Although there was no proven evidence of the willingness of evangelical women to submit to male headship on *Christian Mingle*, but rather the expression of equality in a relationship, still many women felt the need to clarify and exhibit a sense of modesty to the Christian men they were matched with.

The moderation of modesty on *Christian Mingle* is indicative of an attempt to control women's bodies, to the extent that they have been limited to nothing but a headshot at first glance, since the photo and age of each *Christian Mingle* member is the first thing that comes up in the search, with nothing to define them but the aesthetics or merit of their faces. However, the

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<sup>214</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2006), p. 26.

Christian expectation, and, in the case of some evangelical missions such as *Christian Mingle*, the enforcement of modesty, is nothing new to the evangelical church. Although modesty can also be in reference to one's demeanor – a lack of pride, humility, or lack of vanity – it has widely become known in the Christian church as a reference, in the case of women, to one's sexuality; the way in which a woman dresses and presents herself sexually to the men who will 'own' that sexuality when married to her. Christian women are widely encouraged to moderate their clothing choices and demeanor so as not to tempt men. Evangelical churches make it their mission to educate young women about their sexual appeal, and how to suppress it so as not to cause their Christian 'brothers' to sin through lust and lose their purity. Once again, the responsibility for the purity of Christian men is transferred to Christian women. This warning against the committing of lust, and the teaching within the evangelical church to prevent such sin is derived from Matthew 5:28: "The ideal set by Jesus for marital unity and indissolubility was paralleled by his other ideals. He criticized not only the act of lust but the lustful imagination: 'Everyone that looks on a woman to lust after her, has committed adultery already with her in his heart' (Matt. 5.28f)."<sup>215</sup> Within the evangelical churches especially, to be sexually active before marriage is viewed as irresponsible, unholy, and sinful.<sup>216</sup> Parrinder explains: "Sexual union before marriage has always been condemned, even when there is an intention to marry, since traditional church doctrine laid all sexual acts within the framework of a marriage."<sup>217</sup> Evangelical missions, such as *LifeWay Ministries'* programme *True Love Waits*, are committed to teaching sexual purity "through the lens of Scripture" to high school and

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<sup>215</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sexual Morality in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996), p. 208.

<sup>216</sup> Carter Heyward, "Sexual Ethics and the Church: A Response" in *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, edited by Jeanne Becher (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), p. 262.

<sup>217</sup> Parrinder, *Sexual Morality*, p. 238.

university students, and helping them to understand their sexuality “in light of the Gospel.”<sup>218</sup> *True Love Waits* began in 1987<sup>219</sup> and is one of the most well known evangelical dating and marriage preparation movements today. According to the *LifeWay* Ministries website for *True Love Waits*, “Over the years True Love Waits has witnessed hundreds of thousands of young people commit their sexual purity to God, while at the same time offering the promise of hope and restoration in Christ for all who have sinned sexually. It has been a movement to further spread the biblical message of sex and purity to a younger generation.”<sup>220</sup> The practice of behaving modestly in a sexual manner is encouraged and viewed by evangelicals as biblical. However, since Matthew 5:28 may indicate that looking upon a woman lustfully should be equated with adultery, women have come to be held responsible for dressing in a way which does not tempt men to look upon them as a sexual object. There is a slogan commonly used in the evangelical church, ‘modest is hottest’; the message to young Christian women is that Christian men find modestly dressed and behaving women the most attractive. *Christianity Today* published an article in 2011 entitled “How ‘Modest is Hottest’ is Hurting Christian Women.”

The Christian rhetoric of modesty, rather than offering believers an alternative to the sexual objectification of women, often continues the objectification, just in a different form. As the Christian stance typically goes, women are to cover their bodies as a mark of spiritual integrity. Too much skin is seen as a distraction that garners inappropriate

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<sup>218</sup> “True Love Waits,” *LifeWay*, accessed October 26, 2015, <http://www.lifeway.com/n/Product-Family/True-Love-Waits>

<sup>219</sup> “True Love Waits – History,” *LifeWay*, accessed October 26, 2015, <http://www.lifeway.com/History/True-Love-Waits/c/N-1z0zq7rZ1z13wiu?intcmp=TLWMain-Hero-History-20131216>

<sup>220</sup> *LifeWay*.

attention, causes our brothers to stumble, and overshadows our character.

