

# Of Faith, Food, and the Folly of the Figure

## Introduction

Seventeen-year-old Leah was considered by her parents to be their perfect child. “Life would be easy if all our kids were like Leah,” they exclaimed to their friends. Leah really did have a great deal going for her. She was easy to raise, goal-oriented, reliable, hard working, and eager to please. The combination of these personality characteristics led her to various achievements. Leah learned her catechism well, became an honor student, excelled at volleyball, was named “most likely to succeed” in her grade-school yearbook, and was a first chair in her high-school band. Her parents felt good about how well things were going for her and had high expectations about her future. She seemed to be developing into a well-adjusted, confident, caring, and Christian young woman. All was well...at least from her parents’ perspective.

Although external appearances suggested that Leah was excelling, her inner life, her real life or soul life, plagued her. Beyond the intentional lessons at home, school and catechism, was what one might call the unintentional curriculum. This curriculum is comprised of the unintentional lessons conveyed by family, friends, and the culture in which she grew. These lessons taught Leah that in addition to Christ and kingdom, an important part of life is body and beauty. The very personality traits that from an outward perspective made Leah excel academically also made her try to achieve bodily. She succeeded easily with the one pursuit but struggled with the other. The goal-oriented, possibility-driven, and conscientious Leah was becoming a beauty-oriented, one-size-smaller driven, self-conscious woman who doubted her place in life and who was overly concerned about her body. Although her grades were good and her spikes hard-driven, she grew to be more sullen and dissatisfied.

For Leah, the body-image lessons began when she was 5 years old. At this age she received a Barbie doll at a Christmas celebration. In her own observant and subtle way she began to associate being ultra thin and stylish with popularity. At 7 years old she watched as her mother used Buns of Steel exercise videos every day in the living room. Those videos unintentionally taught Leah that women are supposed to be petite and that even the last bits of fat are unacceptable. The video’s constant encouragement and repetitive phrases both motivated Mom but more importantly became part of Leah’s thought patterns. At 9 years of age Leah was with her mother at the Meijer check-out counter. There she, as is expected from her observant nature, scanned the magazines and tabloids. On one magazine she noticed that a woman with a normal body type was concerned about needing to lose more weight and tone down. Again, her little culturally-conscious mind was influence and she learned that her older sister’s normal body type is actually unacceptable and overweight. Leah continued to

grow and noticed that the good girls in the TV programs were always the thin girls. She concluded that if the thin girl is the good girl, then the fat girl is the bad girl... and the programs often bore that out. Her soul was once again affected and she became more determined to control her own body-image.

Leah's extremely impressionable adolescent years continued to mislead her. One day she was watching the basketball game with her father. A commercial ended with the phrase, "Pizza without the guilt." Leah again learned, but this time she learned that to eat a reasonable portion of enjoyable foods shows a lack of self-control and that one should feel guilty about eating fatty foods. On another occasion Leah heard her bone-thin mother complain to her father that Brenda (Leah's older sister) has a weight problem. Leah now learned that even father and mother make value judgments based on appearance and clothing size. If respected and God-fearing father and mother think this way, then certainly weight and body shape are important, she thought. Yet another influence in Leah's life was her friends. Among other things she finds that talking about food, fat, and figure not only is a ready source of conversation but also one that others quickly respond to and pick up on.

Lastly, to make matters even worse, Leah's weak parents gave in to her repeated requests to subscribe to Teen Magazine and too often allowed her to watch The Bachelor. Part of their appeal is the many emotions that it evoked in her. At times she laughed and at other times she cried; sometimes she was excited and at other times anxious. The devil, however, only had one emotion, and it made him smile.

The result is that now Leah, who in many respects may be an active Christian, has nevertheless vexed her righteous soul. The choices that she and her parents made included those that moved her closer to her own personal Sodom and Gomorrah. The result is yet another teenager who is consumed with issues of appearance and body shape. She is self-conscious in first meeting up with her friends. While listening to conversations she unconsciously scans those in her field of view and judges them based on their figure. The days in which she feels overweight cause her to also feel less loved and accepted. Leah's personal worth has become dependent on her body and appearance and less on her life with God. Appearance and figure has become a permanent part of who she is and will continue to influence her for years to come.

