



Luther and Beauty

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Theological aesthetics is not a pressing concern for most working pastors. But given that theological aesthetics is the theory of beauty in relation to God and how the senses contribute to matters of faith, we see that working pastors, in their decisions about worship, do aesthetics far more than they may realize. Choices about music, images, worship space, and other artistic and liturgical matters quickly involve worship leaders in matters of beauty. Such decisions are important. Many who come to faith do so because faith is often something that is more caught than taught. That is, many find themselves attracted to the Christian faith, at least initially, less because it rings true to the intellect or fosters just social relations, and more because it grabs one's attention, puzzles or strikes one with awe and wonder, and even leaves one speechless with how its story is presented in music, architecture, and passionate worship and preaching.

LUTHER AS RESOURCE FOR AESTHETICS?

Most Lutherans are aware that they have a rich heritage in music and architecture. But it would seem that this heritage has developed almost in spite of Lutheran theologians, many of whom often assume that Protestantism has little to offer for a theory of beauty. This is because Protestants seem to favor words but not images,

Following some twentieth-century scholars, it is often held that Martin Luther's theology eliminates concerns about aesthetics and beauty from the Christian life and theology. But a detailed reading of Luther's writings suggest that this is certainly not true, and that he in fact has a robust appreciation for how these elements are crucial to the Christian faith.

good preaching but not iconography. Indeed, the catalyst of Protestantism, Luther, is not seen as a resource for beauty. After all, Luther challenged the medieval view of salvation in which desire was crucial to helping move pilgrims on their journey from temporal, earthly things to eternal, heavenly things. Countering this, Luther highlighted that our pilgrimage is not one leading up to heaven, since, after all, in Jesus Christ God has come down to us. Indeed, old beings who think that they are capable of such an ascent are put to death in the waters of holy baptism. Luther reconfigures the Christian pilgrimage as one of service in one's vocation to neighbors and the well-being of the earth.

Even more challenging to a Protestant view of beauty is the fact that so many pastors cut their theological teeth on Rudolf Bultmann's existentialist theology. Such theologians are adept at demythologizing, seeking in Scripture underneath a shell of a no-longer-believable mythology a deeper existential kernel of truth, causing people to become more self-aware. Bultmann wrote, "the idea of the beautiful is of no significance in forming the life of Christian faith, which sees in the beautiful the temptation of a false transfiguration of the world which distracts the gaze from 'beyond.'"¹ In Bultmann's view, trying to find a depth dimension to life in the experience of beauty is tantamount to a thin disguise for avoiding the ugliness, pain, and suffering of life. It is this darker side of reality, not beauty, that provides the true entry into Christian faith. But Bultmann here is no disciple of Luther. He bypassed the deeply paradoxical nature of Luther's aesthetics. Better aligned with Luther is the Finnish pastor Miikka E. Anttila: "In the cross of Christ there is supreme beauty concealed beneath the most abominable ugliness. Yet there is no ugliness in God. The ugliness of the cross belongs to us, whereas the beauty is God's. God is most beautiful not only when compared to us. He proves to be most beautiful when he makes us beautiful, that is, gives his beauty to us. This is an aesthetic variation of the doctrine of justification."²

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Even so, there are several reasons why people would have reservations about Luther's ability to deliver a viable theological aesthetics. Given that Luther distinguished a hidden, absconded God from a revealed one, as well as a theology of the cross from a theology of glory, he is a questionable candidate for modeling

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 51, cited in David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 23.

² Miikka E. Anttila, "Music" in *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment*, ed. Olli-Pekka Vainio (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 218.

theological aesthetics. After all, things that are beautiful are often tranquil and serene. But that seems to contradict Luther's spirituality, which was often marked by anguish and assault from God, what Luther called *Anfechtungen*. Luther would even seem to be the enemy of beauty since he attacked the medieval belief that human fulfillment would be achieved in the "beatific vision" in paradise. That perspective rewarded beauty to those who cultivated the theological habits of faith, hope, and love. Luther's claim that "merit" and "reward" had no place in a theology of grace seems to make Luther an enemy of beauty.

But this view is wrong. For Luther, the gospel is beautiful. The gospel shows us that in his heart, God is like the waiting father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). Sinners identify this God with beauty as such because nothing is quite as joyous or wondrous as the unconditional mercy given to sinners in Jesus Christ. For believers, this forgiveness brings about a new life, a renewal of the senses,³ allowing them to lower their guards and so experience life in all its fullness, both the ups and the downs. Precisely because Luther's theology allows believers to live unguardedly and to experience not only joy but also pain as encountered in the law's accusations or in God's apparent absence, it allows believers to treasure life in its fullness and as it is given. Thereby, Luther advocates a new aesthetic dimension to human life.

