Attending to the Beauty of the Creation and the New Creation

Toward a Biblical Theory of Aesthetics

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(Book Reviews will return in Winter 2013)
Editor’s Note

We too easily forget that the greatest patron of the arts in western culture, even into the twentieth century, is the church. We too easily forget that many of the significant innovations in art—printmaking, sculpture, figuration, stained glass—owe their origins to their placement in sacred space. We too easily forget that the seminal collection of lyric poetry in world literature is the Psalter.

We even too easily forget that the artistry even of comic books and the graphic novel can be traced through William Blake down to the illuminated manuscripts of medieval monks working by candlelight.

And this isn’t a cultural phenomenon only of those who owe their heritage to Western Europe. One need go no further than the folk art of Adolfo Pérez Esquivel or He Qi (both of whose artwork has graced the cover of Concordia Journal), or the writing of Derek Walcott (whose poetry has been discussed in these pages), to see how religion informs the artwork of non-western and postcolonial cultures.

Why the amnesia? Perhaps because we live in a Calvinistically iconoclast America that continues to distrust the image, whether depicted in words, pictures, or both. And yet, the Calvinists would be the first to remind us that the reason their church windows are clear is to behold clearly the divine artistry of nature.

Or perhaps it is because we have too easily interpreted the modern and contemporary arts as the work of a divorced secularism. In which case we may want to turn again—with fresh eyes and ears—to see and hear the resonances of creation and sacred history reverberating in the abstractions. After all, even the thoroughly modernist Chagall’s best work included religious stained glass.

No less in North America than in the sixteenth century, Lutherans have often found themselves in the middle of the fistfights between iconoclasts and iconophiles. And so we look here, in the following articles guest-edited by Charles Arand, to recover a confessionally Lutheran and thoroughly biblical theological aesthetic to behold a beautiful creation, with fresh “eyes, ears…and all my senses,” wherever it may be found. The articles intend to jump start a conversation about the roles that the arts and aesthetics (the beautiful in Plato’s good+true+beautiful equation) play in the theological task and the life of Christians in the world.

But the conversation cannot end here. Lest we forget too that the incarnation we are about to celebrate again—divine breath mixing in human mud—itself has keen aesthetic implications. Matter of fact, might it not be the incarnation—and the way it intertwines the twin themes of creation and redemption—that inspires any art in the first place?

Travis J. Scholl
Managing Editor of Theological Publications
Editor's note: President Meyer preached this sermon on August 31, 2012 for the opening of Concordia Seminary’s 174th academic year.

The theme I’ve chosen for this academic year is “Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach.” It comes from The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer.

There was also a Cleric, an Oxford scholar. He didn’t have much gold in his treasure-trunk; but any money he got from his relations he spent on books and academic study; and he prayed actively for the souls of those who had provided him with the means of scholarship. His greatest care and concern was study. He didn’t speak a word more than was necessary, and that was expressed elegantly and with deference, briefly and pithily, and packed with deep significance. His speech resonated with moral virtue, and gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

“Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach.” Obviously that’s appropriate for a community of learning but when the community is the people of God gathered in a seminary around the Lord Jesus Christ…Do you hear that? When the community is the people of God gathered in this seminary around the Lord Jesus Christ, then learning and teaching is not only about the head but our learning and teaching of things eternal touches the heart. If what we begin today does not touch your heart, then it is in vain.

Deuteronomy 4:9 says, “Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.” “Only take care, and keep your soul diligently.” Concordia Seminary is a place of the most insidious temptations. The nooks and crannies of these stone buildings, the shadowy places of the woods, are places where the devil prowls seeking to devour you. Deuteronomy chapter 4 is looking forward to Deuteronomy chapter 5 where God repeats the Ten Commandments. “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” But if we think we have mastered the law and gospel, if we have only an intellectual understanding of justification, if we are not zealous to learn the evangelical doctrine in all its articles, then we are taking the Lord’s revelation in vain. “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” How can we rationalize not attending chapel when blessed Martin Luther tells us “we should not despise preaching and his word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it?” The rationalizations you’ll be tempted to give for not going to chapel are the same excuses your future parishioners will give you for not attending your church services. “Honor thy father and thy mother,” proper respect for authority. “But we’re individualists! No one is going to tell me what to do!” Then don’t be surprised if things do not go well for you. “Thou shalt not kill” but not all of us cultivate healthy life styles. “Mens sana in corpore sano,” said Juvenal. “A sound mind in a sound body.” “Thou shalt not commit adultery” but the temptation of pornography and sexual impurity can make your life at the Seminary a hellish brothel. “Thou shalt not steal.” God places a premium on the stewardship of
money and material things but do we think that credit and balanced budgets and stewardship are not related to our life with God? “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” but you think it’s okay to go on the internet and use our theological sophistication to clobber a brother or sister for whom Christ died? And what is coveting except to put yourself into bondage to someone or something other than your Lord Jesus Christ? “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Gal 5:1) How terrible it would for you to arrive at the great alumni reunion and hear, “I never knew you. Depart from Me.” (Mt 25:23)

But you and I are specially privileged to be here. While the devil is most cunning on a seminary campus, here the word of God can be wielded to the defeat of sin, death and Satan. How? Take care and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Here’s the how to: Make them known to your children and your children’s children. In other words, gladly learn and gladly teach. What do we learn and teach? What the eyes of God’s people have seen. The exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law on Sinai, the people led by cloud and fiery pillar to the Promised Land, the sin that led to exile but the promises of the prophets, and finally the coming of the suffering servant, Jesus Christ who leads us from sin, death and Satan to a Promised Land “reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice” (1 Pt 1:5–6).

God’s vision for us is too great to be confined to a classroom and the intellect. It’s in the classroom, yes, but also in the gathering places on campus, in our immediate neighborhood, in St. Louis, in the world…The late first-century teacher Quintilian wrote, “Studendum semper et ubique.” We must learn always and everywhere. “It is too small a thing,” Isaiah suggests for us to confine our following Christ to just a classroom, as necessary as that is to what we do. “It is too small a thing,” to stay in the comfortable cocoon of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, as blessed as that is for us, and not spread our wings to greater witness in everyplace and to everyone. “It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6). By the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, let our learning and teaching grow into the great vision that God has for his mission!

One day early in my ministry I went to the lumber yard and told Lester Going what size boards I needed. We went back into the shop, he cut the boards to the right size and asked, “Do you want the auffalls?” Huh? Auffalls was southern Illinois German for what was left over, the scraps on the floor. To me that’s a good picture of the learning and teaching of Concordia Seminary. Concordia Seminary is about Jesus Christ. Make your learning and teaching personal, intimate, a passionate quest for you, for me to know more about the God who comes to us in the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. Make your learning and teaching about your own salvation and then the auffalls, the byproduct will be effective ministry. What better adverb to describe how we go at it this new year, what better adverb to describe learning and teaching in this community than the word “gladly”? Amen.

Dale A. Meyer
President

Concordia Journal/Fall 2012

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The above title is a citation from C. S. Lewis’s fantasy *The Great Divorce* and should be enclosed with quotation marks. The fuller citation reads, “Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly. For all that can be shaken will be shaken and only the unshakeable remains.” In this statement Lewis says generically and abstractly what he says specifically and concretely again and again in his writings. It is the goal of this article to provide from *The Great Divorce* much of that specific and concrete evidence supporting Lewis’s claim that “heaven is reality itself.”

Christians, of course, accept the reality of heaven; we believe that there is such an entity. But too often, because of a history of Platonism and a contemporary culture of New Age philosophy, we think of that reality in terms that emasculate its reality. We think of heaven as something ethereal, “vapory,” cloud nine stuff, such substance as dreams are made of. Our view of heaven may be too abstract, anemic, diluted, and namby-pamby. We imagine souls (whatever they are) resting or floating in space. We regard heaven as a sort of vacuum, a depository of paradoxically pleasant emptiness. We may make the same mistake that Jane Studdock of *That Hideous Strength* made: “She had been conceiving [spiritual reality] as ‘spiritual’ in the negative sense—as some neutral, or democratic, vacuum where differences disappeared, where sex and sense were not transcended but simply taken away.” When Dr. Ransom, having just returned from a trip to Perelandra (Venus), attempts to describe its heaven-like splendors, Lewis (himself a character in his novel) replies, “Of course I realize it’s all rather too vague for you to put into words.” To which Ransom insists, “On the contrary, it is words that are vague. The reason why the thing can’t be expressed is that it’s too definite for language.”

It is Lewis’s view that the character of heaven is more literal than the most literal words with which human language attempts to describe it. Heavenly reality is more concrete, more specific, more definite, more tangible—more seeable, hearable, touchable, tastable, smellable—than the most definite and colorful words we use to picture it. In Lewis’s terms, words are too slow, too vague, too indefinite, too abstract to measure up to the heavenly realities they depict. Heavenly reality is not air; it weighs so many pounds. “Truth tastes like honey, and embraces you like a bridegroom” (40).

In many of his books Lewis argues the reality of heaven. In *The Great Divorce* he uses a more effective approach: he suggests its reality. In this novel a busload of damned people from hell are allowed to visit heaven and—heretically—permitted to stay there if they wish. What do these visitors from hell find in heaven when they arrive? Beautiful flowers as heavy as boulders. Luscious apples too huge for them to steal. Waterfalls that talk and rivers like swift-moving glass. Lions, panthers, deer frisking about—even unicorns. Raindrops like bullets that the damned ghosts fear will shred them to pieces. Grass that cuts their feet. (In heaven you don’t cut the grass—it cuts you!) Insects so solid they can penetrate the damned or even crush them. Hell, compared to heaven, is no larger than just a crack in the ground difficult to find; an entity that if swallowed by
a butterfly would do the insect no harm or have any taste; a mere drop of ink engulfed by the Pacific Ocean (138–139). Heaven, on the other hand, becomes bigger and bigger the farther you proceed into it. It is indeed “world without end”—spatially as well as chronologically.7

Or look at the nature of the saved in heaven. Lewis calls them the “Solid People.” Given the circumstances, they make a noise as they tramp the heavenly turf and cast shadows in the sunlight. One can’t see through them, whereas the ghosts from hell are translucent, ugly stains through which one can see dimly the outlines of a tree or bush behind them. The damned need “thickening up” to be visible to the eyes of the saved! Less frequently, Lewis refers to the occupants of heaven as “Bright Spirits.” When they move they shower light. If you get too close to them, you feel heat emanating from them. In Lewis’s heaven, brightness is not an abstraction and warmth is not a metaphor. At one point Sarah Smith, formerly of Golders Green—now a citizen of heaven—appears, followed by a host of children and animals that she had befriended on earth. Those seeing her can’t tell if she’s clothed or naked because her courtesy and joy appear to enshroud her even as her innermost spirit shines through these traits that seem more like garments than abstract traits (118). “Love shone not from her face only, but from all her limbs, as if it were some liquid in which she had just been bathing” (121; italics mine).

Above all, consider Lewis’s depiction of God. In response to a damned clergyman referring to God as “the Supreme Value” and “the spirit of sweetness and light and tolerance—and…—service,” one of heaven’s Solid People urges, “Come and see. I will bring you to Eternal Fact, the Father of all other facthood” (42). To Lewis, God is fact, very fact of very fact. When a damned artist beholds the splendors of heaven, he utters, “God!” “God what?” a Solid Person responds. “What do you mean, ‘God what?’” asks the artist. To which the Solid Person replies, “In our grammar God is a noun” (82–83). From this the reader infers two truths: first, that God, like a noun, has substance, that he is a tangible, concrete reality; second, that as nouns take verbs (action words), so God acts. God is not static. He not merely is but he also does. “God is love,” for example, means that God loves—loves the other Persons of God as well as the creatures he made. When a red-necked occupant of hell blurs out, “I’m not asking for anybody’s bleeding charity,” a Bright Spirit seizes the opportunity to convert an abstraction, as well as a cliché, into a concrete gospel reminder by using capital letters to call attention to the Lord Jesus Himself: “Ask for the Bleeding Charity” (28; italics mine). Similarly, a saved lady says to her former husband (one of the visitors from hell), “I am in love. In love, do you understand? Yes, now I love truly,” then adds, “I am in Love Himself” (125–126). Once again an abstraction progresses to a person, the Person of God Himself.

In respect to materiality Lewis’s descriptions of heaven seem compatible with those of the Scriptures. Biblical depictions of heaven include such items as rooms, mansions, cities, rivers, mountains, trees, thrones, trumpets, choirs, banquets, milk, wine, streets of gold, gates of pearl, and buildings made of a variety of precious jewels. We have no way of knowing whether these descriptions of heaven are literal or not.
Even if they’re not, the imagery the Bible uses suggests that the heavenly phenomena are even more substantial and more dazzling than the imagery itself. (Certainly it is hoped, that none of us is so sophisticated as to be disappointed in heaven at the possibility of holy materiality, of familiar precious items unsullied by sin or by the capacity to tempt to sin!) Even more to the point is the precedent established by our Lord’s incarnation. That “God is a spirit” is no surprise. But what astounds is that this Spirit assumed flesh and blood and entered our history. In the surprised reaction of St. John, “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Besides, our incarnate God is a God who conveys salvation to us through such material things as water, bread, wine, and language, a redemption of ordinary everyday items that never ceases to amaze us.

Lewis does not intend his representations of heaven to be exact or precise or factually true. He is not claiming that the flowers of heaven (if there are flowers) are unbudgeable to the damned or that its fruit (if there is fruit) is incapable of being picked up by them. In his preface Lewis provides this disclaimer: “I beg readers to remember that this [book] is a fantasy…[T]he transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal; they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the after-world” (x). At the end of the book George MacDonald, Lewis’s guide in heaven, warns the author, “Give no poor fool the pretext to think ye are claiming knowledge of what no mortal knows” (144). This is one of the reasons why the book ends as a dream rather than as an actual experience. The last thing Lewis would want us to infer from this development is that heaven too is a mere dream. Rather, what he does mean to do by ending his book in this fashion (besides finding a natural and palatable way to bring the story to a credible close) is to protect himself from the accusation of arrogance or heresy in his depiction of heaven. (After all, no one was ever excommunicated or defrocked for merely dreaming heresy!)

But certainly Lewis’s representation of heaven is meant to affirm that “heaven is reality itself,” that is, that heaven is for real and that heaven contains real joys, a riot of colors and sounds and tastes, solid joys that can be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, joys that can be experienced by resurrected bodies that weigh so many pounds, that make audible sound as they move across heaven’s surface, and that cast recognizable shadows in the Son-light.

Francis C. Rossow

Endnotes

1 C. S. Lewis, The Great Divorce (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1973), 70–71. All future page locations for citations from this book will be in parentheses in the text of the article.
4 Lewis eliminates—or reduces—the potential heresy by having all the damned (except one) choose to return to hell anyhow. Thus the great divorce, or “great gulf” between heaven and hell spoken of in our Lord’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus turns out to be, in Lewis’s understanding, not just a geographical divide, but, above all, a psychological divide. As one of Lewis’s occupants from hell ironically says when confronted in heaven with salvation by grace, “I’d rather be damned than go along with you” (31).
Here especially we see the artistry of Lewis. He knows better than to write an essay entitled “Ten Reasons Why I Believe That Animals Go to Heaven.” Instead, he simply suggests their salvation—without apology. Notice how Lewis with his inclusion of unicorns broadens for us the horizon of things to believe in. Maybe the mythological creature isn’t a myth after all!

See the last chapter of C. S. Lewis’s The Last Battle.

“Holy materiality” need not be an oxymoron.
In Memoriam: Erich H. Kiehl (1921–2012)

Dr. Erich Kiehl attended St. Paul’s College in Concordia, Missouri graduating in 1940. He received his Bachelor’s degree from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in 1942, from which he also received a Master’s of Divinity degree in 1945, a Master of Sacred Theology in 1951, and a Doctor of Theology in 1959. Dr. Kiehl served as assistant to the pastor at Timothy Lutheran Church in St. Louis in 1946. From 1948–1960 he was Director of Planning and Research for Church-Craft Pictures, Inc. Starting in 1960, he was editor of Weekday Materials for the LCMS Board for Parish Education.


As an undergraduate student, I first met Dr. Kiehl during his tenure as a professor (1965–1974) at Concordia Lutheran Junior College, Ann Arbor, MI. During the traumatic years of the synodical controversy in the 1970s, Dr. Kiehl was called to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where he was Professor of New Testament Theology until his retirement in June 1992. It was my privilege to study with him during those years, to assist with his publication of *The Passion of Our Lord* (Baker, 1990; reissued by Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002). I received my ThD under his guidance.

As significant as his leadership was in the seventies, Dr. Kiehl was pre-eminently a teacher. He was an innovator in the use of the latest classroom technology of his day. His overheads were legendary. But it was his ability to open up to students the world behind the text (geography, history, culture, archaeology) that was particularly noteworthy. The “Babylonian Chronicles” and Pritchard’s *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* were fascinating to this young undergraduate. To this day, I cherish this legacy, even as I write these words overlooking the shore of the Sea of Galilee from the archaeological excavation at Hippos of the Decapolis. My students, my volunteers, and I benefit from the interests Dr. Kiehl inspired.

But Dr. Kiehl’s legacy is more than academic. A man of strong convictions, Dr. Kiehl repeatedly said in the classrooms of Concordia Seminary, “Gentlemen, we must be winsome.” Dr. Kiehl recognized that the gospel and the truths of Scripture are not advanced with aggressive tactics and bald politics. By being winsome, gentle, and caring we bear witness to the good news which is at the heart of what Dr. Kiehl taught and we, his students, learned and, God willing, will imitate.

Mark Schuler
Concordia University
St. Paul, MN

Dr. Kiehl died on June 13, 2012, aged 91 years. An obituary was published on June 20 in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.
Dr. Elmer W. Matthias was what came to be known in Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) circles as a “system” person, meaning his path of education from the local elementary school days would progress into one of our LCMS prep schools, and, if on the way to pastoral preparation, graduating ultimately from the seminary in St. Louis. Elmer, a pastor’s son, went from a one-room school in Riceville, Iowa, to graduate from Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Concordia Seminary equipped him to be a pastor. He graduated in 1945.

Elmer did not take placement into a congregation immediately upon graduation, as was the usual route, but he remained at the seminary for a year of graduate work. His first placement was to a mission church in Galena Park, Texas, a suburb of Houston. Upon acceptance of his call, he was ordained in Galena in September 1946. During his ten-year tenure at Peace Lutheran Church, his service among God’s people brought them to complete a building program that erected a church building and an elementary school. Elmer’s ministry was blessed with the congregation becoming self-supporting in this period of his pastoral service.

In 1956 Reverend Matthias accepted the call to become senior pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Anaheim, California, and served there for 22 years. During his tenure at Zion the church grew along with the community. He led the work to build a new sanctuary on East Street in Anaheim to accommodate a congregation that had grown to over 2000 members.

During his time in Orange County, Reverend Matthias was instrumental in the founding of Lutheran High School of Orange County. He served as circuit counselor and district vice president for the Pacific Southwest District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He worked tirelessly at the synodical level to lead the church to establish an institution of higher education in southern California. His efforts resulted in the founding of Christ College, Irvine, now Concordia University, Irvine. He served as an original founding member of the Christ College Board of Control from 1967 to 1978.

While serving Zion Lutheran Church, Reverend Matthias began studies at Fuller Theological Seminary and received the degree of Doctor of Ministry in 1977.

In 1978 Dr. Matthias accepted the call to serve Concordia Seminary in St. Louis as associate professor of practical theology. This is when I came to know Elmer and Ruth Matthias, since I too was called to Concordia Seminary in 1978, and we were installed in our positions there in the opening service for a new school year by Dr. Paul Ph. Spitz, Missouri District President. Elmer served as the director of the World Mission Institute from 1979–1981 and as director of continuing education and parish services from 1981–1985.

He was instrumental in the establishment of the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) degree to the seminary’s graduate offerings, and he served as the first director of the D.Min. program, from 1983–1987. During his nine-year tenure on the faculty he conducted frequent church growth workshops at regional congregations. Both the Doctor
of Ministry degree program and principles of church growth made some seminary faculty members and some church leaders nervous and even perplexed, as it remains still in some circles. Elmer worked diligently to keep all things Lutheran while maintaining that the Lord gave the church the Great Commission, and it means giving the grace of baptism and the gift of his teaching to all humankind, attended by his promise of the abiding power of his presence.

During Dr. Matthias’s seminary tenure, he and I served together on the called faculty for the department of practical theology. Often Elmer would display his keen and acute sense of pastoral ministry during sessions, keeping everyone on track with the real business of a seminary, pointing to its major purpose, namely, to prepare men for the holy ministry of word and sacrament in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Our tenure as professors began in the rebuilding process after the LCMS crisis in the mid-1970s. We were also social friends, mostly resulting from our mutual asset of parish ministry experience on the faculty.

Following his retirement in 1987, Dr. Matthias returned to Anaheim and continued to serve as an interim pastor at several congregations in the area. He also served Redeemer Lutheran Church in Ontario, California, as assistant for pastoral care. He was called to glory on July 20, 2012 after several years of declining health.

Elmer William Matthias, the third child of the Reverend Arthur William and Elsie Harder Matthias, married Ruth Delores Weinhold on November 12, 1947 in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, where Ruth served as a nurse. He is survived by his wife of 65 years, sons Bruce (Sonja) and Steven, and grandchildren Lauren, Jason, and Andrew. Elmer and Ruth were a couple who together demonstrated the joy of ministry, a life filled with grace and warm hospitality, and the love for people that comes from God’s great love for them, and for all.

In a word, Pastor and Professor Elmer Matthias was a “churchman,” one of those pastors whom some of us were fortunate to serve with as young pastors, men whose service went beyond the congregation to projects like high schools and colleges, who supported district and synod and the work of the church-at-large with sound doctrine, a mission spirit, and evangelical care for souls. This generation of pastors embraced one another, though sometimes in disagreement, encouraged each other, cared for one another’s families, and helped their peers in ministry when they encountered difficulties and problems. They trusted one another.

Rev. Dr. Matthias’s legacy is more than pastoral and professorial. He was a mentor of pastors. His district president, Rev. Dr. Larry Stoterau, of the Pacific Southwest district, said at Elmer’s funeral how noted he was “as a pioneer in both church growth and in the Doctor of Ministry degree program. Elmer was always willing to mentor and encourage young pastors. He was seen as an encourager of other pastors, too. He loved being around pastors.”