I am personally aware of many Leahs in my life. These are men and women who have genuine faith, godliness, and kingdom consciousness; yet their old man, that carnal and earthly-minded aspect of their soul, haunts them daily. Some are so affected that they make moral judgments of their day based on their adherence to weight and figure management programs. They think that the day gone by was either good or bad because of the exercise programs and diets that they maintained. What an earthly-minded mentality a Christian can develop! The caring for their children, bringing of

meals to the needy, and time in devotion to God, all aside; when all is said and done and their heads nestle into their pillows, then their thought patterns wander to food and figure as the final moral basis for the day.

These matters are important for us to think about. You women grow into your present bodies through an adolescent culture that is saturated with body-image concerns. It is leaving its mark on you. Tomorrow, many of you women will raise your precious children in a culture that is even more saturated with body-image than ever before. Many of your daughters, just as you might feel now, will be robbed of a sense of being loved and accepted because of their bodies; just as Leah of Jacob did. Our tender-eyed Godly men and women suffer needless anguish because of the worldly messages that they have been cultured into accepting.

What is to be done? Why are our young people like this? What is it that leads us to think these thoughts? Why is so much time and energy put into weight management and beauty programs? What can we learn of Leah?

## **Of Faith and Food**

It's important that young people establish and maintain a proper perspective on life. Young people must develop, maintain, and cherish a kingdom consciousness. What is the chief end of man? The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We were created with that high purpose. We are to recognize that there is a real King who sovereignly created and maintains all things. It was he who brought us forth, not for ourselves, but instead for his glory. He expects and deserves our praise and our best efforts. In his wisdom he has created a kingdom or realm that has the purpose of giving him glory. God receives glory through the praise of his people, especially in the communal worship of established churches. The 24 elders of Revelation 4 symbolize the Old and New Testament church. These elders are seated around the throne and "worship him that liveth forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

The entity by which God caused us to exist is body and soul. That's borne out in Lord's Day 1, "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own..." God could have formed us as spirit only; leaving us with no physical aspect. This, however, was not in his wise plan. We are quite familiar with our bodies. The body is the flesh and blood; the cellular and chemical aspect of our being. We tend to be less familiar with the soul. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the soul as it will be instructive for us as we address this problem of food and figure.

The soul-aspect of our person is that spiritual (not physical) part of us that is the origin of life from a rational and volitional viewpoint. It's the part of us that thinks, wills, desires, plans, and has emotion. The soul aspect of us can exist with or without the physical aspect of our being. In some ways one can think about the soul as the real you. That is, it is you in the deepest sense. One could say that the body does not have a soul but that the soul has a body. Now, one must be careful to not become dualistic about the body and soul because at present they together comprise the self. Someday, when we die, the body and soul will be separated but in the new heavens and new earth our souls will be once again united to our perfected bodies. These two aspects of us are inseparably intertwined in our current state and together they influence the whole person.

Our bodies affect our soul. The music we hear with our ears soothe the soul. Recall the history of David playing to Saul. The sights we take in with our eyes affect our souls as well. Pornography corrupts our souls as it leads us to think more sinfully. Lot vexed his righteous soul, and almost undoubtedly that was partially through his eyes as he lived near Sodom and Gomorrah. Exercise performed by the body is good for the soul. And even the wine that we drink affects our soul. Regarding the topic at hand, the magazines, mall posters, television programs, beaches, and commercials we watch all affect our soul's thought patterns, too.

Our souls affect our bodies. Those piercings that we chose originated with the soul's plans and desires. The abuser of cigarettes and alcohol may corrupt the body in various ways as a result of the soul's decisions. In some ways a postmortem may tell the mortician more about that individual's soul than it does about one's final cause of death because written on the tapestry of the body's skin and organs is a record of the soul's choices.

Food, calories, and fat are good!