This new aesthetic is secured through Luther's sacramental theology, which does not repress but instead opens up the senses: touching, seeing, and especially hearing. After all, God's promise is embodied, sacramentally administered through earthly means and through a preacher's teeth, lips, and tongue. As embodied, God's word is significant for aesthetics because it recognizes that faith takes shape in the senses.⁴ Nor for Luther can *image* be opposed to *word*, since language itself is wholly constituted metaphorically or, to use Luther's words, through images.⁵ Luther affirmed the value of an iconic approach to faith, not simply because icons teach the faith to the unlearned, but also because they extend Christ's incarnational embodiment at the core of how God works with humans.⁶

SITUATING LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

Luther gave voice to sensibilities that were developing among Europeans in the late Middle Ages and that shifted the core of aesthetics from the mind to the senses. Throughout much of the medieval era, thinkers about beauty followed the

³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1958–86), 27:140 (series hereafter cited *LW*). Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 121 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 40:2:178 (series hereafter cited as *WA*).

⁴ Anttila, "Music," 219.

⁵ *Preface to the Psalter*, *LW* 35:256: "So, too, when they [the Psalms] speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for you fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator so portray them."

⁶ See Mark C. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), chapter 7.

teachings of Augustine, for whom higher levels of beauty were to be found in the intellect beyond the senses. In fact, many medieval theologians identified beauty, along with being, truth, goodness, and unity, as *transcendental*, meaning that it applied to the reality of all things, at least at their cores. Those who highlighted beauty as transcendental saw the world pancalistically (from the Greek words *pan*, meaning everything, and *kalos*, meaning good): to one degree or another everything was beautiful because every created thing was either a vestige of the Trinity (nonhumans) or an image of the Trinity (humans).

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No one in the Middle Ages could ever have believed that beauty was in the eye of the beholder. There was nothing subjective about beauty. Instead, beauty was something that reason discerned. It was reason that should be properly ordered to God and that, when glorified in eternity, could appreciate God's beauty on its own terms. For medieval people, beauty was seen differently than art. The two are, of course, related, but art was primarily considered craftsmanship. In contrast, beauty discovered the eternal in all things, and therefore saw them as stepping stones toward heavenly, eternal reality.

In contrast, early modern thinkers found significance in the senses and even allowed them to be pleased. In this view, reason is related to the senses by gratefully approving the beauty discovered by the senses. Luther contributed to this trend, especially in his views of music. This does not mean that Luther had a subjective approach to beauty. True, unlike Aquinas, Luther's approach does not favor metaphysics as the royal road to knowledge about God. This does not mean that Luther was some kind of protomodern who disbelieved in God's reality apart from our subjective thoughts about God. Instead, it is because Luther believed that philosophical truths must first be "bathed," baptized if you will, before they can be appropriated by theologians.⁷ In a word, for Luther, it is not philosophy but the Scriptures that show us what is truly beautiful and what is not.

Luther was committed to the Renaissance ideals that highlighted elegant style and formal rhetoric. When he was young, Luther compared his own work to that of Lorenzo Valla and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.⁸ Luther's own craftsmanship is to be found in the literary expressions he used in his treatises, letters, devotional works, and, above all, his translation of the Bible. Renaissance Humanists sought to evoke emotions in their readers by means of erudition and ornamentation. This was not beauty for its own sake but instead a *telic* beauty whose aim was to persuade readers. In contrast to many current approaches to aesthetics,

⁷ Mattes, *Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 16.

⁸ Erika Rummel, *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 4.

the Humanists' goal was neither creativity per se nor self-expression but instead a modeling of ancient or classical perspectives.

The two most important intellectual schools that shaped Luther, nominalism (taught at Erfurt University) and late medieval mysticism (encouraged in the Erfurt observant Augustinian monastery), did not theorize about beauty. But for many thinkers in the High Middle Ages, such as Thomas Aquinas, theorizing about beauty was an important goal of the theological task. Aquinas identified proportion, clarity, and integrity (or perfection) as the chief criteria of beauty. Luther would offer a very different approach, not entirely unprecedented in the medieval tradition, that sees Christ, even as "despised and rejected," as beauty, adorning sinners by clothing them in his righteousness. Unlike Aquinas, Luther saw aesthetics not primarily through the prism of analogy but instead through paradox.

But this meant that for the Reformer, theological aesthetics was a facet of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Paralleling Luther's conviction that Christians are simultaneously righteous and sinful, the aesthetic implication of justification by faith is that Christians are simultaneously ugly (as sinners) and beautiful (as clothed in Christ's righteousness). Christ himself, as bearing our sins, is, as Isaiah put it, "without form or comeliness." God's alien work of rejecting the smug self-security of sinners is not beautiful. In fact, it is terrifying. But the liberation of sinners from their many defense structures is a beautiful outcome of justification. Likewise, the strengthening of God's new creation in Christ reveals God's beauty. The gospel expresses reassurance that humans are indeed "at home in the world,"⁹ which allows them to delight in God's ways and wonder at the resplendent goodness surrounding them.