L. Dean Hempelmann
Las Cruces, New Mexico

*Dr. Matthias died on July 20, 2012, aged 90 years. An obituary was published in The Orange County Register on July 24, 2012.*
The beauty of the earth, in all its intricacies, is a gift of the creator to us. And its value is not practical or ethical, but is given to us simply to delight us even as God delights in it. And it is powerful. N. T. Wright notes that beauty, whether in God’s creation or in human art, “is sometimes so powerful that it evokes our very deepest feelings of awe, wonder, gratitude, and reverence.” Beauty blossoms into appreciation for God’s creation and love of the creator.

An aesthetic appreciation for creation is also one of the very reasons we are able to rule over the earth in a caring way as God’s special creatures. As those creatures made in God’s image, we find ourselves attracted to, attending to, and wanting to preserve that which we find beautiful. Our appreciation of beauty in other creatures and the wider creation draws us into an ethic of nurture and preservation rather than exploitation and survival of the fittest. The impoverishment of our world when species are lost is felt by us on a deeper level than merely pragmatics. It is perceived as a moral issue. Thus, there is in the first article relationship of aesthetics and ethics, as aesthetics plays an important role in ethics.

In fact, it’s been suggested that what we consider to be beautiful has played a far more important and effective role in preserving pieces of creation than have moral or ethical precepts. J. Baird Callicott observes, “In the conservation and resource management arena, natural aesthetics has, indeed, been much more important historically than environmental ethics.” But the aesthetics (or the appreciation of beauty in creation) and its value for ethics, is a fairly recent area of study among environmental philosophers, ethicists, and theologians dating to the eighteenth century when discoveries in astronomy and geology sparked a reconsideration of the beautiful in creation.

The goal of this essay is to suggest some considerations for thinking about beauty with regard to the creation. As Christians, we affirm that beauty in creation is objective and universal, given that God repeatedly admires what he has made as “good.” It pleases and delights him. It witnesses to his benevolent wisdom. But we must also recognize that perceptions of what constitutes the beautiful are often culturally conditioned. What we find beautiful is often filtered by how we have learned to perceive it.

In this essay, we will first explore how we can find beauty in the “non-scenic” and ordinary things of creation as a confession of God’s evaluation of his creation as

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Erik Herrmann, right, is assistant professor of historical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.
“good.” In doing such we may give thanks and praise to God for his entire creation and not only to the parts that we like. Second, we will consider the importance of finding (or restoring) beauty in the midst of creation’s bondage to corruption as a confession of our eschatological hope of the new creation. In doing so we may persevere in work that endures into the age to come.

Finding Beauty in the “Non-Scenic” within Creation

Few people in America today would argue with the need to protect the beauty of Yosemite, the Rocky Mountains, or Grand Canyon National Park. We travel across the country to see them, admire them, and photograph them. Consider what are considered the most photographed mountains in the world—the Grand Teton. Obviously, we should preserve them! But then we drive back home to the plains of Kansas, the concrete canyons of the city, the sameness of suburban landscapes, and complain how we have only wetlands and marshes, grasslands and flat plains “and they’re so boring.”

So how have we been conditioned to see beauty in mountains but not in flatlands? In large part it occurred by means of various fields of study from philosophy to science to art to theology (and their influences upon each other) over the course of the past three-hundred years.

Callicott points out that prior to the seventeenth century, nature was not considered to be a subject of serious painting. When the landscape painters (Claude Lorraine, Salvatore Rosa, Salomon van Ruysdael, and Meindert Hobbema) came on the scene they shaped a perception of beauty that came to be known as the “picturesque” that focused on woodland lanes, river scenes, and park-like settings. This had two effects. It created the activity of scenic tourism to places with beautiful landscapes and it gave rise to what came to be known as landscape gardening. Most of these were pastoral or cultivated landscapes. Wild landscapes like mountains, in keeping with much of the western tradition, were viewed with disdain both aesthetically and theologically.

The eighteenth century brought about dramatic changes in aesthetic perception. Developments in astronomy and geology led many to embrace the grand, vast, and irregular landscape on earth as beautiful. Theologians responded with an “aesthetics of the infinite” in which they stressed God’s infiniteness and eternity. These developments found full flower in the nature writing of Transcendentalists and Romantics who sought the beautiful and sublime in landscapes untouched by human hands such as mountains, oceans, and deserts. Thus it is not by accident that our earliest national parks were those that had grandiose and dramatic features—Yellowstone, Yosemite, etc. It was not until the twentieth century that we had an Everglades National Park and a Great Plains National Park.

The impact of the sciences and humanities upon our perception of beauty in creation is not necessarily bad. Christians can receive these First Article disciplines as gifts of God and use them for exploring and discovering God’s world. However, we must use them critically, by recognizing that they too are culturally conditioned and thus their results are provisional. Second, we can best use their results when they come from a ministerial use of reason, but not when they exercise a magisterial use of reason that expels God from his creation, or fails to recognize creation today as one groaning
in bondage to corruption on account of human sin. In these ways, we can use them to enhance and enlarge our perceptions of beauty in creation so as to delight in and care for God’s entire creation, including the “non-scenic” corners where we live.

Science and the Perception of Beauty

A pivotal figure for connecting beauty to the conservation of “non-scenic” landscapes was the forester, wildlife manager, and conservationist, Aldo Leopold. In the 1940s he criticized the callousness with which scientists approached nature solely in terms of statistics and scientific studies. Speaking to the Wildlife Society, he complained that the definitions of science penned by the National Academy “deal almost exclusively with the creation and exercise of power.” But he asked, “what about the creation and exercise of wonder or respect for workmanship in nature?” He argued for the humanities to help rewrite the objectives of science. The development of an ethic by itself was insufficient for the cause of conservation. Ethics dealt with duties that are seen as burdensome whereas beauty attracts. People cherish and treasure that which they regard as beautiful. And so Leopold proposed a “land aesthetic” to go along with his land ethic to counter the prevailing tendency of valuing land only in economic terms which led to the draining of marshes and bogs, and putting seemingly, every square foot of land into development.

In his land aesthetic, Leopold called for a change in the mind’s eye that went beyond the scenic. He argued that instilling an appreciation for nature is a “job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.” In other words, it is not about taking people into scenic areas in order to view scenic overlooks. It was about helping them to see beauty in the “ordinary” places where they lived. For Leopold, such an appreciation could be cultivated through knowledge of the new field of ecology combined with evolutionary biology. The combination of seeing interconnections within the whole (synchronously) in addition to connections through history (diachronically) would enable people to see even wetlands, bogs, and marshes as beautiful.

Leopold illustrated his new conception of beauty his “Marshland Elegy,” a “haunting ode” to Sandhill cranes and their marshland homes in Wisconsin. Our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird... He is the symbol of our untameable past, of the incredible sweep of millennia which underlies the daily affairs of birds and men... Amid the endless mediocrity of the commonplace, a crane marsh holds a paleontological patent of nobility, won in the march of aeons, and revocable only by shotgun. The sadness discernible in some marshes arises, perhaps, from their once having harbored cranes. Now they stand humbled, adrift in history.
For Leopold, we should not see cranes apart from marshes or marshes apart from cranes. Put another way, “We cannot love cranes and hate marshes.”\textsuperscript{19} This way of “seeing with the mind” and thus perceiving with our senses allowed us to see that the marsh is no longer a “waste” or “God-forsaken mosquito swamp” but a thing of precious beauty.\textsuperscript{20}

Leopold’s use of ecology can help us in a provisional way to see the beauty of interconnections between creatures and the places for which they were made. At the root of his culturally-conditioned evolutionary analysis\textsuperscript{21} of the history of cranes, according to Holmes Rolston III, is a respect for life and the beauty of its persistence and perseverance—something that Christians can also appreciate, but attribute it to the power of God’s word of blessing to “be fruitful and multiply.” Taking this into account, we may well find beauty in the ecology of the places where we live as we explore the harmony of the interconnections between the various flora and fauna, as well as the cultural history that has shaped those places.

**Art and the Perception of Beauty**

Along with science, art can also cultivate an appreciation for creation by honing our perceptions. Following Leopold’s lead, Richard Bauckham has argued that it is not enough for Christians to assert that human dominion entails ethical obligations on the grounds that the earth belongs to God. We also need an appreciation for nature.\textsuperscript{22} Bauckham acknowledges that such appreciation “in its various forms of expression, is not, of course, purely altruistic, but like the pleasure we gain from knowing other people (as distinct from the benefit we gain from using other people) it entails a sense that nature does not exist simply for our benefit, but is inherently valuable (‘good,’ as God said in Genesis 1).”\textsuperscript{23} Appreciation for creation combined with our control over creation “leads to a caring, respectful exercise of this power, which aims to preserve the intrinsic value we perceive in nature.”\textsuperscript{24}

Humanly produced art can help us cultivate an appreciation of nature in several ways. First, it takes us “beyond the role of mere spectators of nature’s spectacle towards engaged contemplation of nature and appreciative participation in nature.”\textsuperscript{25}

[Art] whether literary, visual, or even musical, can, as expressing and fostering human appreciation of nature, be part of our curatorship of nature. It also alerts us to the fact that we cannot relapse into a one-sided preference for “unspoiled” nature over nature adapted by human skill and art, a romantic view which is based on what we have seen to be an artificially sharp distinction between nature and culture.\textsuperscript{26}

Second, it can hone our perceptions by helping us to see the world through the eyes of others. As Scott Russell puts it, “What comes through to us from a work of art is not simple transmission of what arose within the artist, but rather a new impression refracted differently through the lens of each individual.”\textsuperscript{27} Third, it causes us to do a “double take” if you will, to pause and ponder before moving on. This seems especially true for nature poetry.\textsuperscript{28}
Of course, art will reflect its own particular cultural contexts as well. The eighteenth century shifted the perception of beauty from the small, exquisite, and symmetrical in nature to the vast, grand, and irregular nature, from seeing it in flat plains and rolling fields to seeing it in mountains, oceans and deserts. Theologically it shifted from seeing God’s goodness and wisdom in nature to seeing the infinity and eternity of God in space and the vast objects of the universe. This flowered in the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century such as William Wordsworth, and the nature writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir, as well as the portrayals of creation’s grand and dramatic features in the paintings of Thomas Cole and the photography of Ansel Adams.

In the last fifty years the nature writings of Rachel Carson, Peter Matthiessen, and Carl Safina, have drawn attention to the diversity and inter-connectedness of life on earth. William Warmer explores the interconnections of blue crabs and fishermen in the Chesapeake. Annie Dillard shows us the mix of beauty and horror in creation. And the photography of Michael Forsberg has sought to highlight the beauty of the Great Plains. The same applies to the documentaries of Jacque Cousteau or David Attenborough (Planet Earth, Frozen Planet). Christian literature such as in the Psalms, Christian hymns, and canticles can also play a role in honing our perception of creation. Each of these gives us a fresh way of seeing the beauty of creation.

**Theology and the Perception of Beauty**

In addition to science and art, we need to add the most important component for shaping our “mind’s eye”; for finding beauty in the non-scenic of creation, namely, to see the Creator’s attentive care for his creation. It should especially be able to help us appreciate beauty in the ordinary or “non-scenic” when Irenaeus affirms the intrinsic goodness of creation or when Aquinas celebrates the diversity of God’s works in creation as manifestations of God’s goodness. But, as Luther laments, the tendency in our fallen nature is that we do “not wonder at these things, because through our daily association with them we have lost our wonderment (italics added).” But he adds, “if anyone believes them [God’s words] and regards them more attentively, he is compelled to wonder at them, and his wonderment gradually strengthens his faith.”

Perhaps no one embodies such wonder and delight more than St. Basil the Great, of the fourth century. Basil was one of the most educated men of the early church, having studied at the major intellectual centers of the ancient world. During Lent one year, Basil preached a series of sermons on the six days of creation (known as the Hexaemeron) in which he drew upon the science of his day, personal observation, and the Scriptures. His homilies were so well regarded that Gregory of Nazianzus declared, “When I take his Hexaemeron in my hand and read it aloud, I am with my Creator, I understand the reasons for creation, and I admire my Creator more than I formerly did when I used sight alone as my teacher.”

Basil affirms the intrinsic beauty and worth of creation in light of God’s evaluation that it was “very good.” He describes beauty as “that which is brought to perfection according to the principle of art and which contributes to the usefulness of its end.” He writes,
...a hand by itself or an eye alone or any of the members of a statue, lying about separately, would not appear beautiful to one chancing upon them; but, set in their proper place, they exhibit beauty of relationship, scarcely evident formerly, but now easily recognized by the uncultured man. Yet, the artist, even before the combination of the parts knows the beauty of each and approves them individually, directing his judgment to the final aim. God is described on the present occasion as such an artistic Commender of each of His works, but He will render becoming praise also the whole of completed world.\textsuperscript{38}

So Basil compares how we perceive the beauty of creation with how God views it in light of the overall purpose of his creative activity.

The Scripture does not point out exactly this, that a certain delightful vision of the \textbf{sea} presented itself to God. For, the Creator of all creation does not look at beauty with eyes, but He contemplates in His ineffable wisdom the things made. A pleasant sight, indeed, is a whitened sea, when settled calm possesses it; and pleasant also when, ruffled on the surface by gentle breezes, it reflects a purple or bluish color to the spectators, when it does not beat violently the neighboring land, but, as it were, kisses it with peaceful embraces. Surely, we must not think that the meaning of Scripture is that the sea appeared good and pleasant to God in this way, but here the goodness is determined by the purpose of the creative activity.

And then Basil goes on to describe “ecologically” what we today would identify as the water cycle in a way that seems remarkably current today.

In the first place, the water of the sea is the source of all the moisture of the earth...Consequently, the sea is good in God’s sight because of the permeation of its moisture into the depths of the earth; and it is good because, being the receptacle of rivers, it receives the streams from all sides into itself but remains within its own limits. It is good also because it is a certain origin and source for aerial waters. Warmed by the rays of the sun, it gives forth through vapors a refined form of water, which, drawn to the upper regions, then chilled because it is higher than the reflection of the sun’s rays from the ground and also because the shadow from the cloud increases the cooling, becomes rain and enriches the earth.\textsuperscript{39}

Note how Basil shows himself familiar with science of his day and places it within the context of God’s benevolent work to refresh and make fruitful the earth.

Although Basil does not possess an ecological understanding of cranes as members of a biotic community, Basil composes his own celebration of cranes and their characteristics.

How the cranes in turn accept the responsibility of outposts at night, and while some sleep, others making the rounds, provide every safety for
those asleep; then, when the time of watching has been completed, the guard, having called out, goes to sleep and another, succeeding provides in his turn the safety which he has enjoyed. You will see this discipline also in their flight, a different one takes up the task of guiding at different times and, after having led the flight for a certain appointed time, goes around to the rear, transferring the leadership of the journey to the one behind him.40

Basil sees them as marvelous expressions of God’s providential wisdom. “In what bird does nature not share some marvel peculiar to it?” How many varieties of winged creatures he has provided for! How different he has made them from each other in species! With what distinct properties He has marked each kind!”41 And in what becomes something of a recurring refrain, Basil emphasizes that God has given each creature exactly what it needs: “Thus, everything in existence is the work of Providence, and nothing is bereft of the care owed to it. If you observe carefully the members even of the animals, you will find that the Creator has added nothing superfluous, and that he has not omitted anything necessary.”42

Such appreciation for creation and its beauty evokes wonder for the Creator. Basil exclaims, “What time can suffice to say and to explain all the wonders of the Creator?” and “All things bear traces of the wisdom of the Creator.”43 Basil thus not only grasps the creature, he also grasps the creator “in, with, and under” the creature, a theme that Luther would develop as the larvae Dei (masks or veils of God).44 In his Genesis commentary, Luther makes that point again, “When God reveals himself to us, it is necessary for him to do so through some such veil or wrapper and to say: ‘Look! Under this wrapper you will be sure to take hold of me. When we embrace this wrapper, adoring, praying, and sacrificing to God there, we are said to be praying to God and sacrificing to him properly.”45

And so both Basil and Luther continually see in all the features of creation witnesses to the creator’s benevolence and benefaction. To that end, Basil prays for his congregation,

May God, who created such mighty things...grant to you an understanding of His truth in its entirety, in order that from visible objects you may comprehend the invisible Being, and from the greatness and beauty of creatures you may conceive the proper idea concerning the Creator [italics added]...Therefore, in the earth, in the air, and in the heavens, in water, in night and in day, and in all things visible, clear reminders of the Benefactor grip us.46

In a sense, what both Basil and Luther engage in is what Joseph Sittler calls “beholding.” He notes that “the word ‘behold’ lies upon that which is beheld a kind of tenderness which suggests that things in themselves have their own wondrous authenticity and integrity.” It is to live in the world with awe for life that acknowledges God's attentive care for his creatures and sees them as our fellow creatures. In other words, “To stand beholding means that one stands within the Creation with an intrinsically theological stance.”47
Embodied Participation in Beauty

Theology, science, and art are not intended to replace but to assist our own direct, personal experience of creation’s beauty. And, it is a personal participation in, and sustained attention to, the particular patch of earth on which we live that can foster affection for it. Basil modeled this in his Hexaemeron when he declares, “I have seen these wonders myself and I have admired the wisdom of God in all things.”

Personal immersion in creation is especially important for us as embodied and sensoried people. God made us a psychosomatic unity of body and soul. Direct contact with creation employs all of our senses and faculties. God gave us senses to interact with the full spectrum of creation and its beauty: eyes to see sunsets and the shimmering red throat of a hummingbird; ears to hear the songs of birds and the beating of their wings; a nose to take in the fragrance of wine or the sweetness of cedar; taste in the earthiness of wine or hoppiness of beer; and touch in a cool breeze or the heat of the sun. And he gave us the faculties of reason and imagination to perceive its workings and beauty.

Yet we have become increasingly disconnected from creation by surrounding ourselves in the synthetic environments of our own making. Few authors have addressed these issues more compellingly and prophetically than Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, essayist, novelist, and poet. He draws attention to the importance of acquiring an intimate familiarity with the particular places where we live and the particular creatures with whom we share those places. Through such familiarity, we cultivate imagination as a way of “seeing.” As he puts it, “To imagine is to see most clearly, familiarly, and understandingly with the eyes but also to see inwardly, with the ‘mind’s eye.’” And so by “imagination we see it [the land] illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place.”

Our interaction with creation comes to be understood within “the context of normal, everyday relationships.”

Beauty and the New Creation

In the first article of the creed, our challenge is to see that all of it—in its order, provision, and harmony—is the beautiful work of God. But as we turn to the second and third articles, we encounter a deeper problem, namely, the diminishment of creation brought about by the fallenness of God’s human creatures. Here we move away from the need to find beauty in the “non-scenic” of creation to finding beauty in the midst of creation’s bondage to decay. In this context, beauty again plays an important role. Whereas beauty in the first article attracts us to creation, arouses appreciation for creation, and thus serves the cause of conservation so beauty in the second and third articles can serve to arouse and foster hope for the renewal of creation. And so we not only need to find beauty in the “common” elements of creation as impetus for its preservation, but beauty within the diminishment of creation for our persistence in its preservation.
The Misuse and Diminishment of Beauty in Creation

We approach creation and its beauty today as fallen creatures who have misused the creation and brought suffering to it. Nowhere is this revealed more starkly than at the horror of the cross. There is no “pulchram” at the fulcrum of sin and redemption, nothing beautiful to see here. The suffering Son of God possessed no “form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2). The fact that our Lord died as one without form or comeliness is part of his passion in our behalf. Sin rendered him downright ugly. Sin is ugly. His cross stands before us as a grotesque and cruel image, a mirror and revelation of all that has gone wrong with our world. The cross casts a shadow of judgment on all sinners who, acting as “theologians of glory,” not only distort goodness and truth, but also twist one’s relationship to what is beautiful.

Yet what precisely does the crucifixion reveal about this fallen relationship to beauty? The problem is not the ontological quality of beauty itself—that somehow beauty in God’s eyes looks like a man hanging from a gibbet and we have wrongly preferred sunsets and cherry blossoms. Nor is our problem really an issue of epistemology—that we can only know the divine beauty through what is vile and repulsive. On the contrary, the goodness and beauty of creation does testify to goodness and beauty of God (e.g. Rom 1, Ps 19). Rather, the problem of beauty revealed by the cross is an issue of hamartiology: we take what in creation is empirically and actually beautiful and ascribe divinity to it. Such things of creation are not in themselves evil—it is our sinful perception and use of them, thus Luther in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518): “without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.” Beauty, like all that is genuinely good is quickly turned by the sinner into something divine or a means to the divine, in fine, they “worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25).

So rather than receiving the beauty of creation as a gift from God for our good and our delight, we seek to possess it and claim it as our own. Luther points out in his Large Catechism, “Therefore, if we believe it [the first article of the creed], this article should humble and terrify all of us.”53 God has given us all that we need, yet we refuse to believe it. And so we misuse all his gifts for our own “pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord or Creator.” He continues, “For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves…”54 As a result, we confuse the creator with the creature by failing to distinguish the creator from his works. Idolatry ensues, as Luther never tires of reiterating.55

As a result of our idolatry, creation groans in subjection to the bondage of the curse.56 “The beauty of the present world is transient.”57 Holmes Rolston III observes, “Every wild life is marred by the rips and tears of time.”58 We see birds with torn or missing feathers and the full elk with scars from battles. In addition, the direct human impact of sin on creation over the last couple centuries has become clearer. Timothy Dudley Smith’s hymn, “The God Who Set the Stars in Space” captures it nicely: “But yet on ocean, earth and air; The marks of sin are seen; With all that God created fair;
Polluted and unclean.” And this is something that all can see (as Niebuhr once said, “sin is the one empirically demonstrable teaching of the church”). Aldo Leopold lamented that one of the consequences of an ecological education is that it opens our senses to see that “one lives alone in a world of wounds.”

It is not just creation that suffers. What affects creation affects us—physically, emotionally, psychologically, and aesthetically. Peter Harris, founder of A Rocha, put it pointedly, “if there is damage done to the creation, there is damage done to the human community.” That is easy to see when pollution contaminates the air we breathe and the water we drink. But we are also impoverished by the loss of beauty in creation resulting from, for example, the extinction of our fellow creatures of God.

As Aldo Leopold reflected on the extinction of the passenger pigeon in the early twentieth century he wondered what we may have lost.