Consequently, the female body is perceived as both a temptation and a distraction to the Christian community. The female body is beautiful, but in a dangerous way. This particular approach to modesty is effective because it is rooted in shame, and shame is a powerful motivator. That's the first red flag. Additionally concerning about this approach is that it perpetuates the objectification of women in a pietistic form. It treats women's bodies not as glorious reflections of the image of God, but as sources of temptation that must be hidden. It is the other side of the same objectifying coin: one side exploits the female body, while the other side seems to be ashamed of it. Both sides reduce the female body to a sexual object.<sup>221</sup>

Evangelical women are caught in a patriarchal double-bind. They are meant to hide their bodies and all that physically defines them as female and yet our sample shows that women's body shape and pretty face is important to men – as much or more than their Christian virtue. This evangelical ideology of femininity requires women to be disciplined and have control over their bodies, and that self-control should be visible. On the other hand, it should not be so visible that they are seen as immodest; all that suggests sexuality or is an invitation for lust, needs to be contained and covered, controlled, in effect, by the patriarchal church. Carter Heyward suggests that the anti-sexual stance of the Christian church is rooted in the anti-female foundations of the church.<sup>222</sup> It is ironic, as Lisa Isherwood points out, that women are

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<sup>221</sup> Sharon Hodde Miller. "How 'Modest is Hottest' is Hurting Christian Women," in *Christianity Today* (2011), accessed August 28, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/december/how-modest-is-hottest-is-hurting-christian-women.html?paging=off> .

<sup>222</sup> Heyward, "Sexual Ethics", p. 262.

encouraged to be in control of their bodies, yet are meant to give up their control in all pertaining to their sexuality.<sup>223</sup> Perhaps this is why women seem to accept this paradox, as exemplified by the evangelical women on *Christian Mingle*, who chose not only to allow the website to moderate their photos, but who specifically indicated compliance with an ideology of unsullied female purity in their virginity and modesty.

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<sup>223</sup> Lisa Isherwood, "Sex and Body Politics: Issues for Feminist Theology" in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*, edited by Lisa Isherwood (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.), p. 30.



## Conclusion

Despite the aesthetic pressure that the contemporary diet, beauty and dating industries exert on women, both Christian and secular, I conclude this thesis with hope that the evangelical woman can begin to discover her true identity in Christ and know that through his works on the Cross she is loved and free from the moulds that society says she must conform to. Rather, she can be at peace in her own body simply because she is created in the image of God and she is uniquely loved by God, and created to be inherently loveable without being perfect. To seek female perfection is, as Raphael has pointed out many times to me in conversation, to seek an idol of the feminine who, as perfect, would have hubristically exceeded the conditions of her own finitude as a creation of God.

In this conclusion I will discuss how I believe this at peace-ness with the body can be achieved. It is evident that from the nineteenth century to the present day that the ideology of femininity has evolved and continues to do so, yet far from being emancipated from past ideologies, the submissive ideal of the 'Angel in the House' still lingers in the most conservative of evangelical churches and missions, and the ideology of the slim, beautiful, 'domestic goddess' once incarnated in the ideal of the '1950s housewife' is still widely admired and sought after by evangelical Christian men, as indicated by the investigation of *Christian Mingle* in Chapter 3. Although *Christian Mingle's* profiles of evangelical Christian women suggest that they actually desire to be an equal in a relationship, and regard their femininity as encompassing intelligence, independence, character, holiness, and embodiment, they still, however, willingly comply with

the evangelical requirements of modesty and self-effacement. This paradoxical elevation of, at once, a sexualised beauty and sexual modesty has trapped evangelical women somewhere between the popular ideal of the beautiful, sexualized 'dolls', and the Christian ideal of a wife who poses no distracting temptations to male desire.