With these thoughts in mind let us turn again to the issue. What is the Christian's perspective of food and figure? God sustains and energizes you (soul and body) with physical food. The physical affects the spiritual. Nourishment not only energizes the body but because the body and soul are intertwined it also affects our soul! We reason more soundly, think more clearly, remember more distinctly, emote (have emotion) properly when we have adequate nourishment. Food, calories, and fat are good! God has provided them in abundance and it is wrong to despise and have negative thought patterns regarding them. In Genesis 1:29 and 30 we read that one of the earliest provisions to man so that man could serve his God was an ample supply of food. II Peter 2:3 says "According as his divine power hath given us all things that pertain to life and godliness." God has given us what we need for life. Let's eat of it and even enjoy it. Also Ecclesiastes 3:13, "And also that every man should eat and drink, and

enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.” Carbohydrates in the form of bread is good! In fact your brain runs exclusively on carbohydrates. Let us receive these foods as the gift of God and may it energize our brain. Fat is good! Every cell of your whole body is encapsulated with two layers of fat called a phospholipid bilayer. Let us put away our thought patterns that lead us to despise the good nourishing gifts of God.

### **The Folly of the Figure**

Now that we have before us the correct perspective of life (to praise and serve God) and food (energy for body and soul), the next question... or as it turns out questions...need(s) to be asked. What of figure? What does body shape or facial complexion have to do with this Christian life? Given the preceding line up, whom would you choose to marry? Which of these would love his body of believers the most? Which would encourage you in your devotional life? Which would have the ability to formulate the words that you need to hear when in doubt and despair? Which would sing and pray most fervently? Which will work most diligently at raising your children in God’s fear? Which will be eager to participate in society? Which will weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh? Which will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, go to the imprisoned? Which will invite the stranger for coffee? Which is godly? Which is laboring for the meat that endures (John 6:27)?

Isaiah 55:2 says, “Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not? Harken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.” How much time, money, and energy do you spend on the folly of a good figure? Do you feed your souls? Figure does not satisfy and only has fleeting beauty. Worms will destroy your body and it will wither away as the flower of the field. Young people, is it your desire to someday marry and wake up next to a self-centered, shallow, carnally minded, but beautiful spouse? Does it give you status to date a good looking person? Is beauty your heart’s desire? May we and our Christian young people have eyes to see the true beauty in one another.

Physical beauty is literally only skin deep. Remember this most outer layer of you is not you! Too many young (and old) people identify themselves with this 1 to 5 centimeter thick covering. In reality, you are not your body. Stop identifying self primarily from only the physical aspect. You are your soul! The church of Jesus Christ needs beautiful people, not beautiful bodies. Remember who you are. You are the spiritual (and physical) entity who is loved by Jehovah, redeemed by the Lamb, one whose infirmities touch Christ, a member of his body, a servant to the kingdom causes, one charged to raise future young members of his church, a witness to the

world, the salt of the earth, a future mother in Israel. Besides, the body that you have is not even yours anyway. Lord's Day 1, again. "That I with body and soul both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ..."

Christian beauty lies in the shape of a woman's godly spirit, her godly knowledge, her godly wisdom, her godly emotion, her godly love, her godly care, her godly industry, and her godly psyche and not one bit in the shape of her physical body. One of the effects of conversion is that we more and more put away the old man of body worship and put on the new man of Christ. I Peter 3:3,4, "Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." Notice that reference to beauty in the phrase "sight of God." It's the soul that has beauty in God's eyes.

In many ways beauty is a distraction from real life; from soul life and kingdom life. One could wish God made the whole human race of members that were equally beautiful so that the distraction would go away. We see that beauty is a distraction away from kingdom life in scripture when we read of the struggles of David and Bathsheba, as well as Joseph with Potifer's wife. How many hours do our young people distract themselves from kingdom life when they work to put their faces on in the morning and exercise vigorously to tone and shape their bodies?

A kingdom consciousness guards us from getting distracted by these earthly and carnal goals. Developing a strict morning devotional schedule will benefit many young Christians. Beginning every day with time spent worshiping God develops a spiritual mindset that does not quickly leave us as we progress through the day.

### **Proper Perspective of Beauty and Exercise**

But what is the place of exercise and beauty in the Christian life? Are we not to exercise and are we not to appreciate beauty? Given its distractive nature, should we not do away with beauty and its pursuit altogether? Is it more godly to dress down and develop a code whereby we all agree to wear clothes with a common pattern? Is there room for individuality and style?

God created human beauty and it is to be valued and appreciated. On day six of the creation week God created man. Adam and Eve were undoubtedly beautiful people. They were the pinnacle of his beautiful creation and at the end of the day God looked at all that he had made and said it was very good. Although fallen, God's creation still has beauty, even today. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). In Christian maturity and in God-sanctified

ways we can look upon one another and appreciate his handiwork as revealed by the beauty of the people around us.