We grieve because no living man will see again the onrushing phalanx of victorious birds sweeping a path for spring across the March skies, chasing the defeated winter from all the woods and prairies…Our grandfathers were less well-housed, well-fed, well-clothed than we are. The strivings by which they bettered their lot are also those which deprived us of pigeons. Perhaps we now grieve because we are not sure…that we have gained by the exchange. The gadgets of industry bring us more comforts than the pigeons did, but do they add to the glory of the spring?

In a similar vein, an editorial entitled “On Cranes and Culture,” in the *Christian Science Monitor* reflected on the precarious situation of whooping cranes in the country in 1954.

There are twenty-six whooping cranes left in the world, says the National Audubon Society, two of them in captivity. And the Society appeals to sportsmen to save these great man-high birds from extinction by sparing them as they migrate from northern Canada to their winter refuge. Well, so what? The dodo bird and the passenger pigeon are already extinct. So, almost, are the trumpeter swan and the heath hen. And civilization seems to survive.

But does it, wholly? Can a society, whether through sheer wantonness or callous neglect permit the extinction of something beautiful or grand in nature without risking the extinction of something beautiful or grand in its own character? And the American society does have a conscience about such things.

Some millions of Americans will hope, we are sure, that the whooping cranes are spared for their own sake. And we have an idea that most of them will at least sense, also, that each of these beautiful birds, as it flies southward, carries a Yellowstone or Quetico-Superior Wilderness [a Canadian park] between its great wings.

What is the nature of that impoverishment? Perhaps three things. First, we lose God’s beautiful works that evoke from us awe and wonder. Second, we lose the capacity
for wonder and beauty and instead content ourselves with settling for less. Third, we have lost something in our moral character for “each species made extinct is forever slain.”

Such losses elicit not only sadness and grief, but at times hopelessness and despair. Fred van Dyke has commented that as a result, many conservation biologists suffer from a sense of frustration, despair, and even hopelessness at the possibility of making any progress in preserving the biodiversity of the earth. And Peter Harris reports that “one of the marker personality traits among environmentalists is anxiety. The Christian approach is very different: it is celebratory and grateful and hopeful.”

**Beauty and Hope of the New Creation**

Jesus came to reclaim and restore his entire creation as the Lord of creation. He does so by beginning with where the problem of creation’s ruin began, namely, with us. By uniting us with Christ’s death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit makes us new creatures. He renews us in at least two ways. First with regard to our perceptions and senses. Second with regard to our actions. When we let go of our idolatry, we can begin to perceive properly. Not to claim that we have this of ourselves, but to receive it for what it is, a gift from God.

Apart from faith, creation’s witness to God was largely “muffled” by us. It is as if we had wax in our ears, or had hit the mute button, refusing to hear its witness. Luther speculated that Adam and Eve would have had intuitive insight into the “disposition of all animals, into their characters and powers.” He goes on to note that due to sin, we now lack the “insight into that fullness of joy and bliss which Adam derived from his contemplation of all the animal creatures…all our faculties today are leprous, indeed dull and utterly dead.” Thus we fail to see God’s benevolent wisdom in his creatures.

But the gospel has ushered in the “dawn of the age to come” and now we begin to hear and see. Preaching on Mark 7:31–37 (“be opened”), Luther notes that the gospel opens our “ears, eyes, mouth, and hands to apprehend the world as creation…But now, at the dawn of a new age, we are beginning to acquire once again the knowledge of the creatures that we lost through Adam’s fall. Now we can look at the creatures much more correctly…” And so we “begin, by the grace of God, to recognize his majestic works and wonders even within the little blossoms, when we reflect about how almighty and good God is.” In his Large Catechism Luther speaks of how all the creatures and temporal blessings help us to see God’s goodness. Luther expressed this vividly in a catechism sermon in the 1530s when he encouraged children to open their ears with faith and listen. So when you see a cow in the field, imagine it saying, “Rejoice and be glad, I bring you milk and butter from God.”

So through faith, we suddenly discover that “the whole earth is filled with speaking.” In fact, faith sees that “the creation is ‘our Bible in the fullest sense, this our house, home, field, garden, and all things, where God not only preaches by using his wonderful works, but also taps on our eyes, stir up our senses, and enlightens our heart at the same time.’” For, like Luther, we can now “recognize his majestic works and wonders even within the little blossoms, when we reflect about how almighty and good God is.” We discover that God speaks “true and existent realities… Thus the sun,
moon, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc. we are all words of God, in fact only one single syllable or letter by comparison with the entire creation.” God has his own grammar in which every creature is a noun or syllable. And not only does God speak, but God is present “in, with, and under” his speaking in creation. Bayer suggests that this understanding of God’s words helps us to speak of “God’s immanence in the world” in the midst of our current ecological crisis. And so the recreative word of the gospel sends us out into creation where we encounter his original creating words reverberating all around us.

Faith enables us to see the persistence of beauty in the present creation in the midst of its suffering and decay. The beauty of hyacinths and tulips pushing through the snow in spring testifies to the persistence and perseverance of life due to God’s original word of blessing. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit priest and poet, captured this in his poem “God’s Grandeur.” But the hope of the new creation also changes our vision of the present creation. It is like a husband who first hears that his wife is expecting—he sees her beauty anew, now as a mother to be. So it is that in hearing the gospel we can see the beauty of this creation with the expectation of new birth and the “life of the world to come.” N. T. Wright suggests that we think of the present beauty of creation the way we view a glass of wine. The beauty of the crystal glass holds the promise of the wine that we will drink from it. So the present creation anticipates and holds the promise of an even more beautiful creation when Christ renews all things.

Perhaps this is also, in part, why Christians are drawn to one another. In the promise that has been given to each of us in baptism, we perceive in one another the beauty of our resurrection hope. More than simply the consolation of knowing someone with a shared ideology or world view (actually we often don’t share these things!), Christians recognize in one another that Christ dwells in us and that his life is continually being manifested in our own (e.g. Gal 4:19, Rom 8:10, 2 Cor 4:10–11). The aesthetic dimension of our Christian fellowship is not often appreciated, but it is especially present when we let the glory and beauty of the new creation fill the hope of our life together now.

Yet as Christians, we do not stop with rediscovering or taking comfort in the remnants or glimpses of beauty that remain within the present creation in the midst of its corruption. Christian care seeks the flourishing of life and the blossoming of beauty. It is not that we can bring it about now (ala post-millennialism). Instead, Christian faith in the eschatological promises of God (renewing the beauty of creation) prompts us to engage in acts of beauty as confession of the hope that we’ve been given. Such acts speak to both the restoration of proper dominion and creation’s future renewal.

Luther suggests that we currently “retain the name and word “dominion” as a bare title, but the substance itself has been almost entirely lost.” What rule we exercise now we do so by power and force not by gentleness and kindness. He encourages us to ponder this to increase our “longing for the coming Day when that which we lost in Paradise through sin will be restored to us.” Scott Ickert notes, “Moreover—and this point is crucial—any ongoing reconsideration of dominion is intensified by an eschatological urgency, whereby creation’s original harmony is transferred into the realm of
expectation and hope.”

Our dominion and attempts at restoration now “becomes a sign of the time when perfect harmony will be restored.” It plays an eschatological role by “anticipating the coming harmony of humans and animals adumbrated in creation’s initial ordering.”

It should be pointed out that engaging in acts of restoring beauty as part of our dominion may often go against the grain of a culture that prizes above all else cost-benefit analyses, “bang for the buck,” and efficiency. Thus the culture may well ask “why waste money on that endeavor?” It is hopeless or useless.

Consider the story of Jesus and the woman who poured the nard. When viewed exclusively through the ethics shaped by the first article, one can sympathize with the disciples’ objections. What a waste of resources! What could have been used to serve the hungry and relieve the poor was lost on this impractical, lavish, opulent act! It is an argument that we often hear today when it comes to art in church or the beauty invested in the church buildings themselves. But Jesus moves them beyond simply the first article preservation of this present world (“you will always have the poor with you”) to beauty and a hope beyond this present existence: “She has done a beautiful thing to me…she has prepared my body for my burial.” Jesus invites the disciples to consider this act from an entirely new perspective. Though it was incomprehensible to the disciples and even the woman, this reverent act for burial would give way to the beauty of the resurrection and the new creation. Her act would not be wasted or in vain, it would not die with the old world as so many of our efforts will (Ecclesiastes!). No, this would be made known wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world. So beauty here also carries an ethical act, but one that can only be valued as such in light of the resurrection and the hope of the new creation. Apart from this, beauty can seem absurd or even immoral.

In light of the life to come beauty can act as a testimony to that hope, filling others with hope and purpose that no amount of pragmatics can accomplish. Consider the Italian movie, Life is Beautiful. In the midst of the death and depression of a concentration camp, Guido, the main character, breaks into the guard station to play a record over the camp PA system—a song that he and his wife danced to when they fell in love. The act seemed to be as foolish as it was dangerous, for it accomplished nothing. He was still imprisoned in this gray reality. He was still destined for death. Yet as the strains of classical music wafted across the air, his wife, hearing it on the other side of the camp, was lifted out of the darkness of her present state. A moment of beauty, a moment of hope. The same might be said about planting flowers in a depressed area, or taking care of the land around an urban church. “When people cease to be surrounded by beauty, they cease to hope.” It not only says something about the future; just as importantly, it says something about us now, about what we were created to be and what God has promised to give us in that eternal Spring.

Beauty as a confession of faith and hope also has implications for the church. From the perspective of the old world, spending money to beautify our church buildings does not appear ethical but absurd or even evil. After all, that money could be better spent on taking care of the poor or spreading the gospel, couldn’t it? But from
the perspective of the new age, spending our treasures on artistic expression within the church becomes part of our public confession of our hope. In this regard, it is interesting that in Hispanic communities, the church will often be built before the residents’ homes, and often more opulently. Perhaps this is how one should understand the function of the great beauty and art inside the temple of Solomon—beauty that no one could actually ever see, but served in this case as a testimony of God’s presence.

Beauty also has implications for our work in the creation. One might ask, if it is worth the millions of dollars to bring an endangered species back from the brink of extinction. It has taken over seventy years to restore a flock of whooping cranes that migrates from Aransas, Texas to Wood Buffalo National Park in Alberta, Canada. The flock has grown from a low of 16 cranes in the winter of 1941–42 to just over 300 in the winter of 2011–12. In struggling to figure out how best to act, mistakes are made along the way. Wendell Berry puts it well, “An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars.” So, is it worth the money? In some ways, that is not really the point. We do so as a confession of our new creation hope. The same applies to art. N. T. Wright notes that art must describe the world as it is and will be (ought to be). It must come to terms with the wound of the world and the promise of the new creation. Interestingly, Rolston notes that wildlife artists often don’t include broken or missing features in their paintings, instead they “repair them” before admiring them.

Conclusion

Beauty is a gift of the one from whom, through whom, and by whom it was made. And that includes beauty as an objective reality in the creation as well as our subjective capacity for enjoying that beauty. To borrow from Samuel Coleridge, we might say that the beauty in creation weds nature to us. As fallen creatures, our challenge is to find beauty within God’s creation where we might least expect it, both in its commonness and in the midst of its suffering to corruption. But in seeking and receiving this gift, beauty also inspires us to act. Time to reflect is often necessary to receive this gift, but when it is received, beauty kindles within us a longing to care and preserve, to confess and give thanks, to serve our neighbor, to strive for unity among Christians, and to bear witness to the gospel which promises to make all things new. Beauty lives among us not as a luxury for the refined, peculiar aesthetic of the artist. Instead, beauty imbues the entire life of Christian faith, hope, and love.

Endnotes

2 Rolston III cautions that aesthetics can play an important but not decisive role for conservation. He points out that his wife’s value is not found only in her beauty, but in her life and character, namely, in her intrinsic value. See “From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics,” in Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty, eds. Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 327. This book is a good introduction to this discussion among environmental philosophers and ethicists.
3 J. Baird Callicott, “Leopold’s Land Aesthetic,” in Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism, 106. The energy of the 1960s and 1970s seemed to be waning by the 1980s when it had become the province of large environmental organizations that approached things from the standpoint of law and policy making for which scientists
supplied value free scientific studies. Thus it gradually lost its grass roots support. Sagoff asks, why were more not interested? In part, Sagoff suggests it was due to lack of aesthetic. “The problem science poses for environmentalism is particularly poignant in its attempt to answer questions that require instead theological, moral, and aesthetic judgments.” Again, “The environmental movement is dying because because it represents the Enlightenment not the Reformation. It is full of Descartes and empty of Calvin. It is high on rationality and low on redemption.” See Mark Sagoff, The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law, and the Environment (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2008), 206–207.

4 Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Mountain Bloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011). Unfortunately, Christianity is blamed for not seeing all of creation as beautiful (just as it was blamed by Lynn White for the ecological crisis in the 1960s. Carlson and Lintott argue that nature aesthetics was “hamstrung by religion which deemed nature an unworthy object of aesthetic appreciation.” They go on to observe how for much of Christian history up through the eighteenth century, wild nature such as mountains were seen as piles of rubble and ruin cast up by the Flood and thus reminders of our sin and God’s wrath (the same could be said of oceans and deserts). “Introduction,” Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism, 2.

6 Nicolson, Mountain Bloom and Mountain Glory, 3.
7 What pertains to the beauty of landscapes also applies to the preservation of nonhuman fellow creatures. It is not by accident that the logos of most conservation organizations are the so-called charismatic (read beautiful and majestic) creatures such as the panda bears, whales, and tigers. Rarely are insects or the “creepy crawly” things of Genesis 1 selected.
9 Callicott, “The Land Aesthetic,” 159. Callicott also brings out how this was taken to an extreme with the “Claude glass.” People would take with them into the countryside a concave and tinted rectangular mirror. When they arrived at a location, they would turn their back on the landscape and hold up the mirror and frame the land-"Claude glass." People would take with them into the countryside a concave and tinted rectangular mirror. When they arrived at a location, they would turn their back on the landscape and hold up the mirror and frame the landscape so that it would be “pretty as a picture.” Callicott, “Leopold’s Land Aesthetic,” 107.
10 For example, Martin Luther himself appears to have held such an opinion. “And so, just as there are mountains after the flood where previously there were fields in a lovely plain, so undoubtedly there are now springs where there were none before, and vice versa. For the entire surface of the earth was changed.” (LW 1:98). But Nicolson argues in part that the tendency to see mountains as blisters and warts was part of the larger Latin tradition in the west from Virgil and Horace. The Romans “felt mountains aloof, inhospitable, desolate, and hostile” (39). These views shaped the next seventeen centuries of the Christian era.
11 By contrast, Christians often considered wilderness in negative terms in light of how it is sometimes portrayed in the Bible, namely, a wild area unsuitable for human habitation and in which wild beasts live and other nonhuman creatures live. See Robert Barry Leal, Wilderness in the Bible: Toward a Theology of Wilderness (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). For wilderness in Christian history see Susan Power Bratton, Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1993).
12 For many, Leopold is the intellectual father of environmental philosophy. See Curt Meine’s, Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, 2010).
13 Curt D. Meine, “Moving Mountains,” Aldo Leopold and the Ecological Conscience, eds. Richard L. Knight and Suzanne Riedel (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18. Callicott, drawing on a number of Leopold’s writings, suggests several dimensions of how we determine the beautiful. These include the artistic (color of feathers or the songs of birds); the personality of species (soaring of hawks and eagles); the scarcity value (those rare and less common), the wildness (wolf versus coyote), and the native (versus exotic). “Leopold’s Land Aesthetic,” 111.
14 Meine, “Moving Mountains,” 19.
15 “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac: and Sketches Here and There (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 224–25.
20 Ibid.
21 Colin Tudge, in *The Bird: A Natural History of Who Birds Are, Where They Came From, and How They Live* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008) points out that Darwin grew up in an age “that was brutal, ruthless, competitive, and predominantly commercial, and increasingly atheistic and materialist. All of these attitudes were underpinned and justified by the physical harshness of the world, and a growing body of philosophy and science (422). Thus as others have pointed out, his thesis “was largely inspired by the English economist/cleric Thomas Malthus’ who argued that there would soon be more people in the world than could be fed thus locking life into unceasing competition from birth to death (423). Thus competition rather than cooperation became the dominant metaphor for understanding the world.


29 Nicolson (324) notes how Akenside captures this division in “the Pleasure of Imagination”:

one pursues
the vast alone, the wonderful, the wild
Another sighs for harmony, and grace
And gentlest beauty.


31 Nicolson, 389–93, points out that few recognized the heritage of eternity and infinity as exemplified by mountains as well as “change and decay as an inevitable part of the permanence of nature” more than Wordsworth:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
The unfettered clouds and regions fo the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (quoted in Nicolson, 392-393)

32 The former sought to witness to the miracle of life, the other seems to view everything more through the lens the Darwinistic struggle of eat or be eaten. Jacques Cousteau, “We never attempted to decipher the meaning of life; we wanted only to testify to the miracle of life” *The Human, the Orchid, and the Octopus: Exploring and Conserving Our Natural World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 39.

Aquinas states that no one creature can fully express the goodness of God, but together they share it as each expresses that goodness in its own way. Fred Van Dyke, *Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2010), 81–82.

Luther in Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008), 107; WA TR 5:225.11.14; #5539, 1542–43.


Basil seems to describe things in an Hebraic way here that describes how each part fits within the functioning of the whole thus producing a harmonious working of creation. This would be different from a more hierarchical functioning of things that characterizes Platonic thought.

Basil, Hexaemeron, 53.

Basil, Hexaemeron, 64–65.

Basil, Hexaemeron, 125. These may have been the “common cranes” or “Eurasian cranes” as opposed to the Sandhill cranes of North America.

Basil, Haexemeron, 130–132.

Basil, Haexemeron, 144. For example, swans are given webbed feet and a long neck to “procure the food hidden in the deep water.”

Basil, Haexemeron, 141–142.

“For Luther, God is not to be sought behind His creation by inference from it but is rather to be apprehended in and through it…Because God cannot be seen by man in His naked transcendence, God must wear a mask or veil in all His dealings with men to shield them from the unapproachable light of His majesty.” And so “every creature is His mask.” *Ideo universa creatura eius est larva*. WA, XL, 1, 174, 3 [Gal 2:6]. Quoted in Ralph Bohlmann, “The Natural Knowledge of God,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 34 (December, 1963), 729.

Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther’s Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 1:15.

Basil, Haexemeron, 54.


Basil, Hexaemeron, 113.


LC II, 22; K–W, 433.

LC II, 21; K–W, 433.

Cf. LC I, 21; FC SD II, 9; LW 19:53–55.

Luther observes that “it appears here what a great misfortune followed sin, because the earth, which is innocent and committed no sin, is nevertheless compelled to endure a curse…” (LW 1:204). More specifically, “God’s practice has always been this: Whenever He punishes sin, He also curses the earth.” (LW 1:99). Luther has a view of history of decline does not take place all at once. If this is true for human history, it is true of nature as well. “After sin all these things were marred to the extent that all creatures and the things which were good at first later on became harmful on account of sin. Even the sun and the moon appear as though they had put on sackcloth. Moreover, later on there was added the greater curse through the Flood, which utterly ruined Paradise and the entire human race.” (LW 1:90). “The curse was made more severe through the Flood” (LW 1:205). Nicolson suggests that where Luther sees the entire earth as changed by the curse and Flood, Calvin sees the current earth as relatively the same earth as God created at the beginning, 97–99. See Nicolson’s account of how theologians wrestled with whether the vast, irregular, and wild features of nature in the eighteenth century were part of the curse on sin or in fact part of God’s providence and design, 184–270.

N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 224.


2002 Hope Publishing Co. Smith’s hymn follows a nice creedal structure.


63 It was inconceivable to most that extinctions could occur until the last couple centuries. See Mark V. Barrow, Jr., *Nature’s Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Luther reflects on this on this as well: “But I think that even if someday a species should perish (but I doubt that this can happen), it would nevertheless be replaced by God” (LW 1, 52). Later in his Genesis commentary, he reflects on Zephaniah 1:3 (see also Isaiah 13:19–22), where God threatens to gather up the fish of the sea and the birds of the heaven. Luther observes, “Similarly, in our age many streams have fewer fish than they had within memory of our ancestors. The birds are less abundant, etc.” (LW 1:99).

64 Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 131.


68 “The Joyful Environmentalists,” 32


70 LW 1, 66. Nicolson notes that Calvin especially stresses that the problem lies with man and not creation.

In other words, “man is unable to appreciate nature because of his lapsed condition.” Quoted in Nicolson, 98.


72 Martin Luther, *Luther Werke*, WA 30, II: 87, 6–9; 88:5–6, 10–11.

73 Bayer, *Theology of Luther*, 109, 107.

74 Quoted in Bayer, *Theology of Luther*, 111. Sermon of May 25, 1544 on 1 Corinthians 15:36ff; WA 49:434.16–18. Luther sees in God’s work in creation—such as bringing forth birds from the water—testimonies to God’s power to raise us from the dead.

75 Quoted in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 108 (WA TR :1.574.8–19; No, 1160).

76 LW 1:21–22; on Genesis 1:3–5.

77 Schwanke, “Luther on Creation,” 85.

78 See Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 103–105, and Schwanke, “Luther on Creation,” 84–89.

79 Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 103–104.

80 “Now the entire creation in all its parts reminds us of the curse that was inflicted because of sin. Nevertheless, there have remained some remnants of the former blessing, namely, that the earth is, as it were, forced to work hard to yield those things that are necessary for our use, although they are marred by thorns and thistles, that is, by useless and even harmful trees, fruits, and herbs, which the wrath of God sows.” (LW 1:204).

81 The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil.

 Crushed. Why do men then now not wreck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And through the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning at the brown brink eastward, springs—

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (Quoted in Felstiner, 95–96.)


84 Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, LW 1:67

85 Scott Ickert, “Luther and Animals: Subject to Adam’s Fall?” in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about*

Ickert, “Luther and Animals: Subject to Adam’s Fall?” 93.

N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, 231.

In this regard, see Paul Raabe’s letter, “Plant a paradise,” to the St. Louis Post Dispatch:

“In St. Louis, many dilapidated buildings have been vacant for years—empty stores, warehouses and factories. They are eyesores and invitations to drug deals and criminal activities. To be sure, modern urban areas need to ‘pave paradise and put up a parking lot’… Studies show that green space affects the local community in many positive ways. With economic incentives, perhaps some property owners would consider plowing under a parking lot and planting a paradise.” http://www.stltoday.com/news/opinion/editorial/article_3d56d966-9bb2-5c2b-a2cb-7dd6a6838f9a.html

See https://www.savingcranes.org/whooping-crane.html.


