

A Christian Critique of Cosmetic Surgery

Andrew McLean (1999: revised 2006)

Introduction:

Modern medicine can perform miracles. Unborn children can receive life saving surgery. Diseases that have wiped out millions in the past have become impotent with a single 20 cent injection. Lives have become longer and more pain free (physically speaking) because of modern medicine.

But now, we can make breasts larger, noses more shapely, legs thinner and ears flatter. How does Christianity critique non-essential surgery? Is non-essential surgery against God's will? I trust that this paper will move toward an answer.

Thousands upon thousands of people are having aesthetic surgery done. In 1996, in the USA, there was one aesthetic surgery performed per 150 people. Projected figures show around 1.5 million people per annum in the US are voluntarily 'going under the knife'. In 1994, "65% of these **uninsured** procedures were performed on people with **family** incomes of less than \$50,000 a year" (Paulsell 1999:964).

And it seems that different cultures are getting different 'jobs' done. In Japan, eyelid surgery (to remove the epicanthal folds) is popular. American Jewish families in the 50's and 60's gave 'nose jobs' to their children as 16 year old birthday presents. Brazilian young people are having breast reductions, while in Ireland, many candidates choose ear pin-backs. (Paulsell 1999:964).

What is non-essential and essential surgery?

Essential surgery is procedures deemed to either alleviate severe pain, or immanent death. Non-essential surgery however is surgical procedures designed to improve social, mental and physical well-being. This may include the removal of birth 'defects' such as 'Port Wine' Birthmarks. Such a problem will not affect the health of a person, but may hamper social development and integration. In fact, The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as "A state of complete physical mental and social wellbeing and not just the absence of disease and infirmity. (Moltmann-Wendel 1994 :22), so a socially 'sick' person, may well be cured back to full 'health', by undergoing non-essential surgery.

Is non-essential surgery against God's will?

Should we see bowed legs, or port wine birthmarks as individual characteristics that God gave to that particular person? If God indeed 'knitted them in the womb (Ps 139), then surely that feature has been placed by the all-knowing almighty God? I cannot agree with this reasoning. If this is the case, then perhaps only a vindictive God would intentionally create children with severe birth defects. I do not believe in such a God. We live in a fallen world, and part of that fallen world is the physical incompleteness of people.

The 'fall' had ramifications, not just for our spiritual health, but for creation's physical health as well (Romans 8:22).

A Biblical example of non-essential surgery

When Jesus healed the women who had bled for 12 years (Luke 8), we can quite safely presume that this condition of hers was not life threatening. Her real sickness lay in her social and religious life. She was deemed unclean, and she couldn't perform her normal social and religious responsibility and privileges. For her time and culture, she was not 'whole'. Jesus healed this ailment, Jesus performed non-essential surgery on this women, so that she could be healed! Jesus repeated such healings with the women with the bent over back (Luke 13:11), and the man with the paralysed hand, (Luke 6). Again, presumably, this man was not in any mortal danger, however, this man's capacity to work was greatly diminished. He was therefore socially, financially and religiously¹ 'sick'.

The man that was brought to Jesus for physical healing by his friends had his sins forgiven first. Jesus is interested in not only physical healing, but social, emotional, mental, and spiritual healing as well. In summary, Jesus is 'into' non-essential surgery.

The human body, from God's point of view, is precious. God fashioned the human body with his own hands. The body is in fact a temple. A temple of the Holy Spirit. God has made bodies, and he loves our bodies, as much as our mind and spirit. We do not believe that matter is evil (as many gnostic and pagan religions do). Jesus, in fact, 'tabernacles' (lives) among us (Jn 1), taking on human flesh. We can be sure that God would not have chosen to do this if there was something inherently wrong with the 'flesh'. Indeed, God has redeemed us, body and soul and he will raise us, body and soul. We can be sure that wholeness of body is as important to God as wholeness of mind and spirit.