Kim Chernin rightly observes that "If we have satisfied ourselves that our culture plays a significant role in encouraging women to disparage their bodies, we must nevertheless still understand the tendency shown by women to accept the negative image our culture assigns to us."<sup>224</sup> Feminist theologians such as Lisa Isherwood, Melissa Raphael, Elaine Storkey and Carter Heyward offer seeds of hope that women can actively resist the negative image assigned by our culture described by Chernin, as well as the pressures of usually fruitlessly attempting to attain a slim body and pretty face that last as such into middle and old age. Rather than seeking to fulfill an evangelical ideology of femininity that incorporates nineteenth-century and contemporary discourse on women, and attempts to adhere to prescribed evangelical diets and dating websites, breeding competition amongst her Christian sisters, a woman can instead find affirmation and security in Christian sisterhood. Within the evangelical Christian community, there are opportunities for feminists to nurture a sense of mutuality rather than competition. Carter Heyward discusses the importance of mutuality in her classic text, *Touching Our Strength*. As humans were created for relationship, therefore relationships that are unequal in power or competitive in nature are damaging to all who are involved, as they cause

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<sup>224</sup> Chernin, *Womansize*, p. 127.

disconnection and disharmony.<sup>225</sup> She asserts that mutuality can be achieved through love and forgiveness<sup>226</sup>, and the understanding of what each person wants and does not want within the relationship.<sup>227</sup> Through these actions, Heyward believes that mutual relationship between men and women, and sisterhood with other women, can be achieved. Particularly within the Church, Heyward is hopeful that women can have a liberative experience, where they feel respected, loved, and equal. The evangelical church can provide opportunities for women to experience mutuality through social events within the church community, which provide opportunities for women to form friendships with other women and men; or through pastoral counseling for women, where a female pastor or leader within the church can serve as a mediator, as women work through (as I did) negative relationship experiences with men and other women, and can, through the biblical practice of forgiveness as discussed by Heyward, learn to love and feel loved again. Where women can take on leadership roles within the evangelical church (even in churches where they cannot take on the role of an elder or pastor), it would provide someone for women within the church community to talk to, and they could speak to women specifically about women's difficult experiences of embodiment in a patriarchal culture. Programmes such as the evangelical movement *Life Hurts God Heals*<sup>228</sup>, which is a ministry program that offers support for youth and young adults who are struggling with addictions, depression, eating disorders, or abuse<sup>229</sup>, could be re-shaped and advertised specifically to adult women, particularly those who are struggling with abuse, self-worth, body-image, eating disorders,

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<sup>225</sup> Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength; The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 12-13.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110-112.

<sup>228</sup> "Life Hurts God Heals," *Share the Hope*, accessed October 27, 2015,

<http://www.sharethehope.org/programs/support-care/support-05/>

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

abortion, or other crises. In fact, Trinity Cheltenham, an evangelical Christian church in Cheltenham, England which I attend, has just started a 12- week trial run of *Life Hurts God Heals*, which they re-wrote specifically for vulnerable women, and they currently have 15 women participating in the course. If feedback is positive, they plan on running the course several times a year. Trinity Cheltenham also hosts the New Wine Conference *Splendour* every October. New Wine is a network and movement of evangelical Christian churches in the United Kingdom<sup>230</sup>, and *Splendour* is a conference exclusively for women, with teaching and speaking by evangelical Christian women. The conference tagline is to “empower women” and celebrate women for all God has created them to be within their churches, homes, families, and communities.<sup>231</sup> In October 2015, Over 800 women attended the *Splendour* conference, filling the church seating capacity. Through mutuality and positive evangelical missions such as *Life Hurts God Heals*, and *Splendour*, for women, it is with hope that women within the evangelical community can begin to feel supported, safe, and encouraged to be reconciled not only with their physical bodies, but within the Church body, as well.

Feminist theology has had varying degrees of impact on the movements described above. Some impact will be unacknowledged because it is often impolitic to do so. But feminist theology, too, can also help us to revisit the evangelical Christian woman’s source of identity, which must shift from the attainment of the prescribed ideal feminine to a woman who is spiritually freed from the aesthetical-physical boundaries of her body without disowning its worth by a new form of asceticism.

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<sup>230</sup> “About Us,” *New Wine*, accessed October 28, 2015, <https://www.new-wine.org/home/about-us>.

<sup>231</sup> “Splendour,” *New Wine*, accessed October 28, 2015, <https://www.new-wine.org/events/new-wine-women-splendour-cheltenham>.