This is not to say that there shouldn’t be preferences or priorities for us. One might contribute to hunger relief before contributing to the saving of an endangered species. But one might do the latter before spending money on entertainment or frivolous purchases that we only throw away a few days later.

Wright, Surprised by Hope, 224

Rolston, “From Beauty to Duty,” 333.

Coleridge words are, “wedding Nature to us.” Quoted in Felstiner, 39.
By definition, aesthetics is the philosophy of beauty and art. It is the discipline which uses human reason to study the nature of beauty and the principles which determine its expression and critique. As such, in Lutheran terminology, it is a discipline that belongs to the kingdom of the left. Consequently, the Scriptures do not give an explicit definition or philosophy of beauty. The biblical writers assume its presence as a characteristic in God’s creation, as well as, it may be argued, demonstrate/employ its principles of expression in their writing. Perhaps the best example of this is biblical poetry. Clearly, the nature and principles of beauty are operative and exemplified in the psalms, as well as much of the wisdom and prophetic literature of the Old Testament and their parallels in the New Testament.

This is not to say that the writers of the Bible are silent about beauty. They testify to it as a characteristic both of God and his creation. Moreover, they particularly witness God’s valuing of beauty in the role of God-ordained worship.

It is the presupposition of this study that where Scripture does (often incidentally) reveal knowledge of the kingdom of the left, it would seem wise to take advantage of it as an accurate, helpful and insightful (even if not exhaustive) source.

To that end, even though Scripture does not intend or purport to give an explicitly developed philosophy of aesthetics, it does give Spirit-inspired (i.e., divine) accounts and literature in which beauty is either profoundly referenced (i.e., witnessed to and implicitly described) or demonstrated (as in the poetic literature). Consequently, human reason (especially sanctified human reason) may well be able to deduce some aspects of aesthetic theory from biblical revelation. This would not be a theology of aesthetics as much as a biblical theory of aesthetics—i.e., some fundamental principles of aesthetics deduced from biblical accounts referencing beauty.

The particular focus of this study is to deduce some characteristics of beauty itself (ontology) on the basis of the creation accounts given in the first two chapters of Genesis (especially chapter 1). This seems an obvious place to begin since, other than revelations of God himself (theology), this is as close as we can get to a description of a pristine expression of beauty, of beauty unmarrred by the introduction of sin.
Characteristics of Beauty in the Creation Accounts

This study operates with the conviction that the biblical creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 are historical narratives. Consequently, what they report are descriptions of the universe as it actually appeared upon its first existence before the creation was corrupted by any consequences and effects of the fall. While much of this can still be observed in creation in its fallen state, certainly the characteristics would be much more obvious and magnificent in the original, perfect creation, much as they will be in the new creation.

At various junctures, the creation account of Genesis 1 gives summary evaluations of God’s creative work as he initially creates a primary matter that is “without form and void” (v. 2) and then in six days progressively gives it form(s) and fills it. At each juncture of evaluation (days 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6), the account gives the Creator’s own judgment of what he has made, based upon what he saw. That judgment is uniformly/consistently “good” (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21 and 25) and finally, with respect to all that he had made (the whole) “very good” (v. 31). Within this context, no doubt, tov is an evaluation of God’s creative work in many respects (aesthetic, moral, ontological, functional, teleological, God-delighting, etc.). Nor can these aspects of God’s creative work necessarily be separated from one another, much as all of the characteristics of God himself, as revealed to us, are bound together and form one manifestation of glory. All of these characteristics together express the “goodness” of God’s creative work. But, certainly aesthetic goodness is part of that total package. After all, the biblical writer records God’s evaluation in connection with what God saw.

To be sure, this altogether nature of the goodness of creation does make it somewhat challenging to isolate a particular perspective, such as aesthetic, and develop a list of definitive characteristics that does not include the characteristics of the other perspectives, such as, morality, etc. (Thus, the issue of whether something that is immoral in some characteristics can also be aesthetically beautiful is inherently problematic.) But, for the purposes of this study, aesthetic will be taken as a separate category or attribute subset of the overall goodness description given in the creation account, with the assumption that, if nothing else, it highlights certain aspects of the goodness of creation—namely, those which can be perceived by human senses and appreciated/valued with the faculty/ability that identifies the quality of beauty (which we will attempt to delineate).

As stated previously, it is the assumption/belief of this study that while the creation itself and the human faculty for perceiving beauty are both seriously marred by the fall, nonetheless, enough of the “goodness” (including aesthetic) remains that what is beautiful to the Creator can still be (imperfectly/incompletely) perceived by the human being whose senses and aesthetic faculty are still functional.

So, what are some of the aesthetic characteristics of the original/perfect creation (still imperfectly perceptible) as described in Genesis 1–2? Since we have no visual record of the original creation, we must make our deductions on the basis of the written record. This will likely not lead us to an exhaustive list of the criteria of beauty, but it will
give us at least some criteria, so that for those who accept the biblical description of creation as an expression of the divine aesthetic standard, there is a normative canon with which to begin. This study will limit itself to the criteria of beauty as these are experienced through the sense of sight. Presumably, in many respects, they would also apply to the experience of beauty in the other four human senses.

Perhaps, it should be underscored once again that the standard of beautiful criteria developed here are deductions developed from the biblical account of the creation. Since these criteria are not explicitly dictated, they are, of course, subject to the limitations of human reason. Thus, the deduced criteria are certainly open to critique. But, despite this limitation, the benefit remains that there is an objective basis for all to analyze and discuss. This gives at least some prospect for an agreed upon basis for determining what is beautiful. The apostle Paul, for one, assumes this can/should be done when he urges Christians: “Whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8).

Differentiation

As noted above, the evaluation of the goodness of God’s creative work (including its aesthetic goodness or beauty) occurs first in the creation account of Genesis 1 at verse 4. Specifically, the text observes that God saw the light was good. The creation of light itself introduced the first differentiation or distinction in the primary matter. Whether one views this as the creation of energy or a literal light as we typically experience it (despite the fact that the sun, moon and stars are not set in place until day 4), the result is a distinction or difference so profound and fundamental that the resulting realities are given distinct names—namely, Day and Night (v. 5). It may be that the Hebrew text, which can be read, “God called to the Day” and “He called to the Night,” underscores the personal intentionality of this first differentiating/creative act. In the very least, this first act of creation, resulting in an aesthetic goodness, emphasizes a primary characteristic of beautiful matter. It is differentiated. There are definite, observable distinctions or boundaries set in place to mark off one created form from another. This is a characteristic which continues to describe the creation to a greater and greater degree as God’s creative work progresses. Finally, on day six when the complete set of differentiations is finished, the sum of all the boundaries/distinctions is said to be very good (v. 31).

Thus, a primary/fundamental characteristic of the aesthetic good is that it expresses differentiation, distinction, or boundaries. Day is distinct from night (v. 5). Evening is distinct from morning (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, and 31). The waters above the expanse are distinct from the waters below it (v. 7). Earth is distinct from the seas (v. 10). Plants are distinct from fruit trees (v. 11). The greater light that rules the day (sun) is distinct from the lesser light that rules the night (moon) and both are distinct from the stars (v. 16). The birds (v. 20), the living creatures that swarm in the waters (v. 20), and the living creatures brought forth from the earth (v. 24) are each distinct from the others. Most distinct from the rest of God’s creation is man, who alone is made in the Creator’s image and after his likeness and who governs the earth as the Creator’s repre-
sentative and partner (v. 26). Specifically, it is said of the human creatures that they are made with the God-intended primary distinction of being male and female (v. 27).

Consequently, that which is aesthetically good, or beautiful, always involves differentiation, distinction, or boundaries. The aesthetic good leads the perceiver to notice, appreciate, value and enjoy the distinctions in God’s creation. Theologically, this is grounds for the human creature to experience the multifaceted nature of God’s glory and creative activity and render thanks and praise. When no distinctions are clear, the perceiver experiences the creation as an undifferentiated mass that brings no aesthetic satisfaction, no experience of beauty.

**Contrast**

Differentiation in its most extreme or profound expressions is experienced as *contrast*. The most fundamental expression of this in the creation accounts is the contrast between light and darkness. These may be described as polar opposites. Both are creations of God. They are aesthetically good/beautiful when they are experienced vis-à-vis each other. Together they emphasize the unique qualities of each. Thus, one of the primary skills in the visual arts is expressing this contrast. Visual objects are perceived pleasingly (noticed, appreciated, valued and enjoyed) when they express the characteristic of light distinguished from/contrasted to dark. Expressions of complete darkness or light may be experienced as beautiful, but partly because their opposite is inferred. Similarly, a specific color in its radical purity or singularity may be experienced as beautiful (e.g., a perfectly blue sky) partly because of its distinction from/contrast to other colors (even if the other colors are not in the immediate visual context).

This contrast is also expressed in fundamental *line forms*. No doubt, one of the first contrasts Adam perceived and enjoyed was the stark difference between the forms of the sun or moon (parabola or circle) and the earth’s horizon (straight line from Adam’s perspective). These too may be seen as visual opposites. The contrast between the two, endlessly expressed in God’s creation and human artistic expressions, highlights the unique qualities of each and the goodness of their experience together.

This may be the best place also to identify the contrast expressed in the dimensions of space. Theoretically, these dimensions could exist along with time at the first appearance of the fundamental, undifferentiated matter. Perhaps this is implied when the original matter is identified as having a face (paneh) “over” the deep (tehom) and the Spirit of God is described as hovering “over” the face (paneh) of the waters (mayim) (v. 2). Together these words suggest the three dimensions we commonly experience as space. Certainly, the description of day two makes multidimensionality apparent. The distinctions made in the waters involve “midst,” “under” and “above” (vv. 6–7). As well, it might be argued that “Heaven” (v. 8) (creation beyond the earth) is uniformly used in Scripture in reference to the creation as a place exhibiting height, breadth, and depth. In any case, these dimensions express fundamentally contrasting aspects of creation. They would be among the first distinctions Adam perceived and experienced as good. In particular, the visual arts, let alone beauty, are unimaginable without at least the two contrasting dimensions of horizontal and vertical.
Again, part of the aesthetic experience, then, involves the perception of contrasting elements in God’s creation. While little, subtle gradations in form can be experienced as beautiful, it is partly because they are perceived in the visual context (whether external or mental) of the contrast of the fundamental forms.

**Diversity**

As the differentiation of God’s creation progresses and, especially, as it concludes, a prominent and obvious characteristic of the creation that is aesthetically good is its tremendous *diversity* or variety. Not only are there major *types* of differentiation/distinction that stand in stark contrast (light and dark; land, sky and seas; plants and animals; humans and non-humans), but there is seemingly endless diversity or variety within each major differentiation. In other words, the *quantity* of distinctions within the creation is *practically* infinite. Again, one might observe this as the extreme of differentiation.

The account of day three of creation begins to bring this aspect of goodness into fuller expression. And, once again, it reaches its fullest expression on day six (with, by way of reminder, the fullest expression of the Creator’s approval, *very good* [v. 31]). On day three, the accent of God’s aesthetically good creative activity shifts from *forming* to *filling*. These two basic creative activities have been hinted at/anticipated already in verse 2 when the state of the basic matter is described as *without form and void*, but the activity of *filling*, with its result of diversity, now comes to the fore and receives emphasis throughout the rest of the account.

As God begins the filling activity for his creation, the first focus is on planet earth. “Vegetation” (v. 11) is a collective term, indicating multiple types of plants and trees. The distinctive categories of *plant* and *fruit tree* are identified with plurals (v. 11). Day three of the account brings the first use of *kind* (v. 11) to describe a broad category of creatures that can reproduce with each other. Verse 12 indicates that there is a multiplicity of these kinds or interbreeding groups. Moreover, the *multiplication* of the quantity of these plants and trees are part of the Creator’s intention, provided for through their seeds (vv. 11–12).

Day four shifts the attention away from planet earth (although the creative activity is identified as being for the sake of earth) to the world beyond (the *heavens*) (v. 14). It is interesting to note that even the creation beyond earth, although taken as a whole, is described in the plural. That is, there is diversity/variety also in the rest of the creation. Not only are there two lights (sun and moon) for ruling/governing earth, but there are also multiple lights/stars “to give light on the earth” (v. 17). Not only do these various lights give light upon the earth and distinguish day from night and one day from another, but they also mark multiple distinct periods of time—i.e., *seasons* and *years* (v. 14). Time itself is marked into multiple divisions.

The great diversity among God’s creatures continues to be detailed and highlighted as the narrative shifts focus back on earth for the two concluding creative days. Thus, the Creator commands the waters (plural) to swarm with swarms (plural) of living creatures (plural) (v. 20). Birds (plural) are spoken into existence and told to fly across the heavens (plural) (v. 20). Special identification is made of the *great sea creatures*
In addition, God commands the earth to bring forth living creatures (plural), livestock (collective), creeping things (plural), and beasts (plural) (v. 24). Once more, each of the basic categories of birds, swimming creatures, and land creatures are said to be created in various kinds (plural) (vv. 21 and 24–25). And, as with the green world, so all the living creatures of sea, sky and land are designed with the means and given the command to multiply (v. 22). Finally, also the human creatures are commanded by the Creator to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (v. 28).

All of this detailed description of the filling activity of the Creator emphasizes that a very primary characteristic of the aesthetically good creation is its tremendous diversity. Consequently, a fundamental criterion for judging beauty is its expression of diversity. Overall, beauty highlights and celebrates diversity, the manifold/abundant/profuse number of distinctions in God’s creation. Beauty is expressed in the sheer quantity of distinctions among God’s creatures (individual creations). Thus, that which is beautiful will lead the perceiver to notice, appreciate, value, enjoy (and, in Christians, give thanks and praise to the Creator for) the astounding variety within the perceivable world.

This does not mean that every single creature of God or every human creation must by or in itself express the full variety of creation’s distinctions in order to be beautiful. Nor does it mean that the more distinctions there are in a given creature or human creative expression, the more beautiful it is. What it does mean is that a given creature of God or human creative expression is beautiful to the extent that it leads the perceiver to take note of, appreciate, value and enjoy the overall diversity of God’s creation. Thus, beauty claims the whole of creation as its context. Every beautiful work will in some way lead the perceiver to appreciate and value the diversity of perceived reality as a whole. This may be accomplished by the focus upon a few distinctions in contrast to the many, or by the inclusion of a great many distinctions, highlighting diversity as such. Thus, the singularity of color in a freshly fallen snow, covering everything in sight with uniform color, may be perceived as beautiful, but so may the blend of the vast diversity of colors in a fall forest. In their own way, each draws attention to the characteristic of diversity.

Unity and Harmony

Yet, given the almost incomprehensible diversity described in the Creator’s world, the text also underscores that there is, at the same time, a marvelous unity and harmony to it all. The individual creatures of God’s world, while being distinct, exist and function well together, as a whole. While there are almost innumerable distinctions and strong contrasts, there is no isolation of any creature nor opposition/competition among the creatures. Each has its place and contributes to the whole. The relationships among the diverse creatures are complementary and supplementary. To repeat, at the several junctures during the progress of creation, while increasing quantity and variety of creatures are introduced, each evaluation of the Creator is good. And, at the end of the account, it is reported that God looks at his creative work both in its diversity and multiplicity (everything) and as one (it), and pronounces that it is very good (v. 31). There is a togetherness or oneness to the creation that is good (including aesthetically good).
Genesis 1 underscores the oneness in several ways. At the very outset, the
Creator is identified as God (Elohim) (v. 1). Throughout the account, the creative activity
is attributed some thirty times to this same Elohim. To be sure, in verse 2, the Spirit (ruah)
is very significantly identified as present and operative in the creation, but he is
the Spirit of Elohim. Likewise, while in verse 26 it is significant that Elohim refers to
himself in the plural (us and our), he claims a singular image and likeness—i.e., Elohim
is only one God. Consequently, all of creation comes into being through the activity of
the one, same God. In addition, with the very significant exception of the human crea-
ture, God employs the same means for creating—namely, he speaks his creatures into
existence (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, and 24). With the exception of the creation of man,
there is a sameness to the manner of God’s creating.

Further, the creation itself is identified as a unity. In the summary introduction
to the account in verse 1, the one creation is combined in the phrase heavens and earth
cf. Gn 2:1 and 4). This heavens and earth unity is then described as the product of one
creative process of God taking place over six days (cf. Gn 2:3).

Before the individuating work of the Creator begins, the whole creation is one
undifferentiated substance, described as darkness, the deep and waters (v. 2). From it comes
all the differentiated creatures detailed in the following verses. Hence, the creation
comes from the same basic stuff. The account highlights unity with specific reference
to the yet-to-be-shaped earth that at the beginning is without form (shapeless) and void
(empty). Yet, even at this point, it is described as one earth. All the differentiated forms
are related to one another in that they all are created from the same primary matter.

The unity of the creation in terms of its sharing of a fundamental substance
is underscored a number of times in the creation account. Thus, the form of mat-
ter above the dividing expanse (raqia) is identified with the same word as the form
of matter below the expanse—namely, waters (mayim) (vv. 6–7). Plants and fruit trees
are “brought forth” from the matter that has been shaped into earth (eres) (vv. 11–12).
From this earth (eres) are “brought forth” also all the living creatures that live on the
earth—namely, all the various kinds of livestock, creeping things, and beasts of the earth (v. 24),
as well as “every bird of the heavens” (see Gn 2:19). It is especially striking that even man,
the creature that is made in the very image and likeness of the Creator, is shaped from
the same fundamental material as the rest of the creation (see Gn 2:7). Substantially, in
terms of its basic building blocks, all of the creation is one.

Not only are the diversity of created forms (creatures) related in substance, but
they are created to function together in a complementary and supplementary unity. Thus,
evening and morning continually work together to make each new day (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19,
23 and 31). The “lights of the heavens” (i.e., sun, moon and stars) function together “to
give light upon the earth” (vv. 15 and 17) and to provide seasons (v. 14). “Rain” (likely
mist or dew) is provided for plants (see Gn 2:5). Living creatures are created to swarm
in the waters (v. 20) and to “multiply and fill the waters in the seas” (v. 22). While birds
are created to “fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens” (v. 20), they are
also given the earth on which to reproduce (v. 22). Creeping things are made to creep
“on the ground” (vv. 25, 26, 28 and 30). “Every green plant” is given for food for
“everything that has the breath of life” (v. 30). Most significantly, the human creature has a relationship to all the other creatures of the earth in which he (and she) are to “have dominion” over them—i.e., to represent the Creator/Ruler and work with him to care for the earth and its creatures (v. 26; cf. Gn 2:5 and 15). This last relationship is prominently featured when the Creator brings every ground and air creature to Adam for him to name (see Gn2:19).

The complementary/supplementary relationship among all the creatures is given particular emphasis in the union of man and woman. This is not surprising since they are most reflective of the nature of the Creator who is both one and plural. Together they are given the categorical name man (adam) (vv. 26–27). Together they are in the image and likeness of God (vv. 26-27). Together they are given the command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (v. 28). Together they are to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over all the living creatures (v. 28). Moreover, Eve is specifically created as a helper (ezer) for Adam (see Gn 2:18 and 20). Eve is even specially crafted by the Creator from the substance/rib of Adam and personally brought by God to Adam (see Gn 2:21–22). Adam himself underscores their unity in diversity when he exclaims that the woman was made from his substance/bone/flesh (see Gn 2:23) and poetically identifies her as woman (ishah) because “she was taken out of” man (ish) (see Gn 2:23). To cap it off, the biblical account concludes that the man and woman “shall become one flesh” (see Gn 2:24).

To sum up, the creation accounts make it abundantly clear that, although there is a great deal of diversity within God’s creation, nonetheless, it is also prominently characterized by a unity and harmony both in substance and function. Consequently, it is a prominent feature of that which is aesthetic/beautiful that it displays unity and harmony. Such unity is not just a matter of being together, but being together in a way that pleasingly works together, that benefits each of the creatures so joined. So, with respect to the Creator’s overall composition of the earth, it is beautiful not just because sky, land, seas, plants, and living creatures are together in one location, but because they harmoniously work together. They “fit.” Among other things, they look good together, as in the combination of sky, sun, and earth in a sunset or in the combination of grasses, wildflowers and singing birds in a meadow. Similarly, human created works are experienced as beautiful to the extent that the various elements from which they are composed “fit/work together.” To the extent that they clash or are incongruent, to the degree that the elements just don’t “work together,” we perceive them as aesthetically unpleasing or ugly.

Balance

Closely related to harmony is balance. As the creative work of God progresses throughout the six days, differentiation of the matter becomes more and more diverse, while still being one creation. The increasing quantity and diversity of differentiations work in ways that are complementary and supplementary (including aesthetically) such that the unity is maintained. Not only do the incredible quantity and variety of God’s creatures exist and work together, but they do so in ways that are right/pleasing/satisfying, allowing each to be perfectly and fully what the Creator intended, as well
as bringing the whole to perfectly and fully express its potential together. Expressed dynamically, one creature of God does not overwhelm/overcome another. Expressed quantitatively, there is not too much or too little of any particular creature. Each creature is present in the right/pleasing/satisfying amount, including the creature of movement or change (such as day into night, seed into plant, matter into energy, or shift of matter from one space to another).

Again, the first such balance created is that between dark and light (paralleled in the creatures evening and morning) (vv. 4, 5 and 8). In the instance of day and night, the proportions seem to be equal. In any case, the balance is just right. To God’s vision and for his purposes, there is just the right amount of dark and light, of day and night. They work together in balance. They perform a pleasing dance. Darkness does not dominate light and night does not outweigh day.

While the proportions among the rest of the creatures are not given, it is clear that there is a balance, according to the Creator’s standard and intentions. Thus, by the end of the third day, sky (the heavens), earth and seas (waters) are in the right proportions so that, for example, seas are gathered together in one place where they belong and dry land appears in its proper place (vv. 6–10). The amount of plants and fruit trees are appropriate for the earth, so that each has the resources of light, water and earth for it to properly do what God created it to do. The heavens, while vastly bigger than the earth, are in the right proportion to the earth so that the sun, moon and stars can be at the proper distance to give the right amount of light on the earth (vv. 14–18). The living creatures of the water, sky, and land live together in proportions such that each has and will have (after fruitfulness and multiplication) enough of the resources of air, water, and plants to thrive, without destroying the others or depleting the resources (vv. 29–30). Each is given the green light to reproduce and do their share of filling the earth.