From this brief study thus far, we would have to conclude that at least some aspects of non-essential surgery are a blessing. Children that are badly burnt can undergo reconstruction surgery, so that they can be socially whole. People who have experienced accidents can remedy depressed cheeks and noses. Women who experience severe back pain, because of oversized breasts, can be healed. Children who are born with a 'port wine' birthmarks, 'webbed' fingers and toes can be made whole. We can therefore praise God for anaesthetic and other breakthroughs that have made this possible, and we pray and work towards better and better treatments still.²

Non-essential vs Cosmetic surgery

¹ No person with a birth defect was allowed in the temple to worship. Such people were deemed to be cursed by God. This means that they remained in a constant state of impurity and uncleanness. God's grace was effectively cut off from such people. Jesus obviously rejects this status! He wants all to come to him!

² Parents and people who undergo non-essential surgery should be made aware that no surgery is totally risk free.

However there is another side to this whole story. “The depressed nasal bridge line left after removal of the nasal septum (for many a necessary operation) can be built up by inserting a bone graft; the racial depressed nose the African can be improved (sic) by the same procedure, but that is called Cosmetic surgery” (Duncan 122). This quote has made a value judgment in the use of the word ‘improved’. This is surprising since the quote is taken from a Dictionary of Medical Ethics! The debate runs deep. The line between non-essential surgery and cosmetic surgery is blurry. It is to this line that we now turn. The rest of this study will focus on cosmetic surgery.

Definition of Cosmetic Surgery

The word cosmetic describes the ‘art of adorning or beautifying the body’ (Duncan 121). Cosmetic Surgery therefore is surgery that makes the body more ‘beautiful’. Cosmetic surgery is an offshoot of non-essential surgery³, however cosmetic surgery opens up a whole new set of issues for the Christian wishing to understand this phenomena more fully. We will explore some of these now.

What is normal, and what is beauty?

Clearly, since time began, there have been norms for how a person ‘should’ be. This is why bad birthmarks and ‘webbed’ feet have been identified as outside the norm, which non-essential surgery can remedy.

Beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder, which explains many of life's decisions!. For one, a sunset is the pinnacle of beauty, whereas others may find unending praise for a 1968 Chev Corvette! It is true that each culture has an idea of what is beautiful. To the African tribe whose idea of beauty is a women with lengthened necks (with metal rings), to our own culture with beauty being defined as a young, athletic, thin, small framed, white, full breasted women⁴. To other cultures, a plump old women is seen as ‘beautiful’ or at least desirable (Moltmann-Wendel 1994:10).

In western culture, Beauty has become the norm. Many people spend many dollars and time adorning their body, doing their hair and getting into shape. The cosmetic industry and the weight loss industry are multi-billion dollar industries in the western world. Cosmetic surgery is only a natural outgrowth of this fixation.

Why do people engage in cosmetic surgery? What is it that drives our cultures norms?

The number one reason that people have cosmetic surgery is happiness. (Paulsell 1999:964). People are simply not happy with their bodies, and they are willing to surgically change them. Anecdotal evidence has shown that in fact, non-essential surgery does in fact contribute to ‘making a person whole’,

³ The skills and techniques developed from non-essential surgery in WWII, gave rise to the modern cosmetic surgery explosion.

⁴ This is possibly changing somewhat, with what is called the ‘death of the super model’ that one reads in Women’s magazines. Figures such as Sophie Dahl, lead the way.

“The grateful patients are commonly happier and more productive members of the community” (Duncan :1981: 123). The Surgeons themselves often describe their work as ‘healing the psyche through adjusting the body’ (Paulsell 1999:967)

Why is it that people are not happy with their bodies? This is the crucial question. I have identified 4 main reasons that people aren’t happy with their own bodies; 1) racial inferiority, 2) sexual incompleteness, 3) age phobia and 4) discontent. We will explore each of these in turn, relying on the biblical text for critique.