Melissa Raphael discusses the role of feminist theology in resisting oppressive ideologies of femininity a 2014 article in which she describes the idolization of the feminine. Raphael refers to Natasha Walter's 'living doll' and discusses how "An idol of the feminine is a carefully made-up substitute for real female presence that makes women its puppet and men the devotees of an appearance alone—a devotion constituted by sexual-aesthetic desire rather than moral love. Women cannot, then, become the subjects of their own experience until they have destroyed their own idol. They could not come alive until they had killed off their own death."<sup>232</sup> As women begin to 'kill off' this estranged and estranging feminine ideal (idol), they can be reconciled with their own bodies, and come alive again as their character, intelligence, emotions, and spirituality once more inhabit their own body. This is a long and complex process, but Raphael insists on the possibility of female becoming, where a woman is not constituted by patriarchal preconditions and desires, but rather can be uniquely herself.

From a non-Christian feminist perspective, then, Raphael discusses how female embodiment can exceed its projection as a screen for the desires of others.<sup>233</sup> By presenting an activist, positive, constructive theology at the same time as a critical one, feminist theologians like Raphael write in hope that the act of idoloclasm will open women's imagination to a forgotten and as yet unforeseeable woman made in the image of the forgotten or not-yet-known God.<sup>234</sup>

By viewing this idolization of the ideal woman through the lens of feminist theology, we can revisit the common stereotype among anti-feminist Christians, which Elaine Storkey addresses,

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<sup>232</sup> Raphael, "A Patrimony of Idols," p. 252.

<sup>233</sup> Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, p. 72.

<sup>234</sup> Raphael, "A Patrimony of Idols," p. 258-259.

that feminists seek to dominate men and prove their superiority in both the home and their public life. She asserts that this is a misconception, stating that “most forms of feminism eschew competition, and domination has never been a feminist aim.”<sup>235</sup> Storkey believes that the idealization of Christian femininity widely presented by the church is a distorted picture of Christian womanhood. “The unquestioned ‘rightness’ of traditional roles has many women in its grip, and prevents them from getting within a mile of growing into maturity and knowing real freedom in Christ”<sup>236</sup> However, this does not mean that the Christian woman is free to be autonomous; Storkey maintains that freedom in Christ means freedom to be human, to be Christ-like, to be loving; however, “we cannot go beyond God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is no beyond. Human autonomy, personhood without God, does not exist. God is the very condition of our being.”<sup>237</sup> Freedom in Christ allows Christian women to be free from the fleshy moulds that society says they must conform to, and allows for freedom from the roles that a patriarchal society has required of them. Although this breaking of moulds need not entail the most radical changes in the roles of women - many Christian women who are open to feminist ideas are happy to *choose* to be in traditional roles within the home and family and should not be despised or made to feel less free or whole as a person in choosing them - this traditional role should also not be the norm for *all* Christian women.<sup>238</sup> Storkey states:

What is interesting about the biblical references to marriage (and to family life too) is that they leave a great deal of space for differences. There are no rigidly prescribed roles, no specified division of labour within the family, no stereotypic notions of what it is to be a manly husband or a good housewife. (The most famous housewife in the Bible, the

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<sup>235</sup> Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism*, p. 115.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

woman in Proverbs 31, was a long call from our watered-down, distorted, modern 'Christian' ideal). These, then, are all cultural ideas that we have loaded into marriage and the family, and it is the gripping power of these, which destroys Christian creativity.<sup>239</sup>

Storkey also states that because motherhood and marriage have been, [particularly in the evangelical Christian church], widely viewed as a woman's true role, single women are often viewed as 'half-women.' Although the indicative *Christian Mingle* sample in Chapter 3 offers hope that there are evangelical Christian women who desire to be valued for their intelligence and character, there is also evidence indicating that single evangelical Christian women are also seeking affirmation and love through acceptance based on their presentation of self, largely through appearance and modest demeanor.<sup>240</sup> Christian sisterhood and community should bring the affirmation, recognition, and love that single Christian woman may feel is denied to them by men<sup>241</sup>; women should not feel a need to compete with one another, but rather affirm and build one another up in a community that is politically as well as spiritually self-aware. Women in evangelical churches can incorporate feminist ideas and values by being prophetic in their witness and resistance to oppression through friendship, (co)-counselling, Bible-study groups that welcome feminist hermeneutics, teaching other women, and making the most of the fact that evangelical churches have non-sacerdotal traditions and therefore represent many possibilities for the democratization of the sacred: the prophesy, teaching and witness of all believers in the Spirit, including women.