Again, perhaps nowhere is this balance better displayed than in the combination of man and woman. As originally created for each other, while Adam chronologically comes first and Eve is created as his helper, the man does not dominate the woman. There is not too much man or woman in the relationship. In fact, many of their characteristics overlap. The distinctions that are there enable them to function as one flesh (see Gn 2:24). They are similar enough, but different enough that together they can reproduce and fulfill their calling to help fill the earth. They are similar enough, but different enough that they can recognize each other as an other, communicate with each other, and work with each other to care for God’s creation. Their differences are essential to be able to carry out their unique and combined callings. But, the differences are just right. Adam is not too much man and Eve is not too much woman. Together in just the right amounts they can express the image of God. Together they can be human. Together they dance.

The fall into sin, of course, has radically disrupted the right proportions and put the whole earth and its creatures out of balance as compared to the original composition of God. Frequently, the creation suffers from too much or too little of one creature or another. But the very fact that this imbalance is experienced as such is testimony to an original standard of the proper proportions and influences among all God’s creatures.
As in God’s creation, so in human creations, balance is an important characteristic for a particular work to be perceived as beautiful. While in some instances this may be expressed in equal proportions among elements, many times the proportions will not be equal, but will occur in the right/pleasing/satisfying proportions/amount (thus, the beauty of asymmetry). Not every beautiful work will highlight every element. Likewise, some beautiful elements may be present in a work that is not overall beautiful. But, in those that are as a whole aesthetically good, each element will be in balance. The perception of movement from one element to another will not be overwhelming. The quantity of each element will be experienced as just right. There will not be too much or too little of any given element (e.g., not too light or dark, not too busy or static, not too crowded or empty, not overwhelmed by a given form). The force or quantity of each element will enable each element to be perceived at its best while together they produce the best possible combination when so joined. A beautiful work will reflect the balance, the beautiful dance of the original creation.

Pattern/Design

As God’s creation unfolds throughout the six days, certain relationships of order repeat. Especially highlighted in the biblical account are repeating relationships (sequences) of time, matter, and persons. The repetition of these ordered, sequential relationships results in overall patterns or designs.

Perhaps most obvious in Genesis 1 are the repeated relationships of time. The first repeating time relationship appears after the first differentiation, recorded in verse 5: “And there was evening and there was morning.” This pattern, corresponding to a repetition of the conditions of darkness and light, is identified as a day (yom). The remainder of God’s creative activity occurs in the repetition of the same sequence five more times, with the result that there are six equal periods of creating time, six repetitions of the sequence of evening and morning, of night and day (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23 and 31). That these are intended to be sequential is indicated with the assignment to them of ordinal numbers. The sequence/pattern is ended with the inclusion of one more day on which no activity of forming and filling takes place (see Gn 2:2). This is specifically identified as the seventh day in continuity with the other six days. Moreover, this day is given special accent, being declared by the Creator to be holy (qadosh), set apart as distinct from the other days because it is the day on which the Creator rested from His original creation work (see Gn 2:1–3). Together these seven days form a pattern that is later legislated to be observed by Israel (see Ex 20:8–11), but is already a designated pattern.

Furthermore, time is patterned into the repeated periods of “seasons, days (here, possibly, recurring repetitions of the unit of seven days—i.e., months) and years” (v. 14), determined by the regular movements of the moon and (phenomenologically speaking) sun and stars (vv. 14–18).

In addition to patterns or designs of time, there are also repeated relationships in matter. The fundamental forms of seas (waters), dry lands (earth) and expanse/heaven (sky) are first formed, and then filled with creatures that depend on them for the resources to live and thrive. In fact, all living creatures come from the pre-existing forms.
It is specifically stated that all vegetation, land animals, birds, and humans are made of the stuff of earth (vv. 11–12 and 24; see Gn 2:7, 9 and 19). Again, the fundamental forms each precede the living creatures as the places or habitats/homes in which the living creatures live. Thus, the seas are designated and given as the place for all the living creatures that move and swarm in them (vv. 20–21). The sky is given as the place for birds to fly (v. 20) and the earth is given as the place for them to reproduce (v. 22). Livestock, creeping things and beasts of the earth are given the earth to move upon (vv. 24, 26, 28 and 30). As usual, the human creatures are given special attention. Not only the earth in general is given as their habitat (v. 28), but the Creator fashions a particular place for them to call home as they begin their existence, a park named Eden (see Gn 2: 8 and 15). It might also be noted that, similarly, the heavens are designated as the space for the non-living creatures of sun, moon and stars (vv. 14–18).

Likewise, there is a reproduction pattern or sequence among all living creatures. That is, new living creatures are brought into being by the living creatures that precede them. Moreover, reproduction always takes place within the major kinds or categories to which a particular creature belongs. Plants and trees reproduce plants and trees, “according to their kinds” (v. 12). The living creatures of the earth bring forth offspring, each “according to their kinds” (v. 24). Man and woman are specifically given the order together as a unit to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 28). The same design for reproduction pertains across the diverse forms of living creatures.

Finally, there are very significant patterns or relationships of order between the personal Creator and human persons. The human creatures have in common with the whole rest of creation that they are creatures, i.e., particular creations of God. God preceded them and brought them into existence. They, like the rest of creation, are dependent upon the Creator for existence, original and ongoing.

But, the human creatures are also profoundly different from the rest of the creatures. They alone are made in God’s image and likeness (vv. 26–27). Whatever the exact nature of this image, it includes a whole series of similarities or likenesses that the Creator repeats between himself and man. In their existence together, the man and woman reflect or repeat the divine pattern of plurality of persons in oneness. Thus, Genesis 1 witnesses that the one God Elohim, the single Creator, is also plural in his identity (vv. 2 and 26). Likewise, man and woman are distinct persons, but together form one flesh (see Gn 2:24). The Creator is the ruler over all his creation, but he has made man and woman his representatives on the earth, to exercise his type of caring rule over it and all its creatures (v. 26 and 28; see Gn 2:5, 15 and 20). The Creator speaks meaningful language (vv. 3, 6, 9, etc.) and man speaks meaningful language (see Genesis 2:23). As both man and woman are the Creator’s helpers, so the woman is the man’s helper (see Gn 2:18 and 20–22).

By observance of the creation itself, any human perceiver can multiply examples of repetitive orders of relationship within the creation, but the above are explicitly described in the creation accounts of Genesis. Thus, the astute observer of snowflakes on the winter window sees that they all have the same basic crystalline shape, repeated over and over, as all crystals do. Or, we may employ a refractor of light, like a prism, and observe that, no matter what the source of light, it divides into the same order
of colors. Whether from the biblical description of the original creation or by direct observations of the creation now, it is apparent that a frequent characteristic of God’s work is that there are patterns or designs. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear believers of creation speak of the one, great, grand design of God’s universe. Thus, a characteristic of the aesthetic goodness of God’s creation is pattern or design. Such patterns or designs do not necessarily appear in every single creature (although one might argue that at an atomic and molecular level they do), but part of the beauty of any creature is its placement within the overall matrix of creation where it does appear as a part of many patterns. Thus, every creature points to or calls us to see (in the larger context of creation) pattern and design.

Likewise, human works of creation are beautiful because they express pattern or design. Sometimes, such patterns are explicit and a prominent feature of the beautiful work, as in rococo art or detailed filigree. At other times, the element of pattern may be very simple, involving very few repetitions or not apparent in a given work, but inferred vis-à-vis a larger body of work, or mentally visualized. But, pattern or design is always either an explicit or contextual element of the beautiful.

Personhood/Personality

From the very beginning, creating—whether being brought into existence from nothing (bara) (v. 1) or being given original shape from the created matter (vv. 3ff.)—creating and God go together: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (v. 1). There is no creation, no creature, apart from God. Before the beginning, before the creative activity of God (actions outside himself), God indeed exists—by himself (with much activity going on within himself—e.g., loving, communicating, and willing). But, before the beginning, there is no matter. The Creator precedes all matter and form that has a beginning. The very existence of matter (with its characteristic of beauty) is totally dependent upon Elohim who brings it into existence and maintains its existence. The creation accounts emphasize that matter exists, exists in its diverse forms, works together harmoniously (with complementarity and supplementarity), in balance/dance, and with patterns (in other words, exists in a way that is characterized by aesthetic goodness/beauty) only because Elohim is causing/creating/empowering it to do so. It is inherent in the biblical worldview that one cannot perceive/think/talk about the creation (with its beauty) apart from association with God. One cannot abstract the work of/reflection upon the creation from its Creator. Perhaps for Lutherans in particular, it needs to be emphasized that the so-called kingdom of God’s left hand and kingdom of God’s right hand are both kingdoms of God. While God operates differently in each kingdom, nonetheless it is God who is at work. In the Biblical worldview, there is no such thing as secular (i.e., separate/apart from God). No discipline that studies God’s creation can ever be secular.

As Elohim, God creates as a personal being. His personhood is expressed continuously throughout the creation accounts in expressions of:

- speaking (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26 and 28–29 [“said/saying’’]; see also Gn 2:16-18),
• willing/causing (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 20, 24 and 26 [“Let there be”]; see also Gn 2:5 and 21 [“caused”]),
• perceiving (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31 [“saw”]),
• judging (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 [“it was good”] and 31 [“it was very good”]; see also Gn 2:18 [“it is not good”]),
• communicating (vv. 26 [God within himself] and 28–30 [God to Adam and Eve]; see also Gn 2:15–17 [God to Adam] and 18 [God within himself]), and
• self-awareness (v. 26; see also Gn 2:18).

In addition to these, a wide array of verbs indicating personal actions are attributed to God throughout the creation accounts: create (vv. 1, 21 and 27), hover (v. 2), make (vv. 7, 16 and 25-26; see also Gn 2:4 and 18), separate (v. 4), call (vv. 5, 8 and 10), set (v. 17), bless (vv. 22 and 28; see also Gn 2:3), give (vv. 29–30), finish (see Gn 2:2), rest (see Gn 2:2–3), sanctify (see Gn 2:3), form (see Gn 2:7–8 and 19), breathe (see Gn 2:7), plant (see Gn 2:8), put (see Gn 2:8 and 15), take (see Gn 2:15 and 22), command (see Gn 2:16), bring (see Gn 2:19 and 22), and close (see Gn 2:21).

Of special interest is the description of the Spirit of Elohim in verse 2. The action attributed to the Spirit takes place after the basic matter has been created, but before God begins to do any shaping or filling. At this point, the Spirit is hovering over the unshaped/unfilled newly created matter. The particular verb (haraf) is used in Deuteronomy 32:11 to describe an eagle fluttering over its young in the nest. Whatever else Moses may intend with this verb, it certainly indicates personal intimacy and attentiveness between the Spirit and his medium that is as yet undifferentiated.

Also noteworthy is the Creator’s very personal and intimate creation of the first two human beings. As it were, God confers within himself before creating Adam and Eve, focusing especially on his plan to make them in his own image (vv. 26–27). He personally crafts Adam from the dust of the ground and very personally and intimately initiates Adam’s life with his breath into Adam’s nostrils (see Gn 2:7). God personally assesses Adam’s need for a compatible partner and then performs surgery to remove a rib and fashion from it the woman made just for Adam. God personally brings the woman to Adam as a gift (see Gn 2:18 and 20–22). After the man and woman’s creation, God personally addresses them, giving them fundamental directions concerning reproduction, their assigned work and the food source for them and all other living creatures (vv. 28–30).

In short, the creation account emphasizes that from beginning to end, God’s creation and shaping of matter is very personal. He brings creation into existence as an act of free will. He bonds to his material. He plans and deliberates in the shaping of the material. He forms some of the material to specifically reflect his own identity and then shares his life with it. He evaluates his work as he progresses and is pleased with it. He intentionally concludes his creative activity and then “takes time” to enjoy it. Nothing about the creation happens by chance. God is attentive to every detail, making sure it is perfect, just what he intends.

Consequently, beauty is not impersonal or accidental. Within all of God’s creation, it is personal; it is an intentional expression and statement about the Creator him-
self. Therefore, a fundamental characteristic of anything beautiful is that it witnesses to a personal maker—whether that maker is the original maker of all things or the human maker who creates byreshaping God's material/s. Thus, there is no such thing as chance or accidental beauty. All beauty found within nature is the personal expression of God, the original Creator. For example, the beautifully shaped and polished stone that washes up on a lake’s shore doesn’t come about by chance or impersonal forces. It is the result of the personal action of God, crafting through a long (from human perspective) and complex process.

Likewise, beauty in human creations is always personal. It expresses and communicates something about its maker/s. Painters who fling paint upon a canvas do not do so entirely randomly. Some choice/control/intentionality/passion (even if minimal) is exercised. Even computer generated art is ultimately the product of a personal maker. Someone designed/created a program and applied it to materials. It did not occur all by itself. A basic characteristic of beauty is that it is always a personal product—either created by the three-personed God or one of the persons he has made in his image. With respect to human works, they will be beautiful to the extent that they are a product of human intelligence, will, affect, and skill. The less human investment, the less beautiful they will be. This, of course, does not exclude the use of tools, including very complex tools, such as computers. But the tools themselves will produce no beautiful works apart from their use by persons.

**Personality Plus**

In the above description, previous to personality, we attempted to identify some characteristics within the creation that we could more or less single out and individually define—namely: differentiation, contrast, diversity, unity and harmony, balance, and pattern. Personality as such (i.e., the characteristic of expressing personhood or personal origin) may also be identified as a single, identifiable, objective characteristic. With the certainty that the creation as described in Genesis 1–2 is beautiful or aesthetically good, we have argued that these are at least some of the identifiable, objective characteristics of beauty. These can be perceived and deduced in the description of the original creation as well as in human creative works that are beautiful. Thus, they can serve as an objective basis for perceiving, evaluating and appreciating beauty in creation and human creative works.

However, with the introduction of the last characteristic, personality, we encounter a characteristic that by its very nature is a complex combination of many attributes. In the above demonstration of the personality of the Creator, as described in his creative work in Genesis 1–2, we have specifically mentioned or implied some of his essential characteristics as revealed in his work—e.g., self-existence/awareness/expression, free will, intentionality, intelligence, power, affect, and relationship with persons. Since God is infinite, these cannot by any means be taken as an exhaustive list of all the Creator’s attributes. Yet, it can be seen that even these can be “combined” in a very diverse number of ways, highlighting a diverse number of unique accents. For example, the combination alone of God as an intelligent, intentional, self-expressive God with a
sense of unity in diversity, contrast, and balance can easily be seen to result in creative work that expresses order, design, and pattern. Likewise, combining the characteristics that God is infinite, intelligent, self-expressive and affective certainly implies an infinite imagination. Or, considering that God is all-powerful, absolutely free, and intentional, it is not hard to see this combination expressed in the total novelty of the original creation and endless newness within steady/repeated forms.

Just as there are numerous diverse combinations of God’s personal characteristics resulting in a broad variety of unique personal accents, it may be expected that if these are expressed in the works he has made, then beauty will have some combined characteristics that will be experienced/perceived in multidimensional accents. Some characteristics, such as harmony and balance, may be readily identifiable. Others, such as imagination or order, will likely be more challenging. Some expressions of beauty may be so complex that it may not be possible to completely or clearly identify the profundities that make them beautiful. In the end, likely, some room will have to be left for absolute, overwhelming, indescribable beauty (hence the descriptions of some of the Creator’s works as breathtaking—like a starry night, mountain grandeur, or sunset beach—leaving one speechless or mind boggled). The response to such is not objective analysis of beautiful characteristics, but wonder, awe, and joy at the Creator whose complete personality, likewise, is ultimately a mystery—beyond comprehension or description.

After an occasion of viewing the Creator’s beauty manifested in the moon and stars, David, himself an artist who penned some beautiful words and composed some beautiful melodies, exclaimed in wonder to God, “What is man that you are mindful of him” casting him in the Creator’s very image with the capacity to mimic the Creator’s beautiful works (Ps 8:4)? Indeed, the Creator’s gifts to humans are so great and generous that, at times, they also may produce works whose beauty cannot be exhaustively analyzed. While such aesthetic characteristics as differentiation, contrast, diversity, unity and harmony, balance, pattern, and personality will capture some of the nature of their beauty; even among human works there will be occasions of beauty sublime. The image of God in the human creator beckons this.

Leaving room for such experiences of beauty, however, does not mean that there is no use/need/possibility at all for descriptions of aesthetic good. The record of God’s aesthetic evaluations at progressive junctures in the Genesis creation accounts, as well as the final evaluation of very good, affirm that God invites, at least, his human creatures to recognize and take delight in the elements that go together to make his creation beautiful, and by mimicry their own creations, as well. No doubt, such was and remains a primary intention for any well spent Sabbath time. And, if we take our cue from the psalmists, such is also a major component of praise. Seeing beauty inspired them to write beautiful words and invite their fellow creatures to offer beautiful praise. This is the good, the very good end of a theory (especially a biblical theory) of aesthetics.
Introduction

The sight of a crucifix may evoke a variety of reactions, but it is hard to imagine that any of them would be neutral. The cross is not beautiful by worldly standards. It is a place of death, an ugly and excruciating one at that. And yet, the cross stands at the center of the Christian faith. Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2 says, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Considering Christian aesthetics, one might rightly ask, “What does beauty have to do with the cross?!?”

However, the event of Christ’s crucifixion is something with which any theological aesthetic must deal if it is to be called Christian. Yet, oddly, few Christian texts on aesthetics begin with the cross. Consequently, the cross is often made to look like a final hurdle to be passed rather than the very center of the Christian faith.

What will be our result if we start not with beauty as a concept but with the cross? What will be our result if we let the cross stand for what it is without trying to see through it, behind it, or past it? Will it be too negative? Will it only diminish the resurrection? Will it result in anything beautiful at all? Those might be some immediate concerns, but what I hope to show is that by starting with the cross of Jesus, we might be properly situated to extol the true beauty of God in the resurrection. After all, the Christ event does not end in death but in resurrection, but the resurrection only comes by way of the cross.

The goal of this paper is to offer some points of contact between theologia crucis (“theology of the cross”) and modern Western culture for the sake of gospel proclamation. I will start with a brief look at Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 as a way of initiating the discussion. Next, I will make the turn towards aesthetics while bringing theologia crucis into dialogue with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Finally, I will connect this discussion to modern art and offer some implications for an ecclesial aesthetic.

Heidelberg Disputation, 1518

Martin Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation has long been the place in his literary corpus to get the most detailed account of the theologia crucis. However, some elucidation is in order. Theologia crucis is more than just “a theology” to Luther. It was the working

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framework throughout all of his theology. Moreover, it was a living reality and experience. Gerhard Forde alludes to this in the very title of his exegesis of the Disputation, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*: “So it is vital to note that Luther does not talk much about theology. Rather, he talks about theologians and how they respond to the crisis.”

The first 18 theses of the Disputation set the stage for the more popular theses that follow by showing that Christians are to despair of themselves both in regards to achieving the law by their own work (Theses 1–12) and will (Theses 13–18).

Luther states in Thesis 19, “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things that have actually happened (or have been made, created).” And in Thesis 20, he writes, “That person deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross.” Thus, there are essentially two kinds of theologians: the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. Theologians of glory assume that they can see through creation and history to declare the “invisible things of God.” Forde notes, “One who proposes to ‘see through’ creation and divine action actually ends by dissolving the power of the cross in a sea of abstract universals and consequently undercutting the present actuality of the word of the cross.” “The only solution is the cross itself and the subsequent proclamation of the word of the cross as a divine deed, the work of the Spirit, in the living present.”

However, even at the cross, the theologian of glory will still try to see through the cross of Christ itself, to see through the divine mask of God, to figure out the “why” apart from what the word of Lord actually says. “If we can see through the cross to what is supposed to be behind it, we don’t have to look at it!” Thus, to reduce the cross to essences and qualities is to strip away the suffering and dying. The theologian of the cross contends with the reality of it. It reveals who he or she is. The word of the cross from the risen One reveals who God is. Forde writes,

Theologians of the cross are therefore those whose eyes have been turned away from the quest for glory by the cross, who have eyes only for what is visible, what is actually there to be seen of God, the suffering and despised crucified Jesus.

Forde continues, “If we look at it instead of through it or behind it, the cross tears away all other possibilities.” By the word of the cross that is proclaimed, we are called to trust that God is working in and through our Lord on the cross. Thus, one is left only to wait and hope on the word of the Lord.

So according to Thesis 21, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.” The theologian of glory calls the cross evil because it is suffering and calls human works good because they seek to avoid suffering. Yet, even here, the theologian of glory can easily make suffering into a prescription for receiving grace. As Forde warns, theologia crucis as a principle can easily become a “negative theology of the glory.” That is, it simply becomes a tool for calling human works meritorious before God.
The theologian of the cross, however, recognizes that the cross does not primarily inform us of some abstracted principles but afflicts and attacks us. It is not just any cross or some idea of the cross; specifically, it is the cross of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Son of God, that reveals to human beings their real condition and, with the word, what God is doing about it.

Theses 22–24 shift gears a bit to see how this affects wisdom. But we need to look closely at these next theses as they will be influential for our discussion. Thesis 22 states, “That wisdom which perceives the invisible things of God by thinking in terms of works completely puffs up, blinds, and hardens.”

In other words, he who wishes to become wise does not seek wisdom by progressing toward it but becomes a fool by retrogressing into seeking folly. Likewise he who wishes to have much power, honor, pleasure, and satisfaction in all things must flee rather than seek power, honor, pleasure, and satisfaction in all things. This is the wisdom which is folly to the world.

We all feel the tension over wisdom because we want to apply our human philosophies to God even though he continually evade them. But the cross announces death to these desires to systematize God. “[The cross] does not come to feed the religious desires of the Old Adam and Eve but to extinguish them. They are crucified with Christ to be made anew.” It is the law that does this killing (Thesis 23). The cross in this sense is the subject that afflicts, not simply an object.

In Thesis 24, Luther says, “Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.” The real problem is human sin and misuse of wisdom. Because of sin, the theologian of glory can and does abuse the gifts of God, even the wisdom of the law of God, for terrible purposes. After all, wisdom, strength, the pursuit of good, and honor were the very tools used to put Jesus on the cross (cf. Jn 11:50).

