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# A Christian Vision of Beauty, Part One

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**Wednesday, November 16, 2005**

I have been asked tonight to talk about a Christian vision of beauty, and I am first struck by the fact that this conversation would be so rare. There are altogether too few opportunities for Christians to ponder some of the biggest questions of life. We tend to focus on the questions of urgency and the questions of immediate interest. That is not to say that such questions are improper, but it is to say that Christian thought can sometimes fall out of balance. One of the realities we face is that in a conversation like this, we are not exactly sure where to begin. Where should we begin talking about beauty?

Allow me to make a couple of preliminary observations, the first of which is this: There is something intrinsic to humanity that is drawn to beauty. There is something of an aesthetic desire in us—an aesthetic appetite. Even infants are attracted to certain objects and even faces because of complexity and color and light, those elements which aesthetic theorists have considered the very substance of beauty, form, and attractiveness. Moreover, this desire for and recognition of beauty is something unique to human beings. Dogs do not contemplate a sunset. Animals do not ponder the beauty of the landscape. It is true the heavens are declaring the glory of God, but most of the creatures on the planet are oblivious to this fact. They neither make nor observe nor appreciate art. They stage no dramas, write no music, and paint no portraits. The desire for art is something unique and nearly universal among human beings.

At the same time, we must understand that beauty is in crisis; it is a contested category. Let me suggest two reasons why this is so. First, beauty is a category in crisis because it has been so devalued in the reigning confusion of popular culture. The fact is that we have come to use the word “beautiful” in an altogether awkward and inappropriate context. We speak of *beauty*, when what we really mean is *prettiness*, or attractiveness, or even likeability. None of these things, however, is actually equal to beauty. Yet the popular culture increasingly confuses the artificial for the real, the pretty for the beautiful, and the untrue for the true—all of which are essentially one root

confusion, as we shall see.

Second, beauty is a category in crisis also at the level of elite culture and academia, where philosophers who give attention to aesthetic theory are increasingly convinced that beauty is a shopworn category. It is either political, or entirely subjective, or delusional. Many of the major writers in philosophy suggest that beauty is a category we ought to discard altogether. The idea of beauty, they say, is too expensive, too contested, and too misleading.

In the history of Western thought, beauty has often been a difficult category. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, for example, was convinced that in the end aesthetics was a divergence from ethics, so that to be concerned with the beautiful was to be inadequately concerned for the good. Friedrich Nietzsche, the very prophet of nihilism himself, believed that the category of beauty was a symptom of the decadence and the weakness of modern humanity. Only the decadent would consider beauty important, he argued, because all that finally matters is power. Perhaps in reality, Nietzsche saw only power as beautiful.

But if beauty is in crisis in terms of the culture, both at the popular level and among the elites, it is also in trouble in the church, where the influence of popular culture has led to confusion about what beauty actually is and why we as Christians should seek it.

A Christian understanding of beauty runs directly into the wisdom of the age by suggesting that the beautiful is simultaneously the good and the true and the real. This goes all the way back to the conversation of the ancients—especially to Plato, who understood the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real as being essentially reducible to the same thing. If there is one good, then that good must also be the true, which must also be the real, which must also be the beautiful. So the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real—the four great historical transcendentals—are unified in the One. For Plato, however, the One had no name.

Augustine, the great theologian of the patristic era, identified the One as the one true and living God. Taking Plato's metaphysical speculations into the very heart of the Gospel, Augustine suggested that Christians uniquely understand that the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real, are indeed one, because they are established in the reality of the self-revealing God—the triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He alone is beautiful, He alone is good, He alone is true, and He alone is real. That is not to suggest that nothing else reflects beauty or truth or goodness. It is simply to say that He alone, by virtue of the fact that He is infinite in all His perfections, is the source and the judge and the end of all that is good, beautiful, true, and real. For as Paul said, from Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever, Amen.

Now this Christian conversation about the transcendentals opens an entirely new awareness for us. We now begin to understand that there is a moral context, a truth context, to every question about beauty. We can no longer talk about beauty as a mere matter of taste. Instantly, by affirming the unity of the transcendentals, we are required to see

beauty fundamentally as a matter of truth to which taste is accountable, rather than a matter of taste to which truth is accountable.