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171-172.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Storkey notes that, even within the Christian church, women are dominated by male definitions of beauty: sexual attractiveness and youthfulness; a slim body and pretty face. This definition of attractiveness and distorted view of beauty, she asserts, needs to be challenged. "It must be discerned how women are to be treated in God's terms and to move our society from being one which debases and devalues them to one in which they have dignity, equality, and freedom to be really human. God created people as male and female, and this difference will always be there. What need not be there are the penalties women pay for their sex in so many areas of life."<sup>242</sup> Storkey also offers practical answers to how problems regarding a patriarchal church can be addressed today. Patriarchy, she believes, is the result of deep-rooted sin in the human hearts, which shape human and social structures and distort relationships between men and women. She states that although radical feminists may hold that male-produced patriarchy is beyond redemption in any sense, Christian feminists have the real possibility of change and reconciliation.<sup>243</sup> As women are reconciled to their bodies, they begin to rediscover who they truly are. The estrangement of women from their own bodies is also addressed by Lisa Isherwood. She discusses this repudiation of one's own body that women have experienced through trying to adhere to a prescribed appearance and demeanor, as well the consequences that follow: from eating disorders and low self-esteem, to an "inability to claim passion and power within the world."<sup>244</sup> Women need to journey back to their bodies, and re-inhabit the skin that holds the "divine incarnate."<sup>245</sup> Isherwood concludes that we can find beauty in resting, caring for, and feeding our bodies, and we should celebrate our bodies through doing

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<sup>242</sup> Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism*, p. 178.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>244</sup> Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, p. 143.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*



so.<sup>246</sup> It is with hope that the more women begin to be reconciled with their bodies, they will also be able to see themselves as more than mere flesh and a pretty face; no longer estranged from themselves, they will begin to see beauty in their intelligence, gifts or talents, independence and character; begin to see that their femininity encompasses so much more than just their aesthetic appeal.

The *Christian Mingle* sample in Chapter 3 indicates that evangelical women are changing, despite evangelical missions such as Shamblin's *Weigh Down Diet*, and despite the best efforts of conservatives such as Shedd, Grudem and others; evangelical women have already responded to and been influenced by feminist ideas, and are beginning to express a desire to be known as independent human beings who want to be seen as more than pretty face, and who want to achieve more than a slim body. They want to be known for their intelligence and their character, and desire to be heard and seen as an equal in their relationship with and to men. Although Grudem expresses in his books, such as *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism* and *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to Key Questions*, a fear that evangelical feminism is rendering the manhood of Adam and Jesus as unimportant, we can counter his conservatism, not by dismissing the masculinity of biblical figures or of men within the Church, but instead by using evangelical feminism as a tool to elevate women to an equality to men; not by making them honorary men, but rather by celebrating and encouraging their womanhood. This can, in sum, be achieved through preaching that attends to women's experiences, through counselling young women and making

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

alliances with Christian, non-Christian, and secular women that attend to differences and commonalities of experience. Ultimately, it is through a Spirit-led embodied praxis of preaching, worship, and activism that begins with friendship and may end in establishing refuges for abused women, which will generate the liberative good news for women.

Evangelical feminists can challenge conservatives by reassuring them that they take the Bible seriously and are not trying to eradicate femininity by making women into men, but rather, encourage and celebrate womanhood as God might have intended it and as expressed in Genesis 1. On biblical grounds, evangelical feminists can encourage young women that there is a new reality for Christian community; men and women jointly inherit Christ, and they are not seen as male or female, but rather as equals in Christ.<sup>247</sup> “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26-28). Evangelical ecclesiology is about the Word, and Spirit, and friendship in community. Because it should be concerned with power-with, not power-over others, there is an immediacy in a church’s relationship with God – it no longer has to be mediated through liturgies and rituals. Through this liberative evangelical community, it is to be hoped that evangelical Christian women can be reconciled with their bodies and, if they wish, freely choose to decoratively enhance their appearance, drawing out its beauty by a form of art, but with no sense that there is an aesthetic precondition of acceptance before God or men. It is because of this liberative possibility, whether experienced as proleptic reality or as a reality still only envisioned, that I continue to be both a committed evangelical and a feminist.

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<sup>247</sup> Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 449.





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