Theses 25–26 direct the sinner who has despaired of using these gifts to earn God’s favor to the grace of Christ as the only means of obtaining righteousness. Not by works of the law but trust in Christ’s atoning work is what receives righteousness under the law (Thesis 25). “The law says, “do this,” and it is never done. Grace says, “believe this,” and everything is already done (Thesis 26).” Christ alone brings righteousness to the sinner and the reality of being born anew. Luther writes, “To be born anew, one must consequently first die and then be raised up with the Son of Man. To die, I say, means to feel death at hand.” This is not existentialism; it is tied completely to the Son of Man. Paradoxically, this is the way to new life through baptism and it leads to a daily dying to sin and living to Christ.

Returning to Thesis 24, the fear of the Lord, the cross, and daily repentance are absolutely necessary to create true wisdom (cf. Prv 9:10). Thus, only the theologian of the cross is prepared to use wisdom, philosophy, reason, etc. properly. However, this dying and rising is not merely a one-time event in the past that now eradicates the possibility for abuse. As long as simul iustus et peccator remains the reality until the eschaton, daily death and life resulting from baptism is absolutely necessary.
Echoing Thesis 15, Thesis 27 states, “Rightly speaking, therefore, the work of Christ should be called the operative power, and our work, the operation; so our operation is pleasing to God by the grace of the operative power.” Interestingly in this second-to-last thesis, Luther again picks up the terminology of attractiveness. He writes,

If his action is in us it lives through faith, for it is exceedingly attractive according to the verse, ‘Draw me after you, let us make haste [Sg 1:4] toward the fragrance ‘of your anointing oils’ [Sg 1:3], that is, ‘your works.’

Only the one who passively suffers under the cross of Christ is in a place to have desires and attraction born anew. Moreover, the attraction is directed towards God’s works, not ours.

Lastly, Thesis 28 reads, “The love of God does not first discover but creates what is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through attraction to what pleases it.” This is the love of God that freely bestows and creates good out of rebellious sinners. Luther put it this way, “Therefore, sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”

This has implications for what God’s work through the redeemed looks like. Psalm 41:1 says, “Blessed is he who considers the poor.” “This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person.” This is offensive to us, but we are called also to recognize that we all are the bad, needy, and undeserving people whom God has shown grace and mercy. The problem for the theologian of glory is that the poor, the needy, the bad, do not really exist. All that he or she sees is the good, the true, and the beautiful. The theologian of glory by way of intellect sees through the poor and needy person and thus tries to end their suffering by explanations. The theologian of the cross suffers with the needy and poor sinners, serving the neighbor as the law of love requires, but his or her hope and confidence is only in Christ’s promise and not in the visible results. He or she does not try to explain suffering by justifying God because God justifies Himself and the sinner on the cross. Instead, the theologian of the cross proclaims God’s action in Jesus, the word of the cross, in faith that God’s word does what it says (cf. Heb 4:12; 1 Cor 1:18).

Theologia Crucis and Aesthetics

In The Glory of the Lord, Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that his study begins where the philosophers end, beauty (a term that immediately puts the theologian of the cross on guard). Yet, Balthasar makes a distinction between aesthetic theology (i.e. theology of aesthetics) and theological aesthetics. Aesthetic theology is framed in terms of its aesthetic elements making theology captive to worldly aesthetics, i.e. what is seen as beautiful by worldly standards. Theological aesthetics frames worldly aesthetics beneath revelation. Balthasar’s beginning point is theological because theology in some sense trumps aesthetics in its reverence to revelation.

Balthasar goes on to describe Luther by saying that his theology expresses “the veiled form of the Cross as the only form appropriate for understanding the whole
course of salvation-history.”

He then proceeds to characterize Luther’s three points of contention as 1) The sovereignty of God cannot be explained by any form of analogy; 2) The saving moment of the sinner is a decisive act of turning to blind trust; and 3) In all of this, the *absconditas Dei sub contrario*—“God’s absolute veiledness” permeates all revelation. With these three framings of his theology, Luther is more or less labeled an existentialist.

While it is true that Lutherans do see the importance of the existential experience under the cross, it is not rightly to be called existentialism. The *Theologia crucis* actually tears this down as well. This is why the word of the cross is so important. The word of the cross is the word from the risen One. It happens in and through creation, given from Christ himself in the flesh, given throughout history, and spoken out of the mouth of the pastor entering into the ears of parishioners. Thus faith is not “blind trust” or a “leap of faith” but trust in an objective and external word that makes claims on people (AC V). Faith is simply receiving this word by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because of his misunderstanding, Balthasar does not take Luther’s emphasis on the preached word and administered Sacraments as seriously as it demands to be taken.

In spite of Balthasar’s problem with *theologia crucis*, he still finds merit within it, if only inadvertently. He speaks of a difference between ‘intramundane aesthetics,’ pertaining to all things which all people may consider beautiful (usually related to creation itself), and theological aesthetics (what is revealed to be beautiful by faith). According to Balthasar one needs eyes to see the beauty of the cross and it is God’s self-revelation that determines it. This shows awareness that a cohesive aesthetics falls apart in light of the cross. Yet, his Roman Catholic proclivities towards an *analogia entis* (analogy of being) will not permit him to insert a clear demarcation or distinction between intramundane aesthetics and revealed beauty. Because of this, Stephen Fields argues that Balthasar goes down an analogical middle path that, on the one hand, does not make univocal claims of the correspondence of beauty to intramundane aesthetics and, on the other hand, opposes a view that would make them contradictory to each other. Fields argues that this is Balthasar’s central “problem” in his theological aesthetics. He concludes, “In sum, therefore: however much the cross of Christ sets the standard for beauty, it cannot be understood to destroy the integrity of worldly aesthetics. It must somehow give this integrity its center.” Via Aquinas, Fields’s proposal is that beauty is to be subsumed to the analogy of faith. With his understanding, there can be dissimilarity within similarity under the attribute of beauty and the Godhead. Therefore, intramundane aesthetics are analogous to the beauty of God. Fields then labels the “love of person” as the highest form of revealed beauty. If “love of person,” as an intramundane aesthetic, is the highest form of beauty then even the cross can be seen as beautiful in light of its ugliness. Fields concludes, “As a result, anyone, even without the analogy of faith, can begin to understand how Christ’s crucifixion can be perceived as beautiful, although only the conviction of faith can ground a firm certitude of this beauty (emphasis, mine).”

This assessment argues that a connection can be perceived by anyone between intramundane and revealed beauty in the cross. But one wonders whether or not
Balthasar’s “problem” is really as much of a problem as Fields describes it. Has Fields run the risk of making an aesthetic theology out of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics? Is faith really only a matter of “certitude” in this beauty? One cannot help but think that something important is missing in both Balthasar and Fields.

If we can assume that there is a kind of beauty that we would label “creational” or “intramundane” that all people can call as such, then being able to locate it within some boundaries may be helpful. Herein lies my tentative claim. Perhaps the best way to speak of an intramundane aesthetic is that it actually operates, in Lutheran terms, under the natural law and its place in creational orders.

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The amazing sight of a sunset, the talent of a musician to hit that high note at just the right place, and the gift of the painter to get just that right shade of red is God’s handiwork and gifts to humanity. They are in themselves incredibly strong pointers to the Creator. They resonate with our createdness. When these gifts affirm God’s created order, we are drawn in with wonder. Therefore, if there is a sense that Christian and non-Christian can agree on beauty as such, it would in fact reveal that there is a common resonation with the work of the law written on the hearts of all people (Rom 2:15). Thus, if we place creational beauty not in the realm of subjectivity but as a function of the law, we find that there are much more concrete ways of describing what is intramundane beauty. Consequently, we also have some beginning criteria for judging art.

By connecting creational beauty to the natural law, we see that all people upon reflection of the brokenness of the world may be offered hints that the world should be different than what it is. However, even though this intramundane beauty when it affirms the creational order can (but not necessarily) communicate some sense of morality, it does not reveal the graciousness or mercy of God. That is, it ought not be confused with the order of salvation. It cannot bring communion with God, much less convey that God is for us. That is to ask the arts to do more than what they were intended to do. As always, these speculative theologies of glory only point to human works as the means to attain this. Moments of beauty in art and creation are good and wonderful things, gifts of God, but we are sin-stained. As a result, these gifts can easily become confused as offering peace, grace, or communion with God through our inwardly turned efforts. Sinners take hold of this opportunity and think that the beautiful life can be attained through efforts of contemplation on transcendence, concentration, or other forms of mysticism. Consequently, the twisted attempts to live up to beauty only lead to sin upon sin as they prop up human initiative and works. It does not stop there. Humanity can even use something that may be intramundane beautiful for wicked propaganda. If we substitute the word “intramundane beauty” for “wisdom” in Thesis 24 of the Disputation, it becomes clearer. Because of humanity’s ugliness in sin, even the greatest of God’s gifts can be used in distorted attempts to secure peace through self-justification and to promote heinous agendas. Thus, the desires to obtain this peace must not be fueled or simply reformed. They need to be extinguished in order to be born anew. Creational beauty is not of itself evil, but what sinful humans are bound to do in reaction to it and with it is.
It is at this point that we need to be extremely careful at how we bring *theologia crucis* into this discussion. There is a temptation here to bring an understanding of the cross’s beauty and worldly beauty into one neat, cohesive package. Someone could jump to this conclusion through a hasty reflection on the final lines of the Jewish philosopher George Steiner’s *Real Presences* where he admires the analogy of the human condition being one of Saturday between cross and resurrection. Fields would consider Steiner’s understanding to be the beginning of someone without the analogy of faith seeing beauty in the cross through the attractiveness of an overarching story. However, this only proves that humanity is able to short-circuit the affliction of the cross by turning “love of person” and/or admiration of the narrative into abstracted principles. On the other hand, by grounding this discussion in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, Mary’s son, the Son of God, any such abstraction of beauty is out of bounds.

*Theologia crucis* declares that the human abuse of beauty can take these gifts and distort them so they get in the way of what the cross does to the sinner. Therefore, this distorted desire must also be torn down so that it can be born anew. It addresses the constant danger of making a turn toward an aesthetic theology devoid of the real flesh and blood life of Jesus. If one does not trust in the risen Lord who speaks the concrete and external word of the cross, then the cross, as an event in history, ought to only be a man dying at the hands of the world. It cannot be beautiful by worldly standards. Rather it ought only to lead to despair at the way things really are. The danger here is that the cross becomes something that the theologian of glory can look through to see what he or she really wants to see, an abstracted beauty separated from its affliction. The cross of Jesus can only be considered beautiful for the one who has died under it with all of his or her inwardly turned desires and trusts the external word of the cross. It can only be beautiful for the one who trusts in Jesus. It actually matters whether or not Jesus was the Son of God dying on the cross. It actually matters whether or not He rose from the dead. “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17). Therefore, now the question is, “What role can God’s gift of beauty in creation play in light of the cross of Jesus?”

Certainly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one who knew the experience of suffering as he sat in prison. It might be hard to imagine though that he actually discussed the arts quite often in his letters and papers from prison. Some people might be amazed at this fact thinking, “How could someone think of aesthetics at a time such as that?” Though we cannot follow all of John De Gruchy’s conclusions, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation* contains a thought-provoking chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and he is optimistic that Bonhoeffer can help redefine theological aesthetics as it is commonly conceived.

De Gruchy contends that Bonhoeffer was quite aware of aesthetic theory as early as his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*. In one of Bonhoeffer’s letters to Eberhard Bethge, he writes,

> I wonder whether it is possible (it almost seems so today) to regain the idea of the church as providing an understanding of the area of freedom (art, education [Bildung], friendship, play), so that Kierkegaard’s ‘aesthetic existence’ would not be banished from the church’s sphere, but would be
re-established within it? I really think that is so, and it would mean that we should recover a link with the Middle Ages. Who is there, for instance in our times, who can devote himself with an easy mind to music, friendship, games, or happiness? Surely not the ‘ethical’ man, but only the Christian.  

This is especially intriguing. What is it about the Christian that he or she can “light-heartedly make music, nurture friendship, play, and be happy” that “the ethical person” cannot? Let us hold that question for just a bit longer. De Gruchy posits that Bonhoeffer was consciously reacting to both Kierkegard’s rejection of aestheticism as well as Nietzche’s rejection of Christianity because of its supposed denial of the aesthetic. So, he wants to find a proper place for the aesthetic within the life of the Church. De Gruchy points to this working itself out as Bonhoeffer makes an analogy to the canus firmus in music. He writes to Bethge in another letter,

> I wanted to tell you to have a good *canus firmus*, that is the only way to a full and perfect sound, when the counterpoint has a firm support and can’t come adrift or get out of tune, while remaining a distinct whole in its own right. Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as the *canus firmus* is kept going.

The specific context here was in regards to marriage but De Gruchy insists that the analogy to the Christian life cannot be missed. Thus, Bonhoeffer is intimating that the cross of Christ is a necessity for the Christian because it actually keeps him or her from getting out of tune by ignoring the way things are in this broken world. That is, the cross keeps the Christian from going adrift from the melody of salvation. Jesus’s cross reveals the ugliness of our sinful condition. But the word of the cross gives the hope that salvation will not be taken from us. Yet, there is still a risk here as well. The theologian of glory would seek to aestheticize the cross into a “negative theology of glory.” In the same way, even this analogy of the *canus firmus* can easily run the risk of turning theologia crucis into a principle or prescription.

In returning back to our question over why it is only the Christian that can truly enjoy “music, friendship, games, or happiness,” we recall who the theologian of the cross is. Are those not things for which the theologian of the cross has no time? The opposite is actually true. The theologian of the cross, the one who has died to sin at the cross of Jesus, is the only one who can truly take them up again after they have been denied their illusive power to bring ultimate peace and salvation in this life. It is important to note that this is beautiful only in light of the one who continually lives under the cross. It is the only point where beauty can be taken up again without the risk of it being damaging to salvation. Otherwise, we are bound to fall into the mystical ideas that inwardly turned efforts of concentration and contemplation on beauty can make us beautiful before God. The theologian of the cross is the only one who can properly delight in the aesthetic because he or she has died and continues to die daily to the sinful allure that beauty can be captured by his or her efforts. Once again, *theologia crucis*
tells us that this is no prescription for taking things into our own hands but rather a description of what the theologian of the cross does.

Only faith in Jesus Christ, the passive reception of his righteousness, obtains what the law demands. Only faith in Jesus Christ, death to our sin-ridden pursuit of beauty at the foot of the ugly cross and reception of his beautiful resurrected life, obtains that for which all of creation groans. Those who have died to sin under the cross of Christ are in a right position to appreciate the beauty of God’s creation and preservation of it for what it is, a gift. Moreover, we only need to be reminded of Bach, Cranach, and various other faithful artists to recognize that God’s gifts such as these can be employed to serve the gospel. As gifts, they can even be used faithfully to draw our attention to the specific and concrete means by which God offers forgiveness, life, and salvation, i.e. the proclaimed word and administered sacraments. Yet, we always must keep in mind that the actual means of grace are quite humble: water, bread, wine, and a voice. As we have learned from the Heidelberg Disputation, we do not look through them or ascend to some heavenly realm. Rather, by the power of the Holy Spirit we simply receive them, trusting what the sacramental word of promise declares them to be. Word and sacrament are the means of grace that offer forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The Modern Art Scene

When one considers the modern art scene today, many people consider it to be anything but “beautiful.” Instead, upon entering a modern art gallery, one is bombarded by what are often classified as nihilistic displays and explicitly anti-Christian sentiments. However much that may or may not be the case, it is intriguing that many artists have taken up the theme of crucifixion. Perhaps we are easily reminded of Francis Bacon’s several depictions centered on this theme. With his distorted and contorted bodies stretched out upon the canvas and the reoccurring images of wide-open mouths crying out in agony, we are drawn to see just how horrific Bacon must have viewed the reality of the world, if not himself. A more modern artist like Damien Hirst is known for his fatalistic portrayals of dead animals and mocking displays of Christianity and the cross. Or maybe we are reminded of Chris Burden being nailed to a Volkswagen. It is certainly easy to be enraged by these displays as nothing more than making a mockery of Christianity. Yet, the artists themselves often speak little of intentions. However, although their intentions may seem ambiguous and difficult to infer, it is clear that these artists cannot be intentionless, i.e. they show their dissatisfaction with the world even though some of them may claim to be past it. If this were not the case, there would be no cultural or artistic product.

Therefore, someone might ask, “Does theologia crucis have anything to say to this kind of work?” Can Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation speak today to this situation in modern art? Luther’s formulation of theologia crucis was a different time with different answers, was it not? Robert Kolb gives some insight as he writes,

For North Americans or Western Europeans today the problem is not that we do not have what God wants or expects of human beings (Luther’s
problem). We define the fundamental human problem differently than Luther did: I do not have and receive what I want and expect—and I want to know the reason why! Yet, Kolb suggests that *theologia crucis* is actually still quite applicable. He continues,

Any dissatisfaction with life and identity can form the basis of conversation that leads to Calvary and to the heart of the human dilemma. Even in a “guiltless” society the theology of the cross provides the firm undergirding for discussion of topics that seem distant at first, the topics of redemption or atonement.

Therefore, what might seem to be a disparaging gap of nearly five hundred years is actually not as far off as we might think.

Maybe someone might be daring to ask, “Are these artists really “calling a thing what it is?” In the end, these artists are not unconsciously espousing the Heidelberg Disputation. But before we come to that conclusion, we can say something about their artwork. We could at the very least say that this is a reflection on the tension that they feel within the world, maybe even with Christians themselves. It could also be construed as a cry for justice in a world that employs inhumane acts. Picasso’s *Guernica* that was painted in response to the bombing of the Basque country village is a prime example of this. These artists may refuse to believe in a God who would allow suffering in the world and at the same time deny the existence of their own sin in the matter, but as Luther says, at least their cries understand God to be God:

And I will say one thing more in my free and bold way. There are none nearer to God in this life than these haters and blasphemers of him, nor any sons more pleasing to him and beloved by him!

Luther’s bold way comes out again. He means that they are nearer insofar as their notion of God allows him to be God and they speak of the only one who could change the situation. They recognize how this world is messed up. But this is where the difference between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross comes into play. As Forde notes, the theologian of glory still works under the presumption that he himself is the only way out of the mire and so ultimately despairs in crying out because he refuses to trust in the word of the cross, that God justifies not only himself but also the sinner in the cross of Christ. If anyone claims to have embraced the despair of achieving beauty by asserting the non-existence of beauty and with it, the law, they show themselves to be in direct contradiction to their claims as they recognize its existence in their cries. The theologian of the cross, in knowing this, can show them that they have not truly despaired in themselves. This is not a matter of the theologian of the cross getting pleasure out of announcing the law to them and their failure to keep it. Rather, the hope of the proclaimed word of the cross must accompany the discussion.

There are many who despair in this way throughout the world today. When theologians of the cross encounter them, they can affirm something about their cries. They
can even suffer with them. But they will not try to explain away the how and why. They will proclaim the Christ who suffered for them on the cross, bearing their iniquities, and thereby offering the only hope that this world has. This is the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who bids us come and truly die to self and therein find life in him.59

Conclusion with Practical Implications

What does *theologia crucis* mean for the Church and its aesthetic? This *cantus firmus* of the cross, De Gruchy argues, is needed to help establish a “genuinely theological aesthetics.”60 Yet, for quite some time, the majority of Protestant congregations have eschewed depictions of the crucifixion. Instead, art that is too often associated with Christianity in America is the kitsch, the overly sentimental. It is the kind of art that offers a quick fix for the sake of beauty or emotion itself. It is easy to find these types of scenes all over the walls in churches, but often little is found of a crucifix. We stray away from such images because they revolt us, are too gory for our taste, or ultimately show how messed up our lives really are. We would rather think of happy thoughts than be confronted with a life-size crucifix.61 Perhaps we justify it by noting that Christianity is not about making people feel bad or it might scare away visitors. But in these justifications that often apply not only to aesthetic elements; those who are present might be missing out on something crucial to their spiritual lives, the *cantus firmus*, if you will.

This does not mean that sanctuaries should be ugly places. Sanctuaries ought to be beautiful.62 However, it does cause us to look at art and the overall aesthetic in a different light. The question is not, “Is art valid?” It is valid already because it is a part of creation. The central question is, “Will this particular aesthetic be in accord with and point to the word and sacraments?” Some subject matter and even certain forms of art that may be appropriate in variety of places will probably not be appropriate in a sanctuary, but some will. That is something that deserves serious consideration and is easily the subject of an entire book. However, is not the cross of Jesus one of those key images that that those in the pews should not miss? In a similar vein to Oswald Bayer’s discussion of the liturgy, the cross helps to keep the rupture open that will remain so until the *parousia*.63

We ask these questions: What images will occupy parishioners’ hearts and minds when the trials come and it feels as though God himself is working against them? Will their own sanctuaries, let alone the preaching, be places where the cross and the word of the cross are found? Will they be places where people are able to express the very doubts and suffering that they experience in daily life? Will they be places where the image of the resurrection is made all the more powerful in light of the cross of our Lord? Could it be that both cross and resurrection are needed not only in our preaching but also in our aesthetic?

I close with a look at Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Some might see it as merely a gruesome display but upon a closer look it is still reverently done.64 In this piece, we cannot look away from Christ’s crucifixion. We simply have to contend with it. If we try to look away, we are redirected to Christ. Looking down and to the left we see Mary Magdalene agonizingly pleading for mercy at the foot of the cross.
Her clasped hands direct us back up to the sight again. Glancing away to the left, we see Mary’s gaze upon her son as she faints into the arms of John. Those half-closed eyes direct us back to Jesus on the cross. Looking then to the right, we see John the Baptist’s elongated index finger pointing us back to the cross. But the one who points that elongated finger is accompanied with the words, “He must increase, I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). Our sin is brought to light and we are shattered. There beneath him is the slaughtered lamb, alive from the dead, the greatest of all by being a sacrifice for all. This lamb is pouring His blood into the chalice for the sacramental gift of forgiveness and life. But looking where that finger points once again, may we also recall the Scripture that records the baptist’s words, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29, 36).

**Endnotes**


2 Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 70 (emphasis, author’s). This work is still perhaps the foremost and most concise text on the Disputation. However, in light of later works, some awareness of Forde’s understanding of the law should be taken into account and will be addressed indirectly. Cf. Jack Kilcrease, “Gerhard Forde’s Doctrine of the Law” CTQ 75 (2011): 151–179.