Thus, it violates Scripture and indeed the character of God to call something “beautiful” which is not good, or “true” which is not beautiful, or “real” which is not true. Yet if we are honest, we admit to ourselves that in our common cultural conversation, we routinely sever the good from the true, the true from the beautiful, the beautiful from the real, and the real from the good. As Christians, we alone really understand why this is so, and why it so important.

Augustine understood that beauty was a key Christian category. Indeed, Christians cannot properly think as Christians without understanding the power of beauty. In his *Confessions* he said this: “I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. The beautiful things of this world kept me from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all.” In that confessional statement, Augustine is saying that it was beauty that was calling him. It was his Creator that was calling him, and yet he was distracted by the things of *apparent* beauty in the world. And yet he does not despise those things; he remembers that their beauty is merely a reflected beauty, derived from the fact that God is their Creator.

Augustine continues: “It was you then, O Lord, who made them. You who are beautiful, for they too are beautiful. You who are good, for they too are good. You who are, for they too are. But they are not beautiful and good as you are beautiful and good. Nor do they have their being as you the Creator have your being. In comparison with you, they have neither beauty nor goodness nor being at all.” Augustine realizes that in order to see true beauty, he has to go to his Creator, and then, knowing the Creator, he may observe the creation and see that it does indeed bear the mark of its Maker. There is undeniable beauty in creation, but in comparison with the infinite beauty of the Creator, such finite beauty no longer has the seductive allure it once had. All earthly beauty is simultaneously validated and relativized by the contemplation of the beauty of God.

The same theme was picked up by Jonathan Edwards, who said this: “True holiness must mainly consist in love to God, for holiness consists in loving what is most excellent and beautiful. Because God is infinitely the most beautiful and excellent being, He must necessarily be loved supremely by those who are truly holy. It follows from this that God’s own holiness must consist primarily in love to Himself. Being most holy, He most loves what is good and beautiful, that is Himself. To love completely what is most completely good is to be most completely perfect. From this, it follows that a truly holy mind, above all other things, seeks the glory of God and makes the glory of God His supreme governing and ultimate end.”

In that brief statement, Edwards does something very helpful and very consistent with the Christian tradition. As a matter of fact, it

is a necessary insight once we go to the Scriptures. If you search through the Old Testament, you will notice that the word “beauty” is really not there. Instead, it is the word “glory.” Throughout the Bible, the beauty of God is most commonly described as His *glory*. Once we understand the biblical category of glory—that is, the reality of God in terms of His inner reality and the external manifestation of Himself—we realize that God’s glory encompasses all the transcendentals. To gaze upon God is not first of all to see His beauty, but rather His *glory*.

Edwards defined beauty as consisting mostly in “sweet mutual consents.” By this, Edwards meant that things are rightly set: The thing is what God declared that it must be. In other words, beauty is achieved when the thing created most closely and most perfectly glorifies its Creator. Thus a “sweet mutual consent,” or absolute harmony, exists between the created thing and the Creator.

When we look at the unity of the transcendentals, and compare Edwards’ and Augustine’s vision of view to our contemporary poverty concerning things beautiful, we are quickly and painfully aware that something has gone horribly wrong. Why would human beings seek to sunder the unity between the good and the beautiful, between the true and the real, between the beautiful and the true? Why would we want to call something that is ugly true? Why would we want to call something that is unreal beautiful? That is a symptom of a human sickness, and that sickness is sin.

Our understanding of beauty as a category in crisis begins not with contemporary confusion, but in the Garden of Eden, where our first parents were attracted to the forbidden fruit at least in part because it was attractive to the eyes. A false understanding of beauty—the false allure of the evil rather than the good—is a part of the story of the Fall. Thus the confusion over beauty is not merely an item of cultural consternation, nor is it merely a matter of theological debate. It is a matter of redemption. The only way out of our confusion over beauty is to know the Creator, to know Him not merely conceptually but personally, and to have our relationship with Him once again set right, something which only He can do. Then Edwards’ vision of the “sweet mutual consents” might be realized—a redeemed people once again entering into the mutual consent of the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real.