1) Racial Inferiority. As outlined previously, some people want to be more western looking. I believe that as Christians, we would have a hard time agreeing, in principle, with this. God has made us, Jew and Greek, Australian and Indonesian. We are to stand tall in our own way. I recently met a Japanese fashion design student this year. She mentioned that there are no Japanese ‘supermodels’, not because there are no ‘beautiful’ Japanese women, but because the west doesn’t recognise their beauty. For this same reason, we don’t see any Japanese music artists on Australian TV. Western culture has proven to be the dominate world culture. Obviously the West sets many norms, but we need to take greater responsibility in what this actually means! Is there any difference between Britain’s mediaeval wish to ‘make the world British’, through war and subordination than psychologically making people feel inferior, through the mass media? I believe not.

If other races are feeling like they need to look more western, in order to succeed and feel good, then something is wrong. And I believe that the fault lies with us.

2)Sexual Incompleteness. People engage in cosmetic surgery because they seek to be more erotic. A competition was run on Adelaide radio recently, with first prize being either a breast enlargement, or penile extension. One young man who rang in explaining the reason why he wanted the surgery done, was that he had trouble ‘getting’ a particular young lady that he was keen on, and thought she might view him differently if he had an “obvious monster in his pants”.

Other candidates have breast enlarged to feel more feminine and erotic. Others take package deals to Lebanon, for example, for transgenital surgery (Paulsell 1999: 965).

Again, I believe that the Christian would have problems with this type of surgery. God has created us male and female. Our masculinity and femininity come not from how big or shapely our genitals are, but from God’s gift to us. Our search for body parts that will attract sexual recognition, is I believe, part of the lie that the world has fallen for.

3) Old age Phobia: Many cosmetic surgery candidates are trying to cheat old age. Our culture is scared of old age. Moltmann-Wendel⁵ suggest that

⁵ A prominent women theologian

women, in particular, are more worried about old age than men. Old age in Men, she argues is a status symbol. For women, the 'old woman' image is a 'grumpy, ugly old woman' (Moltmann-Wendel 1994:28). Old age, or aging in a women's body is seen as decay. This 'decay' occurs much earlier for women than is perceived for men.

"Growing Old need not be beautified." says Moltmann-Wendel (1994: 33), but it needs to be seen in reality. Age is a life process, and we need to accept it. She says that post-menopausal women, who in the past have been relegated to the emotional scrap heap, have discovered 'new life'. (1994:33). Some sectors of the world have discovered that old age is not to be feared. Christians should see this ever more clearly. The Bible exhorts us to respect our elders, to see grey hair as a crown of wisdom. Many of God's best workers are old people. For Christians, old age and even death need not to be feared, but be embraced. It would appear that the current cultural quirk of trying to undo age, is an idea that is not of God, and therefore Christians need to be instructed about this. This is very difficult in the current social climate, but something we need to work through.

4) Discontent This is probably the most common complaint and reason for cosmetic surgery. Why is it that people feel so uncomfortable with their bodies that they resort to surgery to 'fix' it? I am convinced that society has fixed in the mind of our people that a size 10B bra, with a Barbie⁶ shaped legs, buttocks and waistline, is the only way to look ⁷. Paulsell says that "We continue to believe that the shape, size and colour of people's bodies provide a window into their character, their worthiness, their souls. (1999: 965). She is right in exposing this myth. Somehow our self-esteem has been linked with how we look. This is always going to be self-defeating, and a negative force. In some sense, our society has unconsciously built this into our lives, to ensure that our lives will be less than satisfactory; as age, and fat legs, and funny shaped noses will be always part of our life ⁸ !

These norms have somehow been inflicted on us. Moltmann-Wendel, again contends that the norm has been shaped by men. "The dream body is the young, smooth, dynamic woman's body, as it is dreamed by men", but this occurs only for a short time in her life. Moltmann-Wendel says that "Women have often subjected themselves to these norms, denied themselves, failed to stand by their bodies and often tormented themselves psychically and without pleasure to preserve youth and dynamism for themselves and others (1994:28). Paulsell has this warning," the body comes to be seen not as a gift, but as a project, not as a mystery, but a task (1999: 966).