3 Cf. Forde, 69. Forde notes that a common mistake is to completely disregard the influence that the first eighteen theses have in properly understanding the more ‘famous’ ones.

4 Ibid., 73; Forde writes that these attempts continue to fail time and time again as 1) God’s majesty continues to come back “like a song” to tear down their ‘theologies.’ 2) If they were to succeed they would make God look ludicrous. 3) In the end they pull the rug out from under gospel proclamation.

5 Ibid., 75.

6 Cf. Ibid., 75.

7 Forde, 76.

8 Ibid., 77.

9 Ibid., 79.

10 Ibid., 80; “Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. [45:15] says, ‘Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.’” (LW 31:52f.). Luther writes, “The cross puts everything to the test” (W. V, 179, 31; cf. W. V, 188, 18ff.)” Quoted in von Loewenich, Walther, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1976), 120.

11 “This is clear: he who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and in general, good to evil” (LW 31:53).

12 Forde, 84.

13 Kolb, 454.

14 Forde, 90.

15 LW 31:54.

16 Forde, 95.

17 “Thus Galatians 3 [:13] states, ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law’; and: ‘For all who rely on works of the law are under the curse’ [Gal 3:10]; and Romans 4 [15]: ‘For the law brings wrath’; and Romans 7 [:10]: ‘The very commandment which promised life proved to be the death of me’; Romans 2 [:12]: ‘All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law.’ Therefore he who boasts that he is wise and learned in the law boasts in his confusion, his damnation, the wrath of God, in death. As Romans 2 [:23] puts it: ‘You who boast in the law’” (LW 31.54f.).

18 Forde, 77.

19 LW 31:55.

20 Kolb writes, “We have been put to death once and for all in our baptisms, but in the mystery of the continuing force of evil in our lives, the rhythm of daily repentance leads us again and again to the cross, to die and to be raised up” (Kolb, 464).
Luther says, “Whoever wishes to apply himself to Aristotelian philosophy without danger to his soul must first be made truly foolish in Christ. The cross has reversed everything.” (WA 1.355.1–2 quoted in Forde, 105).

LW 31:57.

LW 31:57; cf. Eph 2; Rom 5:6–11.

LW 31:57.

LW 31:57–58; Forde, 114.

Kolb, 455.


The primary definition that I will be using to describe “intramundane beauty” will be that which is in line with God’s created order. Cf. William A. Dyrness, “Aesthetics in the Old Testament: Beauty in Context” *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 28:4 (1985): 421–432. Dyrness’s study of the semantic field of “beauty” in the Old Testament reveals its close ties to creational order and what is “fitting.”


Ibid., 39.

Ibid., 45ff.

Cf. Ryan Tinetti’s review of Insurrection by Peter Rollins in *Concordia Journal* Spring 2012. Tinetti helpfully shows the danger of Rollins’s existentialistic application.


Ibid., 35 quoted in Fields, 175.

Fields, 175ff.

Ibid., 176.

Ibid., 181.

Fields gives the example of Mother Theresa being admired by the world through her love for the people of Calcutta, although she was not necessarily intramundanely beautiful (Ibid., 181).


Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1980), 153f. L’Engle suggests that the Ten Commandments serve as absolutes for judging what good art is. However, she does not mean that portrayals of people breaking the law are out of bounds. It is more a matter of how that action is portrayed.

Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980). Wolterstorff locates the arts as actions within creation that are not free from the moral sphere. Therefore, context is key for judging how a particular art is being used.


Ibid., 138.


Ibid., 152.

Bonhoeffer, 394; DBWE 8:394 quoted in De Gruchy, 161.

This is what I believe to be one of the critical issues in De Gruchy’s conclusions. Cf. John De Gruchy, “Visual Art in the Life of the Church” *Journal of Southern Africa* 107 (July 2007): 37–51. De Gruchy has many pertinent things to say as he argues that the cross is needed in order to be able to appreciate beauty because it shows the ugliness from which humanity is redeemed. He is also rightly concerned that art introduced into the sanctuary not be contradictory to the liturgical actions in the church. Yet being that he does not directly deal with the Heidelberg Disputation, he runs the risk of speaking of “a” theology of the cross rather than Luther’s emphasis on describing the theologian under the cross. As a result, De Gruchy’s call for the necessity of the cross can easily start to sound more like a principle or prescription for evoking creativity and enacting social change rather than killing the sinner.

FC VII, 36.

to Mapleshorne (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991). Although modern art has changed in the last twenty years, Veith’s book is still a very important resource for a Lutheran handling of art and a critique of modern art.

53 Kolb, 445.
54 Ibid., 451.

56 WA 5.170.25–5.171.3 quoted in Forde, 91.
57 Cf. Kolb, 457.
58 Cf. Forde, 66.
60 De Gruchy, 242; See endnote 50.

62 It is important to note that this is not a call for congregations to commission or purchase pieces of artwork. This simply is not financially viable for most congregations. It is to recognize, however, that all churches have an aesthetic whether they are aware of it or not. It is simply a question then of whether this aesthetic flows from and points to the word and sacraments. Thus, proper consideration and implementation is a matter of freedom to seek the best use of what is available.

64 Kadai quotes Eric Newton with these words, “it strains the possibilities of the tragic, the static, the mystical and the macabre to a point never reached before or since in Christian art. Perhaps it is the one great series of paintings that dwells, almost hysterically, on horror and yet never loses the spirit of reverence for suffering” (Kadai, 175).
HOMILETICAL HELPS
Proper 27 • 1 Kings 17:8–16 • November 11, 2012

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been in spiritual decline for two centuries. Starting with Solomon’s syncretism (1 Kgs 11) and the division of the kingdom (1 Kgs 12), Israel was ruled by a whole series of kings who worshipped impotent idols. Even one of the LORD’s prophets who confronted a king did not follow God’s instructions perfectly and was killed by a lion (1 Kgs 13). It was a tough time to be a follower of Yahweh.

Elijah bursts on to the scene, empowered by the LORD. Elijah confronts Ahab with his apostasy, and then prophesies a drought that will only be ended by the word of Yahweh.

Many lay people believe that the Bible is filled with miracles. They wonder why God worked so many miracles in biblical times but does not seem to do them so often in their modern lives. In reality, there were only brief periods in which Scripture records many miracles: the periods of Moses/Joshua and Elijah/Elisha, and the ministry of Jesus and his apostles. These time periods were centuries apart. We do not know why God chose to empower Elijah and Elisha in such ways. They are the only Old Testament prophets to raise people from the dead, and other than Paul (Acts 20:9ff) and Peter (Acts 9:36ff), they were the only two mere humans to be used by God in this way (obviously Christ resurrected others and conquered death himself).

Yet even “Mr. Prophecy” (as Hummel calls Elijah) survives during the drought by the faithfulness of a foreign widow. The unnamed prophet of chapter 13 was killed by the lion because he stopped to eat and drink with someone when the LORD had told him not to do so. Elijah is specifically instructed to go to Zarephath and find a widow who would feed him. Zarephath was a small coastal town well north of Israel between Tyre and Sidon. This was the same region that Jesus journeyed to when he met the faithful Syro-Phoenician woman.

My temptation as a preacher would be to go to the big miracles of Elijah, especially the resurrection of the widow’s son in vv. 17–24. But that pericope comes next year in Proper 5. Verses 8–16 are paired with the Mark 12:38–44 Gospel reading about the poor faithful widow and her two copper coins. This pairing affords the preacher the opportunity to emphasize the daily provision that our faithful God gives to us, and our faithful response to his promises (as in v. 14 promise made by Elijah). In our culture this may be a challenge to proclaim. We live in an affluent culture in which few people have ever feared starving to death. We assume that everything we need for food will be available at the local grocery. Our only fear and grumbling is about the price, not the food’s availability. But a local pastor who is making pastoral visits with his people will know what other fourth petition fears they have and can adjust his message to those circumstances. Helping them to see how God works his grace in the world through their simple acts of faithfulness could likely be the goal of the sermon. Ultimately, God’s salvation of the world comes not through works of his power, like he did by defeating the prophets of Baal, but through the love, sacrifice, and servanthood of Jesus’s crucifixion. Jesus’s message of salvation is then spoken by God’s faithful people.
One small ending note: The ESV text does not capture the polite nature of Elijah’s request to the widow that the Hebrew does. Other English versions like the NASB and NIV at least include the word “please” in their translations. Elijah models for pastors how important it is to be gentle and polite when speaking God’s word to his faithful people.

Rick Marrs

Endnote


Proper 28 • Daniel 12:1–3 • November 18, 2012

In his struggle against the pneumatomachians, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit by reducing his nature to that of a ministering spirit or angel, St. Basil (c. 329–379) highlights that good angels are “holy” only because the Holy Spirit, who is God, has made them so. The Holy Spirit uses these holy (angelic) spirits to minister to the children of God in the midst of their struggles against Satan and his evil spirits. When Jesus casts out demons “by the Spirit of God,” he declares that “the kingdom of God has come upon you,” and a sign of its coming is that Jesus “binds the strong man” (i.e., Satan) in order to free those under his bondage (Mt 12:28–29). In the ongoing fight against Satan and his fallen angels, the Spirit uses the holy angels to promote God’s plan of deliverance from the evil one through Christ’s death and resurrection.

In Scripture, chief among the holy angels is Michael, “the great prince who has charge of your people” (v. 1, cf. Dn 10:13: “one of the chief princes”), who in the last day (“at that time”) will lead the church to God’s eschatological deliverance (Dn 12:1). Michael is the defender of God’s people, the “archangel” who contends with the devil (Jude 9, cf. Dn 10:21), the warrior who leads an army of angels to fight against and ultimately defeat “the dragon and his angels” (Rv 12:7–9). Not surprisingly, Michael is portrayed in Christian iconography and art as the warrior saint with a sword who tramples on and slays a dragon, serpent, or human representation of a defeated Satan.

Surely, the “sword” at work in the defeat of Satan by Michael and all angels is none other than “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17), the same word that points Christians to the Lord Jesus, in whose strength they stand firm against the attacks of the devil (cf. Eph 6:1–13). Like the Holy Spirit who makes them holy and directs their work, the holy angels do not draw attention to themselves. They point people to the word of God and so to Jesus. As Luther sings it in A Mighty Fortress Is Our God: “God’s Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes, who fear it; for God Himself fights by our side. Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The Kingdom’s ours forever!” (LSB 657).

While “the kingdom’s ours” now by faith in God’s promise, the future eschatological blessings of this kingdom will be ours in their fullness and thus “forever” at the
last day: “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book” (Dn 10:1; cf. Rv 20:12–15). There will be an awakening of the dead (“those who sleep in the dust of the earth”) “to everlasting life” (v. 2)—i.e., for “those who are wise” and, by their witness to Christ, “turn many to righteousness” (v. 3). There will also be a resurrection “to shame and everlasting contempt” (v. 2; cf. Jn 5:28–29, Rv 20:14). At that time, “the voice of an archangel”—Michael would be a good candidate—will herald the Lord’s coming and the resurrection of the dead will take place (1 Thes 4:16–17). As we await and long for the final realization of our Lord’s kingdom in our lives at the last day—which includes, of course Christ’s final defeat of Satan (cf. Rv 20:7–10)—God’s people are personally assured even now of their protection from the evil one through the ministry of the archangel Michael and all angels. We pray with Luther: “Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.”

The doctrine of angels can be used, on the one hand, to warn secure sinners against the practice of sin and evil, and on the other, to comfort sinners who struggle with the devil’s attacks with the promise of God’s protection through his holy angels. With Luther, the preacher may instruct the saints to be vigilant and stand firm against the devil’s attacks (tentatio) by using God’s own arms for battle, namely, the word (meditatio) and prayer (oratio). The preacher may declare God’s people delivered from bondage to Satan in the name of Jesus. He may also declare them delivered from sin and death on account of Christ’s final victory over the forces of evil through his life, cross, and resurrection.

Leopoldo Sánchez

Proper 29 • Daniel 7:9–10; 13–14 • November 25, 2012

The divine court comes to order in Daniel’s vision within this text. Daniel first beholds the thrones being placed and the Ancient of Days taking his seat upon his throne. The description Daniel provides of the Ancient of Days emphasizes his holiness (hair like pure wool), and images which evoke images of Yahweh’s presence at Mt. Sinai and Christ in the Book of Revelation. Yahweh Sabbath, seated upon the throne of Heaven, is being served by a myriad (though finite because they are created beings) number of angels. The books are opened and judgment will now be meted out.

The content of the books may well include the deeds of those upon whom judgment is about to be carried out. The data in these books is effectively the evidence against those who have sinned against the Ancient of Days. These books contain the basis upon which those who are to be judged might be condemned. These books carry with them the full weight of the law, as do the books in Revelation 20:12.

Daniel’s vision of the court scene is interrupted momentarily by verses 11–12, which are not part of the appointed text. In these verses Daniel beholds the beast being killed. After the interruption to the vision, Daniel once again beholds the throne room and one, like a son of man, takes his seat with the Ancient of Days. Daniel beholds the Christ standing before God the Father. He, the Christ, is given “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.” The king-
dom is bestowed upon the Christ. He has defeated the beast; he has accomplished the purpose for which he was sent.

Daniel beholds a post-ascension Heaven where Christ’s victory has already been accomplished. Daniel beholds the Christ rewarded for the work of salvation. Daniel beholds the victory that will be given to those who stood under the judgment in the opening scene of the vision. The names in the book together with every sin in those books are no longer the basis upon which the Ancient of Days will judge. The Ancient of Days, Yahweh Sabbaoth, will judge based upon the merits of he who appears like a son of man, Jesus the Christ. Christ’s kingdom will not be destroyed.

Suggested Outline

I. The court of judgment convened.
   II. One like a son of man appears.
   III. The son of man is enthroned (Christ is victorious).

Paul Philp

Advent 1 • 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 • December 2, 2012

’Tis the season when Christians make preparations to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, and there are only a few weeks remaining to do so!

This Sunday also marks the beginning of a new church year. As the church celebrates and remembers Christ’s First Advent, Christians also wait in hope for Christ’s Second Advent. Now we live in the “between time” as we move ever-closer to the consummation of the age.

The Appointed Lectionary Texts

The first candle lit on the Advent wreath is the prophecy candle, or candle of hope, and the readings for Advent 1 highlight prophecy, hope, and what the Christian is to do in the “between times” of Christ’s advents. YHWH promises that, in those days, he will cause a righteous branch to rise up who will bring salvation for his people (Jer 33:14–16). This promise was fulfilled as God broke into our time and space, working out that righteousness for the unrighteous through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection.

The Gospel for Advent 1 finds the Messiah moving to Jerusalem in the midst of people who are rejoicing and praising God (Lk 19:28–40). Jesus knows what the crowds do not know, namely that the righteous branch must move to the cursed tree in order to bring righteousness to the very people who will call for his blood by the end of the week. Though the crowd surrounds Jesus with shouts of praise and joy, he makes his way down the path that only he is able to travel—alone. This is Jesus’s mission according to God’s plan.

We are baptized and have received Christ’s righteousness through faith. But what is the Christian supposed to do now, and how is he or she supposed to live out his or her faith while waiting for Christ’s promised return? The answer is simple: the Christian
is to trust in the Lord. But that’s often easier said than done. Psalm 25 is the prayer of the Christian who walks the righteous road. It is not an easy road without the companionship of the Lord who walks with his people.

Exegetical/Devotional Thoughts

Context helps to understand 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13. Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica and Paul preached the gospel for three Sabbaths. Jealous Jews formed a mob and took Jason and other believing Jews who had received Paul and Silas, brought them before the authorities, and accused them of acting against the decrees of Caesar. The brothers, in the meantime, sent Paul and Silas away (Acts 17:1–10).

It is difficult to determine how long Paul and his companions were in Thessalonica. However, given the familial-type relationships that developed between the Thessalonian Christians and Paul and his companions, as well as textual evidence that Paul worked while he was among them (2 Thes 3:7–10), and that he received help “once and again” from the Christians in Philippi (Phil 4:16), Paul and his companions probably spent some months among them rather than two weeks. Even so, Paul didn’t get to spend as much time in Thessalonica as he had hoped.

Paul had a pastoral relationship with the Thessalonians, and also a relationship with them as a “nursing mother taking care of her own children,” as a father who exhorts and encourages his children, and as brothers and sisters loved by God (2:7, 11; 1:4). It is this familial concern that is behind this epistle. Paul was “torn away” from them (2:17, cf. Acts 17:1–10), and he was anxious to know if they had abandoned the faith because of harassments, doubts, and slander levied against them and Paul. Not knowing drove Paul to send Timothy back to Thessalonica, and waiting for the report was the hardest part. Upon his return, Timothy brought the good news that indeed the new Christians had remained firm in the faith. This news brought exceeding joy and thanksgiving to Paul and his companions, which brings us to today’s reading.

Verse 9: Paul is filled with so much joy that he asks rhetorically how he can repay God.

Verse 10: Paul would love to see the Thessalonians once again face to face to “supply what is lacking in your faith” to prepare and put their faith in the proper condition (through correction and instruction which follows in chapters 4 and 5).

Verse 12: “But as for you” ὑμῶν ὃς is emphatic. Paul prays for the Thessalonians, namely that the Lord would cause love to increase and overflow in abundance for one another and for all. Paul does not only encourage brotherly love among the Christians; he also encourages the Thessalonians to love those outside of the congregation. They were to love, and demonstrate that love to, the very ones who persecuted and pressured them, tried to create doubts in their hearts, and who slandered them and Paul.

Verse 13: The result clause is better understood as a second thing for which Paul prayed, “that the Lord would do for them in the context of their increased love for one another.” Paul’s concern was that the Thessalonians be blameless and holy at the Parousia. Paul’s prayer was that they be “blameless” in respect to their outward conduct with one another and the world and in holiness with respect to their relationship with God and Christ.
Possible Sermon Directions

When preparing a sermon on this text, the preacher can look to the other readings. One idea is an Advent walk with the Lord referencing Psalm 25 and Luke 19. The question could be asked, “Where is your focus this season? Is it on your Christmas plans coming up in a few weeks or is it on Christ’s Second Advent?” The preacher could compare the Thessalonians’ situation regarding persecution, pressure, and slander that could create doubt, with situations happening to modern-day Christians. These things can make the Advent walk difficult and challenging. However, we never walk this walk alone because the one who walked to Calvary continues to walk with us and lead us.

Another direction for the preacher might be to have the hearer examine his or her relationships with those within the congregation as well as those outside the community of faith. During the Christmas season, many people are friendly and courteous because they are in the “spirit of Christmas,” but what about those relationships throughout the rest of the year? Should not this attitude prevail past December 25th?

One more possibility is to walk the hearer to Bethlehem, Calvary, Easter and onward toward the Second Advent as Christ walks alongside us as encourager and friend.

Michael J. Redeker

Endnote

1 Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 133.

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Advent 2 • Philippians 1:2–11 • December 9, 2012

Paul faces the first stage of his trial in Rome before the emperor. Whether or not he will be found innocent and released, or whether he will be “poured out like a drink offering” (2:17) and die at the emperor’s whim, he does not know. Not only does he not know, he seems singularly, even extraordinarily, unconcerned with which of the two possibilities will come to pass. For “to live,” declares the apostle, “is Christ; to die is gain” (1:21). What he therefore instead knows—what to him matters more than all else—is that what has happened to him has “served to advance the gospel” (1:12), so much so, adds the apostle, that “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard” (1:12), throughout “Caesar’s household” (4:22), and to all the rest that “my imprisonment is for Christ” (1:13), so that “most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (1:14). So what is there to fear? What is there for Paul to regret, or rue? What more is there for him to do, or to offer, than his salutary reminder and encouragement in the form of his letter to the Philippians of what singularly, what courageously, informs the mind and the heart of the servant of Jesus Christ whose only reason for living is the grace and the peace of the Son of the Father (1:2).

What he says, and how he says it, is nothing short of a marvel, as Paul bids those who are dear to him what he knows may be his final farewell.
“I am put here for the defense of the gospel” (1:16), declares the apostle. “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (1:18). “I will not be at all ashamed” (1:20). Neither will he be afraid. “With full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (1:20). Be of the same mind, exhorts the apostle. Have the same love; be in full accord. “In humility count others more significant than yourselves” (2:3), like Christ himself, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:6–11).

Therefore, “do all things without grumbling or questioning” (2:14), urges Paul. “Shine as lights in the world” (2:15). For “even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (2:17). Whatever gain I otherwise ever managed to secure in this life, I count now “as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I counted everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (3:7–9), that “I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead” (3:10–11).

No regrets. No complaints. No warnings. No indication of any one thing being anything other than the way it should be for the one who lives in faith, who presses on, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (3:13), “toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:14). For “our citizenship is in heaven,” observes the apostle, “and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (3:20–21). “Rejoice in the Lord always,” adds Paul, “again I will say, rejoice” (4:4). “The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything” (4:5–6). “And the peace of God, which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:7).

So “whatever is true,” concludes Paul, “whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (4:8–9). “For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (4:11). “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (4:12–13). “To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (4:19–20).

May such courage, may such inspiration, born of Christ, in the face of all that continues to threaten and to trouble, inspire us still.

Bruce Schuchard
“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Most days I have a pretty hard time with that one. I don’t think I’m alone…

I have a friend in the ministry who, for the past half-dozen years or so, has been battling cancer. On more than a few occasions during that time he and his doctors have come close to concluding that he was in complete remission. But then, just when it came time for his last scheduled full-body scan, the cancer would pop up in a new and unpredicted place. And so, another series of invasive procedures would have to be scheduled, more painful treatments would need to be endured, and my friend and his family would once again be thrown onto the wild emotional roller coaster ride that is the life of people who are staring death in the face.

I wonder what my friend would think, and how Paul’s words from Philippians 4 would be received, if I phoned him up and shared with him: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” To be sure, my friend has a solid faith and a keen mind. He knows there’s a difference between being joyful and being happy. Happiness depends, almost exclusively, on externals: our health, our relationships, how we happen to “feel” at any given moment, what we have or can obtain, how much money, influence, and fame, etc. we’ve acquired. When any of these are under attack or taken away, we immediately turn into “unhappy campers,” and our natural inclination is to become very self-centered and preoccupied with getting them back. That’s what “happy” can do to us.

