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A Christian Vision of Beauty, Part Three

The Christian vision of beauty not only tells us why the world is beautiful—but not quite. Secondly, the Christian worldview explains why the face of a child with Down's syndrome is more beautiful than the cover girl in the fashion magazine. The unity of the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real calls us to look below the surface and to understand that the ontological reality of every single human being is that we are made in the image of God. The imago Dei is the beauty in each of us, and the rest is but of cosmetic irrelevance.

Friday, November 18, 2005

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Just as we, in our fallenness, are likely to see the fallen aspects of creation as beautiful, we are also likely to try to validate ourselves in an artificial humanism of worshiping the creature. When we look at our fellow human beings, or frankly, when we look in the mirror, we are likely to be led astray by prevailing concepts of prettiness and attractiveness rather than to gaze into the mirror or to gaze into our neighbor and see one made in the image of God. The *imago Dei* is the complete and transformative category here, and without it we are left with nothing but the superficial. The *imago Dei* explains why the child with Down's syndrome is far more beautiful in herself than the cover girl in the fashion magazine.

First of all, let us remember that one of the transcendentals is the *real*. What does it say of us that we live in a culture in which the cover girl is the ideal, and yet no one actually looks like that? *The Times* of London recently forecast that eighty percent of all women will have cosmetic surgery at some point. What kind of world is this? Now, most of us, and I am the first of sinners in this category, would not want to answer the door to face a television camera first thing in the morning. We get dressed. We use various techniques and technologies. We are at least somewhat attuned to the fashions of the day. So if we suggest that we Christians are completely without concern for attractiveness, we lie. But at the same time, we ought to be the people who understand that this is mere window dressing. This is an apron of fig leaves, placed upon our nakedness in the garden.

In reality, a Christian worldview that takes full account of human sinfulness is the only way that we can understand how prevailing cultural standards tend to dehumanize our fellow human beings. We delude ourselves into thinking that attractiveness means beauty. Just as nature can lie with its attractive creatures, so also we can lie with the attractiveness we try to portray on the newsstands, on the television, in Hollywood, or in the mirror. An entire industry of billions of dollars is built upon the lie that one can buy enough or endure enough, suffer enough or apply enough, to be genuinely beautiful. The whole category of pornography is one big mutual co-conspiracy to deny the beautiful in favor of a perverted ideal of attractiveness. The real is denied, because given the insatiable desire of the sinner toward erotic attractiveness, the real no longer suffices. Thus the imagined and the fantasized becomes the hunger that is the appetite to be met.

Let me return to the child with Down's syndrome. In what way is every single human being beautiful? First of all, it is by virtue of the very fact that every individual is made in the image of God. What if an individual fails to meet up to current cultural or even scientific or medical definitions of what it means to be adequately human? We are the people who must say this person is still beautiful, still true, still good—not in the sense that we would bless a disease, but in the sense that we would bless the individual who is made in the image of God. Our societal failure to see this is a symptom of something gone terribly wrong in us.

Life is not usually a pretty process. It is not an attractive process. But in its own way, it reflects the beauty of the Creator and His perfect justice, His absolute goodness, and His determination to bring glory to Himself. We should be able to look at the face of a senior saint and see scars and wrinkles and blemishes that have been won through the engagement with the realities of life, and say, "You are beautiful!" Remember the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real? We should not wish to hide this. We should not wish to turn away.

I was approached some time ago by a young minister—a new pastor—who made a call upon an elderly lady who was in the hospital. Being like so many young pastors, as all of us who have been in that position can well remember, he was confronted with someone who needed more than he knew how to give. This elderly church member turned to him from her hospital bed and said, "Am I pretty?" He told me, "I lied and said 'Yes.'" The woman was suffering in the last stages of a degenerative disease, and she wasn't pretty. So that pastor's answer was probably the wrong one. I understood his heart, but I told him, "You need to change *pretty* to *beautiful*. This isn't pretty, but it is beautiful." Thus, we can speak of beauty recovered even in that moment when, in a countercultural move, we say pretty really isn't important. In reality, pretty wasn't important when this woman was twelve. Pretty really wasn't important when she was twenty. Pretty is not important now. In heaven, there will be no pretty people, only beautiful saints, made beautiful by the grace of God and for God's glory alone.

The Christian worldview and the Christian vision of beauty explains why the world is beautiful but not quite, and why the face of a child with Down's syndrome is more beautiful than the face of the model on the fashion magazine, but thirdly, the Christian understanding of beauty explains why the cross is beautiful and not tragic. Here redemption comes full circle, and our conversation about beauty is directed towards the One who is beautiful and His beautiful cross.

How dare we sing a song like that—about the beauty of the cross? Nietzsche would identify that as one more embrace of weakness by a decadent people who are so delusional that they would give themselves even to embracing the sign of their own vacuous hope. But once again, we are reminded that the beautiful is the good, and the true, and the real. The incarnation is a demonstration of God's beautiful love, and the One who was born in Bethlehem's manger was a beautiful babe. Thus John will say, "We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Now this glory—this beauty—that is explicitly and wondrously ascribed to the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ is not attractiveness. It is not prettiness. Indeed the prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 53:3, "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised, and we did not esteem Him."

The cross is beautiful, not tragic. As Isaiah 53:3 reminds us, there was no prettiness in Jesus, and the cross itself certainly is not pretty. It is a symbol of execution. Yet we know the reality. We know the truth, and thus we embrace the cross as a beautiful cross on which hung a beautiful Savior, whose death was a beautiful death. In terms of humans, there are no beautiful deaths. Only one death was beautiful, and that was the death of the One who died for our sins.

In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul says, "For God, who said light shall shine out of darkness, is the one who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Thus we who have been called to faith, who have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and who have been transformed by the grace of God, now see the Lord Jesus Christ and his cross as beautiful.

In Revelation 22, we are reminded of how God will one day bring beauty to perfection. "Then He showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, on either side of the river, was the Tree of Life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse"—there's the corruption reversed—"and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it and His bondservants will serve Him, they will see His face, they will gaze upon Him. And His name will be on their foreheads, and there will be no longer any night and they will not have need of the light of a lamp, nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them and they will reign forever and forever."

Let me conclude by suggesting that for Christians, beauty is an evangelistic category. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky put in the mouth of one of his characters this phrase: "Beauty is the battlefield where God and Satan contend with each other for the hearts of men." And thus it is. In one sense, the evil one tempts with prettiness, and lies about beauty, and corrupts the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real, sundering them from each other and celebrating the confusion. He celebrates whenever something ugly is called true, when something unreal is called beautiful. Evangelism, then, is a matter of restoring the unity of the transcendentals. The unity that has been sundered, however, can only be put

back together again by the one who created the world, and thus redeems.

It is no accident when we are told in Romans 10 that the one who carries the Gospel has beautiful feet. A recovery of beauty can only come by recovering humanity. It can only come by recovering truth, and it can only come by recovering the good and the real, by the power of God.

Beauty is for us an evangelistic mandate, a missiological purpose. We are the people who know what beauty is—not that we have seen it yet with our eyes, but we have seen it in a foretaste, and we have been promised it with an assured promise. In this life, we live amidst the pretty, the corrupt, and the artificial. We live among those who do not believe beauty exists, and among those who think beauty can be manufactured. In such a context, we are the ones who have to say we know beauty, and it is none other than Jesus Christ the Lord.

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