⁶ The original 'Barbie' had body proportions that were proven to be impossible. In fact scientists found that a woman of those proportions would not be able to walk! (she could have moved on all fours however). It's interesting to note that Barbie's body shaped has changed to a 'more realistic' figure since the 1980's.

⁷ It is encouraging to see some reaction against this. In a recent 'Body Shop' promotion, they had a slogan that went. "There are 5 billion people in the world and only 6 super models!"

⁸ I wonder if we will see 'Ear surgery' soon. I expect most people would see ears as a lost cause- they are all funny looking things if you really have a good look at them! (just a thought!)

Christian teaching tells us that our physical actions have a lot to do with our spirit⁹, we are also exhorted to "...be content with what you have" (Heb 13:5). and "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil 2:4). Real contentment will not come about by changing your body, but only by changing your heart. "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes (Matt 6:25), James clearly condemns the judging of people by worldly standards, when people ask the well dressed people to sit at the best places (Jas 2:2-7). People in Christ are to view people by their 'works that adorn them', and not by riches, or the shape of the body. We need to see people as God see them - for God looks at the heart and not the 'clay jars' that we see.

Contentment with what we have, however doesn't mean that we don't try and 'better ourselves', or try and look the best. The Bible says, "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face" (Matt 6:17). This text shows that people of Jesus' time took time and care in their appearance. This may seem obvious, but God is not against us adorning ourselves. God does not setup a false antithesis but can affirm both adorning of the body and adorning of the heart. (cf. 1 Peter 3:3). "For while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way" (1 Tim 4:8).

While we look after our bodies, Christian should to be very careful by not turning our body into an idol¹⁰ (1st commandment). Our body can very easily become our focus, priority, and in theological terms, the object of worship. We have to be careful here though to not make generalisations; One **can** be involved in body idolatry without cosmetic surgery, whereas for another person, a new hairstyle might be an outworking of idolatry of the body. Christian Ethics always has to do with the heart, and not simply with externals, and for this reason, you will need to determine the motives and the heart behind the decision.

Conclusion:

What does God think about Cosmetic surgery? Not an easy question, however we would do well to go to the root of the question. Why do you want this surgery? Is there an underlying feeling of worthlessness? Have you been sinned against (victim of sexual or emotional abuse) in the past, which has contributed to feeling useless, unloved and unattractive? If this is the case, then you would do well to bring God's healing into your life in an appropriate and meaningful way. You should first know in your heart that God accepts you fully, that God has created you as his own special child.

If you still feel as if you would like to go ahead with the surgery, then it would be appropriate to think them about societal norms, and how our culture

⁹ Our body is not ours, but the temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19). Paul's argument here is against those who thought that their physical actions (sex with prostitutes) have no spiritual significance.

¹⁰ We need to teach strongly about idolatry of the body, as this is in epidemic proportions in today's society and churches.

(‘Hollywood’ and mass media) ¹¹ affect ones thinking. Are you trying to fit in, or trying to ‘stand out’? Are you engaged in idolatry of the body? Are you trying to fake a ‘false identity’ with others, or even with yourself?

If you after these self examinations, still wanted the surgery done, and felt in your heart that your motives were pure, then you should go forward with confidence and peace. In saying this, I personally believe that if people fully understood God’s teaching and love for them, most procedures would become obsolete. But then again, I am a Male, who isn’t a popular actress or news presenter, for example, who needs to look ‘youthful’ in order to keep their job. The issues are complex.

The best answer to this whole question, is a radical look at how superficial the world is. The church can and needs to take a lead role here. We, as a society need to ‘get real’ with ourselves, and stop being so stupid, as to think the only things that have value are aesthetically beautiful bodies. Beauty on the inside is a far, far more precious thing. If only the world would listen.

So is God against Cosmetic Surgery? Maybe. Maybe not.

One thing, however, is clear. It’s not a matter of the knife, but of the heart. “Who can know the heart, but You, O God?”

¹¹ We need to be careful that the ‘mass media’ isn’t our scapegoat. Mass media only survive because the masses demand it. We are included in the masses!

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