I challenge you, though, to rethink beauty. Beauty is culturally defined and has changed through the ages. With no proof whatsoever, I leave this thought with you that Eve may have been farmer-strong and beautiful rather than 2009's concept of beautiful which to my mind is more of the frail and weak variety.

It is biblical for a bride to adorn herself for her husband. Isaiah 61:10 says, "...as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels." We can also be reminded of Abraham's servant adorning Rebekah when she accepted the marriage invitation with Isaac. Genesis 24:47, "...and I put earring upon her face, and bracelets upon her hands." Certainly those ornaments were not only worn in secret but also were displayed publicly. Rebekah wore them to Laban's father's house. Christians in the New Testament age can dress themselves and look good for those with whom they associate. Beauty is admirable.

Exercise is also valuable and has an important place in our lives. We are not always to be studying and working but must also enjoy exercise. Regular vigorous exercise is valuable to the body and the soul. The body is more energetic and the soul rejuvenated after vigorous exercise. Exercise also maintains our health. We keep this temple of the Holy Spirit in better condition with exercise.

### **Christian Response to Body-Image Issues**

The center of these body-image issues is identity. Too often in young people the body becomes the dominant factor in identify. The center of identity is actually the soul. Young people's souls need to be fed. Souls are fed by the preaching of the Word. Hearing the preaching of the Word is the most important thing for overcoming these earthly-minded issues that creep up in our Christian lives. Young people need to listen and be fed by that word. As they become more heavenly minded, their kingdom consciousness will overcome insecurities that come with body consciousness.

Reading of scripture also imparts the Word to us. We need to do devotions regularly so that we develop and grow a kingdom mindset instead of an earthly, carnal one. There is so much more to this world than simply what meets the eye. There is a spiritual world of soul-life to develop and nourish.

Christian young people need to know that the devil is active in their lives. The devil and his hosts have access to our souls. They can tempt us and they still do pull us into ungodly thought patterns. Especially when we are young warriors he beguiles us. He's called the angel of light in II Corinthians 11:14 because he makes us think that things

are harmless for us when actually they lead us astray. The devil is active in culture. He is active in music, movies, and on mall walls. He likes to see us become earthly-carnal-body-image-minded people. Ephesians 6:12, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." Guard yourselves from those attacks.

Parents must remember to raise up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4) Authentic parental conversations about life, body, puberty, clothing, exercise, and figure are a layer of protection that stand between our sons and daughters and body-image carnal-mindedness. Parents need to make sure that their children know why they exercise to the extent that they do. Children need to see parents being active and involved in kingdom work. The valuable hours dedicated to God's work should far outweigh the hours spent exercising. Parents must value and encourage the spiritual gifts that their children exhibit to a greater extent than they value and encourage their children's physical achievements. Conversation in the home should be positive about what people are doing in our churches and how helpful others are being. In contrast conversations about food and figure should be kept to a minimum. Comments about people having a weight problem, or that others look so good because they lost a few pounds can be taken wrongly by impressionable teenagers. Words do hurt, sometimes seriously.

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Young people and parents need to be aware of the impact that the ungodly culture has on them. The devil is using every tool, including cultural tools to influence our thought patterns. He uses the movies, malls, and magazines. Even *Reader's Digest* is filled with advertisements that use body and figure to sell products. In addition many magazines regularly include articles about weight loss and body toning. We need to use these with discretion or avoid them altogether. Mark 9:47, "And if thy eye offend thee, pluck it out." Perhaps going to the mall every weekend is more damaging than we ever realized. Again, use with discretion.

Finally, we need to continue to pray for Zion. The church is Zion. God's people are Zion. Prayers should include words like those found in Psalter # 227:3, "Bless they who dwell in Zion, whose joy and strength thou art." Pray that God will continue to raise up young men and young women who are truly beautiful people.

Solomon finishes the book of Ecclesiastes with these notable words. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret

thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.” Let us be those who in our youth maintain a kingdom consciousness. Let us fear God with a fear that loves, honors, respects, and adores the holy one. Let us keep his commandments. And let our every work whether it be done by body or soul be done as unto the Lord. God will judge our every work; our every body-image thought as well as our every body-image deed. May our work be kingdom work and the treasure we seek be kingdom treasure.