But Paul was in prison when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. He was growing older and weaker and probably looking ahead to an untimely, violent, and painful death. And still he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” How could Paul rejoice? How could the Philippians, who were living in an anti-Christian environment? How could my cancer-ridden friend? How can we?

The secret to the kind of joy Paul is talking about is to be found in the very next verse where it says, “The Lord is near.”

More than likely, when Paul wrote this he had in mind a temporal/eschatological understanding of “near.” Jesus would come back soon and usher in his kingdom. Everything that hurt or hindered his people would be seen for what it was: completely inconsequential when compared to knowing and seeing Christ face to face. “That joy is near!” Paul is saying. “That joy will soon be upon us, and death and disease and danger will be swallowed up in Christ’s victory forever! So, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!’”

Paul was most certainly saying all that, but I can’t help but think that he may have had more in mind than just a temporal understanding of the phrase, “the Lord is near.” Might Paul, who valued and extolled the use of the word and the sacraments, have also had in mind a more spatial understanding of that phrase? After all, when we hear the gospel in all its truth and purity, when we receive the very body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in, with, and under the bread and the wine, is not that same Jesus near us? Next to us? In us? When two or three of us gather together in the name of Jesus, and through the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints, we
hold each other up, we help each other, we disciple and discipline each other, is not the Lord “near” in that action and activity?

And I will venture to go even further. It is not uncommon for Christians of sound mind and disciplined temperament, to have had very primal, unexplainable, yet very real experiences of the Holy. The answer to a prayer comes at just the right time. The incurable is cured. What was lost is found and restored. That which was beyond all hope actually happens. The impossible comes true.

None of these so called “experiences,” it must be unequivocally stated and maintained, is ever promised by God, nor should they ever be granted a kind of authority that is rightly reserved only for the revealed word of God as it is written in the sacred Scriptures. But these experiences do happen! Christians do have them. And we certainly cannot say that they aren’t real.

The point of all this is that in predictable, promised, and proven ways, God shows up! And sometimes, in unpredictable and unpromised and improvable ways, God shows up! He shows up for us! He shows up for our good! He shows up for us and for our salvation. God always shows up. He is always near!

Which means, of course, that no matter what is going on around us, and whatever is happening to us, we are always operating from a position of strength, because the Lord is near. We are always in a “no lose” situation, because the Lord is near. We are always going to come out fine, because the Lord is near. And because ours is a God who always shows up at just the right time and just the right way for us, we “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

William Utech

Advent 4 • Hebrews 10:5–10 • December 23, 2012

Rapid fire, these days come together: Advent 4, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. Three days standing in a row, perfectly aligned, can be more than a little intimidating. How can one prepare so much, remember so much, and do so much to honor and celebrate these days? The preacher preparing for each of these days may want to pray the Collect for the day, “…that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy.” Perhaps tempted to substitute “sermons” or “services” for “sins,” the preacher will certainly be encouraged and refreshed by this second reading for the Fourth Sunday in Advent.

This pericope enables the reader to step back in time to the first century and ponder its impact on the people for which it was written. Familiar with the Jewish sacrificial system, the Jewish reader would certainly be struggling with this new information. Change comes in the lives of people, if it comes at all, very slowly and with great resistance. This reading impacts the reader because change has taken place and it is indeed sudden and new! The new covenant established in Jesus does away with the old, inadequate system. There is no time for transition. There is no time for slow implementation. No committee
has been called to build consensus. The words from the cross, “It is finished!” make it “once for all.” No mixing of the old with the new. The old cannot coexist with the new.

Here, in the very last moments of Advent and on the threshold of Christmas, what might the people need to hear? Not one person in church will have experienced sacrificing animals in an attempt to satisfy God. A shared experience can more easily be found in the fact that we all have sins and other burdens weighing us down. As you read the text, remember the lives of the people. Look deeply into their eyes. Reflect on the year drawing to a close and the events in the lives of those who will hear this text. From those most regular in church attendance, to the one visiting for the first time, all long to hear words of mercy and love.

Burdened, wearied by self-imposed expectations and responsibilities, all long to hear words of hope, of promises kept, of renewal, of forgiveness. As you read the text, remember the lives of the people. Look deeply into their eyes. Reflect on the year drawing to a close and the events in the lives of those who will hear this text. From those most regular in church attendance, to the one visiting for the first time, all long to hear words of mercy and love.

Through faith, those wearied and burdened again receive hope. The sacrifice is perfect, complete, and for each one of us. Gerald P. Coleman captures how the believer, released from the burden and lifted in grace and mercy, can sing, “The Lamb, the Lamb, One perfect final offering. The Lamb, the Lamb, Let earth join heav’n His praise to sing. Worthy is the Lamb whose death makes me His own! The Lamb is reigning on His throne” (LSB 547). Advent 4 brings the preacher and the people to the very threshold of the nativity.

William Wrede

Christmas 1 • Colossians 3:12–17 • December 30, 2012

Introduction

In this brief section the Apostle Paul gives Christians guidance for understanding how the life of Jesus, received in baptism, manifests itself in the communal life of love, in worship centered in the word of God, and in a heart at peace that receives all things from God in a spirit of thankfulness.

The Text as Text

There are no major textual problems with this section. Despite widespread attestation for reading Χριστός in place of κύριος in v. 13, the former is probably a clarifying interpretation of the latter. The phrase Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ is unusual, occurring only here in the New Testament as an alternative for the more customary Ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ. It is, however, almost certainly the correct reading.
The first sentence (vv. 12–15) is somewhat syntactically challenging, though perhaps not uncharacteristic of Paul. Most translations and commentators understand the three participles of verse 16 (“teaching…admonishing…singing”) as circumstantial, though some translations (GW, GNB, The Message, NCV, NIrV, NJB, NLT, RSV/NRSV) and some commentators prefer to understand them as having imperative force. Otherwise the text presents no major translation problems.

The Text as Literature

Paul writes from prison (probably from Rome) to the church in Colossae with a special concern to counter a false teaching among them. The exact nature of the false teaching is not specified, but from the implications of Paul’s arguments it appears to have elements of gnosticism while also emphasizing the importance of the observance of religious festivals and rites. Paul clearly sees this teaching as a threat to the gospel. Colossians 2:6–7 serve as something of a theme for Paul’s teaching on the Christian life in this letter. Key to Paul’s thinking about the Christian life, here and elsewhere, is the union of the Christian with Christ’s death and resurrection in baptism (2:11–15). Following the baptismal theme, Paul speaks of the Christian life in terms of “putting off” the old life and “putting on” the life of Christ. Our passage belongs to this context.

The first element of the Christian life Paul mentions here is the practice of certain virtues. That the list of Christian virtues given in our text differs from other such lists (cf. Gal 5:22–23; Eph 4:1–3; 6:13–18, etc.) is not problematic. These lists are not intended to be exhaustive but illustrative. The second element in this baptismal life is rule of the peace of Christ which manifests itself in thankfulness (3:15, 16, and 17). The third element is word-centered teaching and worship.

The Text as Theology

The baptismal life is rooted in the fact that they have received Christ (2:6, 13–14, 20; 3:1—in the latter two instances the Greek ei would be better translated “since” than the ESV’s “if,” since the context makes it clear that Paul is here speaking of a realized condition rather than an unreal one). Paul is not talking about what people must do to become Christians, he is describing the life of faith that flows from the presence of God in the lives of the redeemed people of God, who have died with Christ in baptism and have been raised with him (Col 2:12–13, 20; 3:1 cf. Rom 6:1–5). In this baptismal life Christians should not be side-tracked by “philosophy and empty deception” (2:8) or by “questions of food or drink or in the matter of a festival or new moon or sabbath” (2:16). All such matters are irrelevant to those who have died with Christ (2:20).

The Text as Proclamation

There are a number of ways that one might approach this text. One might highlight the five virtues, of which Paul speaks, bound together in love, or the three overarching characteristics of the baptismal life in the communal life of love, in worship centered in the word of God, and in a heart at peace that receives all things from God.
in a spirit of thankfulness. Whatever the approach, one point must underlie everything: that the life of Christ of which the Apostle here speaks is rooted in the redemptive work of Christ, by which he has made us his people. It is because of what Christ has done for us that we can put on this new life; we do not put on this new life so that we can receive Christ’s blessings. Paul makes this point explicitly in chapter 2:12–13, where he characterizes the life of those who follow Jesus as a baptismal life, a life begun and rooted in our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection.

David L. Adams

Epiphany • Ephesians 3:1–12 • January 6, 2013

Comments on the Text

Lulled either by the familiarity of our text or by its complex sentence structure, we may not at first be aware of the surprise—even the shock—it contains. Verse 6 drops a bomb: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus!” (emphasis and exclamation point added). (Actually, verse 6 constitutes an aftershock, for Paul had already made the explosive announcement in verses 11–13 of the previous chapter.)

For Gentile readers of Paul’s letter this announcement was indeed a pleasant surprise. Living in a society in which they had long been despised and rejected, called (according to Ephesians 2:11) “uncircumcised”—a term of contempt as much as it was a physical description—the Gentiles are suddenly told, “You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Eph 2:19). Talk about good news!

Although the passage of centuries may have diminished the surprise, we today (being Gentiles) are still the beneficiaries of this good news. The fact that I have written this homiletical help and the fact that you are reading it at this moment are the outcomes of God’s exciting revelation in verse 6 of our text.

For many of Paul’s Jewish readers his announcement must have come as a shock (a shock that through the Holy Spirit’s gospel-guidance eventually became for them a pleasant surprise). They had been trained to avoid Gentile contact. Even St. Peter had to learn this lesson from God. When he arrived at the house of a Gentile named Cornelius, Peter admitted, “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

Some of us too, perhaps, experienced a similar shock the first time we saw persons of a different race, nationality, culture, or class join our congregation. But enlightened by the Holy Spirit’s gospel-persuasion we too have had our shock transformed into a joyful surprise, the kind of joy that heaven experiences “over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:7).

Given the good news of this text, that God’s promise of salvation through Jesus is for all people, regardless of race, nationality, culture, or class, it is obviously a mission text appropriate to Epiphany, the Gentile Christmas. Since the eternal salvation God
supplied through Jesus is intended for all people, it is incumbent upon you and me to help spread that message to all people. That is the thrust of Ephesians 3:1–12.

But our text does more than demonstrate God’s grace for all people. It also shows God’s grace toward one person, Paul himself. “Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (v. 8). Nothing false about Paul’s modesty. He is still painfully aware that he was once an enemy of Christianity, a persecutor of the church. To that sort of person God has given not only the gift of salvation through Christ but also the bonus gift of being a special missionary to the Gentiles. This is grace indeed—and Paul is thankful for it. Christ is the Savior for all sinners—and Christ is the Savior for the chief of sinners, as Paul once called himself (1 Tm 1:15).

In addition to the emphases on God’s grace in Christ and on missions in our text, there are numerous other less-accented (but still definitely accented) truths in our text worthy of the preacher’s attention. Today’s reading is a veritable collection of important Christian doctrines, illustrative of “the unsearchable riches of Christ” mentioned in verse 8. An admittedly incomplete list follows:

1. The holy ministry: its privileges and its responsibilities (vv. 2, 5, 7, 8, and 9).
2. The church as the body of Christ (v. 6) and its function (v. 10).
3. The gospel, its content (v. 6) and its power (v. 7).
4. The eternity of God’s plan of salvation (vv. 9 and 11).
5. The knowledge of God’s plan of salvation possible only through God’s revelation (vv. 3, 5, and 9), and not through human effort.
6. The role of faith in accessing God (v. 12).
7. That desire of the angels to know more about God’s plan for human salvation (mentioned in 1 Peter 1:12) fulfilled in verse 10.
8. Even a reference to God as creator (v. 9).

Suggested Outline

**The Good News of God’s Grace in Jesus Christ**

I. For all people, including Gentiles, etc.
   A. The shock of this message, then and now.
   B. The pleasant surprise of this message, then and now.

II. For specific individuals too.
   A. God’s gift of salvation to Paul (and to you and me).
   B. God’s gift of ministry to Paul (and to you and me).

If the preacher opts to deal with some or more of the many doctrines this text contains, a possible sermon topic might be “The Unsearchable Riches of Christ” (v. 8), a topic developed by an integrated discussion of some of the doctrines listed above emphasizing Christ himself as the foremost of those “unsearchable riches.”

Francis C. Rossow
There are fewer occasions more pleasant for the family of God than baptism. For an adult, it marks a capstone of growth in faith and identity. For an infant, it marks, in the presence of family, initial steps of faith and growth as a Christian child of God. For both, baptism brings a regenerative washing by the loving hand of Jesus Christ and a place in the family of God. However, in today's text, Paul moves beyond what we see happening in church to a much deeper magnetic dynamism of baptism. (Referring to recent baptisms would make this all very personal, even participatory.)

Paul links the dynamism of baptism to the three-step climax of the life of Jesus Christ, as Paul summarized them in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: died, buried, rose.

Those three steps of death, burial, and resurrection are not, however, just Jesus’s personal, solitary path through death to life. He died for all (2 Cor 5:14–15), and baptism “into Christ Jesus” sweeps us along, unbound by time and space, into that three-step pivot of cosmic history—died, buried, risen. Note how these verses highlight the intensity of Paul’s conviction: 1) all the verbs (buried, rose) are passives—God provides the power and the link; and 2) each of the actions culminates in a divine “with,” a monumental, eternal Immanuel. Baptism aligns us “with” those salvific events of our Savior…forever.

The link God provides through baptism grants a “with” that cannot be stripped or broken by any force, “neither death nor life…” as Paul says later in Romans (8:31–39). Paul’s concern in these verses, however, is not so much the “with” after death, but the “with” already before death, the “with” of our daily life. The verses before our text (5:20–21) refer to a couple of questions, even critiques that elicited Paul’s reflections on baptism, namely 1) whether grace can somehow quell sin when not even the law could, and 2) whether the principle of grace abounding where sin abounds doesn’t lead to multiplying sin for the sake of maximizing grace, as though sin triggers grace (5:20–21). These are questions about life now. What Paul does is join the theme of “with” to the theme of God’s lordship. The radical, fundamental renunciation of sin that Paul refers to is part-and-parcel of the reality of death/burial/resurrection. The reign of sin is undercut, and the tantalizing deception of the law is exposed. Christ provides a preemptive gift of death/burial with him—death to sin, death to law-driven, exhaustive living—and the baptized Christian emerges into life, now and eternal, under the lordship of God (6:18, 22).

Finally, in 6:11–12, Paul turns from ten verses of indicative verbs to a “therefore” with an imperative: “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” That we can do such “counting” is because of God’s prior “reckoning/counting” of righteousness, as already to Abraham (Gn 15:6). “Therefore, do not let sin reign…” Life completely without sin, of course, is beyond us in this world, and any such claim is both prideful and self-deceiving, as Paul himself understood (7:14–21). For those who have died, been buried, and then raised with Christ, however, sin no longer has the place of either an accepted, casual lifestyle or an intentional, even strategic part of daily life—that would be like a person reverting to an overpowering addiction. We who have been baptized “into” Christ Jesus(6:3), now therefore live “in” Christ Jesus (6:11).
While, as we said at the beginning, baptism is a pleasant thing for the family of God, it is much more. It is also the miraculous, magnetic pull of Jesus Christ, the grace to die, be buried, and rise with him, and the power and Spirit of a new life.

Henry Rowold

Epiphany 2 • 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 • January 20, 2013

Contextual Considerations

This text begins a series of *lectio continua* from 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 which extends through the season of Epiphany.

The first verse of the text begins with these words: “Now concerning spiritual gifts.” This formula indicates that Paul is responding to a question which the Corinthian Christians have posed in a letter they had sent him earlier (7:1). It is the matter of concern he addresses in chapters 12, 13, and 14.

Apparently the subject of spiritual gifts was a cause for some confusion, consternation, and contention within the Corinthian church. It appears that some in the church were elevating spectacular gifts over those which involved “merely” serving others. These members prided themselves in possessing what they considered to be special spiritual endowments. “The Corinthians had apparently used the *gifts* as a means of fomenting division. They regarded the possession of such *gifts* as a matter for pride, and set up one against another on the basis of the possession or otherwise, of this or that gift. Paul insists that this is the wrong attitude.”

Earlier in the letter Paul indicates that a purpose of his writing is “that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against the other” (4:6). In the passage under study (12:1–11) Paul endeavors to convince the Corinthian Christians that the differences in their giftedness are not the basis for pride or jealousy since the gifts are just that—gifts—which are graciously bestowed by one and the same Spirit.

Homiletical Development

Focus: Christians are empowered by the same Holy Spirit to demonstrate different types of giftedness.

Goal: The hearer values the unique giftedness bestowed by the Spirit upon them as well as upon other Christians.

Malady: The hearer elevates himself over others as being more spiritually elite.

Means: The Holy Spirit delivers forgiveness for sinful pride and empowers the humble exercise of gifts.

Suggested Outline

**Same and Different**

Introduction: Early on children are taught the meaning of *same* and *different*. (Examples of pictures depicting these concepts may be displayed on projection screens, enter “same and different worksheets” into your internet search engine.) In the text
of 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 the Apostle Paul had to teach the Corinthian Christians the meaning of same and different regarding their spiritual giftedness.

I. Christians fail to understand how they are the same and different from one another.
   A. The Corinthians recognized how they were different from one another in terms of spiritual giftedness, but they approached these distinctions as the means to elevate themselves over others.
   B. The Corinthians failed to see how their varied giftedness was empowered by the same Holy Spirit and thus was no basis for pride.
   C. We frequently elevate ourselves over others as being more spiritually elite.

II. Christians are the same in their status and standing before God. (vv. 2–3)
   A. As Christians, we share the same background of originally having been apart from God and led astray. (v. 2)
   B. As Christians, we are the same in being empowered by the Holy Spirit to have faith which confesses Jesus as Lord. (v. 3)
   C. As Christians, we are the same in being empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out our distinctive giftedness and callings. (vv. 4–6)
   D. The fact that we Christians are the same in these matters allows for no room for pride or preferential treatment. When such sins arise, however, the Holy Spirit delivers forgiveness to us through the message of the gospel.

III. Christians are different in the abilities and aptitudes with which God has gifted them.
   A. Paul announces that there are varieties of gifts, service, and activities exhibited by us who are Christians. (vv. 4–6)
   B. Paul identifies various gifts bestowed by the Spirit, such as wisdom, knowledge, and heroic faith. (vv. 8–10)
   C. All of these different gifts are apportioned by the Spirit as he wills. (v. 11)

IV. The diversity of gifts is all for the sake of the unity of Christ’s church.
   A. The different manifestations of the Spirit are all “for the common good.” (v. 7)
   B. We now use the distinctive gifts bestowed upon us to serve and edify others.

David Peter

Endnote

Exegetical Issues

The central point is clear: the unity of the corporate body of Christ, made up of diverse parts with different functions, all working for the common good. This is integral to the overall theme of 1 Corinthians, in which Paul deals with a conflicted congregation that, ironically, “was not lacking in any spiritual gift” (μὴ ὑστερεῖσθαι ἐν μηδενὶ χαρίσματι 1:7), yet was filled with division, in large part because of the misuse, misunderstanding, and misappropriation of those “spiritual gifts” to which Paul here turns his attention (12:1, Περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν, literally “things of the spirit,” cf 2:13, 15, of the people themselves in 3:1).

In 12:4 Paul focuses on the χαρισμάτα, used previously only in 1:7 and 7:7, slightly more specifically “gifts (from the spirit).” In both terms the emphasis is on the Spirit who gives them and works them in and through his people, not on the identification or categorization of the gifts as works that we do. The same can be said for the list in v 28ff: this is not a precise list of ecclesiastical offices or rigid rubrics for organizational structure, all of which were, at the time, quite fluid and ad hoc, guided by the Spirit’s work “when and where he wills.”

Thus the major caution for the preacher is to avoid over-interpreting the details of this text in such a direction, especially with a goal of “discovering one’s spiritual gift(s).”

Two foundational points are critical: first, such gifts are gifts and actions of God; the focus must remain on his work and activity, not ours, though done in and through us. Quoting James Dunn, the CTCR document (p. 19) notes that a “charisma is an event, an action enabled by divine power; charisma is divine energy accomplishing a particular result (in word or deed) through the individual.”

Second, the initial premise of ch 12 (12:3) states the one universal gift and activity of the Spirit by which the body of Christ is formed and marked: no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. Here a proper and key distinction is made between those with or without the Spirit.

The pericope at hand then unpacks the proper understanding of the Spirit-gifts that flow from such “spiritually discerned” confession (2:14). Lockwood summarizes that vv. 12–13 introduce the metaphor of the body; vv. 14–20 address those members of the body who might feel inferior and be led to jealousy; vv. 21–26 speak to those who might feel superior, turning the more obvious “ranking of gifts/members” on its head by asserting that the “weaker” parts are necessary, even “indispensable” (ἀναγκαῖά). Finally, vv. 27–31 apply the body metaphor to the whole church, with a diversity of gifts and functions and offices, but all working together for the sake of the whole, which finds its greatest gift in the agape-love embodied in Christ (ch. 13). The goal is not in the gifts but in the proper functioning of the whole body, marked by concern for one another (vv. 25–26).
Homiletical Application

The danger of focusing on one’s individual “spiritual gifts” has already been noted; the theme is one of unity by which the individualities of the various gifts is not lost but absorbed into the corporate body, whose purpose is, simply, to be the body of Christ in the world, proclaiming and “embodying” that Jesus is Lord of the Kingdom of God. It’s not “about me,” but about the body of Christ. The interplay of “one” and of the “many” and the “all” (e.g. vv. 12–14) is striking.

One can certainly unpack that into the need to avoid the schisms, divisions, and divisiveness that too often characterize the church, but this is not yet another exhortation to “just get along.” The unity starts with baptism (v. 13), with the spirit-spoken confession about Jesus (v. 3), and with the koinonia in his body and blood (11:15–17, 12:17ff). Sola gratia is the great equalizer: before God and without the Spirit, no one can claim confession of Jesus, and we would all be accursed as those who would curse the Savior, Lord, and King. In the humility before God, we come together and even work together in the same humility before one another.

Andrew H. Bartelt

Endnote

1 See the CTCR document on “Spiritual Gifts” (1994, www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcms&id=413), and the helpful discussion, including further translation and exegetical notes, in Greg Lockwood’s 1 Corinthians Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2000).
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