Luther grounded his paradoxical approach to aesthetics in Christology. In the incarnation, the immortal God becomes mortal, the infinite is borne by the finite, and the holy one bears the sins of the world. For his aesthetics, Luther found Bernard of Clairvaux to be most helpful. Bernard's spiritual writings were valued by the observant Augustinian community in Erfurt. In the *Freedom of a Christian* (1520), Luther appropriated Bernard's bridal mysticism, where the believer's soul is seen as wedded to Jesus Christ. In his attempt to explain how sinners receive the righteousness of Christ by faith alone, Luther describes the relation between the soul and Christ as that of marriage. This marriage between the soul and Christ allows the bride to share in Christ's properties, such as his righteousness, while Christ as the bridegroom absorbs the debts of the bride, such as sin. In his influential *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Bernard develops this bridal mysticism and so offers a paradoxical approach to beauty. Commenting on the blackness of the bride ("I am dark but comely"), completely apart from any racial overtones, Bernard notes, referring to the alleged physical ugliness of the apostle Paul,

⁹ With reservations about both the Platonism and Kantianism in Roger Scruton's work, I find his metaphor of "at home" a way to describe the benefit that beauty gives us. See Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 174–75.

O soul of surpassing beauty, even though dwelling in a sickly little body, heaven's own loveliness had not scorned your company, the angels on high did not cast you out, God's brightness did not repudiate you! Is this soul to be called black? It is black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem. Black in your estimation, but beautiful in the eyes of God and the angels. The blackness you observe is merely external.¹⁰

For Bernard, the paradox of the physically ugly but spiritually beautiful Paul is made possible by the paradox of the incarnation, Christ's willingness as the Lord to become a servant: "He [Christ] even brought this blackness on himself by assuming the condition of slave, and becoming as men are, he was seen as a man."¹¹ It is because the true beauty of God, of Christ, and even of humans is not transparent to our sight but is only revealed by God and grasped by faith that Luther would see such matters as Aquinas's standards of proportion, color, and integrity as sorely inadequate to convey God's eternal beauty. As will be seen, through the prism of God's paradoxical beauty in Christ, these standards may well have a place, however, in human appreciation for the temporal creation. Apart from his background in monastic spirituality, it is hard to see how Luther would have had any sense for beauty. But precisely because of that background, the theme of beauty arises regularly in his writings.

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EARLY LUTHER ON AESTHETICS

The key text that would seem to make us skeptical about Luther having a positive view of beauty is the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518). That bias confirms just how much an existentialist reading of Luther has blinded us from receiving Luther on his own terms. Consider, for instance, thesis 28: "the love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."¹² One finds something to be pleasing, attractive, because it is beautiful. That means that one intention of the *Heidelberg Disputation* is to deal with beauty.

This thesis demonstrates that God and humans approach beauty differently. Unlike humans, who need an object to be beautiful for their desire to be activated, God does not find sinners to be beautiful. Instead, as the one who creates out of

¹⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Sermon 25:4–5.

¹¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Sermon 28:1–2.

¹² LW 31:57 (WA 1:354.35).

nothing, God makes them to be beautiful. He is motivated to do this solely due to his generous self-donation. The second sentence of the thesis shows how the philosopher Aristotle got this wrong and so should not be put on a pedestal in theology. “Thus it is also demonstrated that Aristotle’s philosophy is contrary to theology since in all things it seeks those things which are its own and receives rather than gives something good.”¹³ Desiring self-fulfillment alone and egocentrically giving rather than altruistically giving express eros. Such desire is grounded in Greek philosophy that disparages the senses and favors contemplation over physical matters. Luther’s argument is epitomized in two sentences of Thesis 28:

The love of God which lives in man loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.¹⁴

Thereby, Luther highlights God’s goodness as inherently creative, not needing reciprocation. God needs nothing from us to be loving. That is good since we have no merit, nothing beautiful, as the Greek philosophical tradition would see it, to trade for God’s love. Instead, God reaches out to those who “are nothing” (1 Cor 1:28) precisely because God’s love is overflowing and regenerating goodness.

Unlike human love, God’s love does not recognize anything attractive in the object of his love. But God regards those who would be judged to be nothing by the standards of this world and, in fact, to be nothing apart from God’s love, as the raw material he can shape into something beautiful. That from the divine vantage God regards those who are nothing to be something we can identify as *forensic justification*. That God shapes such nothings into masterpieces we can identify as *effective justification*. God’s love need not receive anything in order to sustain or generate it. For Jesus’s sake, God regards what is ugly as something beautiful, loves the unlovely, and sees sinners as righteous. Counter to many medieval theologians, or thinkers today for that matter, Luther highlights a monergistic approach to grace.

The view of beauty present in the *Heidelberg Disputation* already echoes Luther’s earlier work in his first series of lectures on the Psalms (1513–1515). Drawing on Augustinian spirituality, these early Psalms lectures see humans as drawing nearer to God the more they humble themselves or when they are humbled by God through experiencing some suffering. Uniquely, in response to his reading of Johannes Tauler, Luther increasingly opposed divine and human roles. He advocated a passive role for humans and an active role for God as the one who exposes sin and gives mercy.¹⁵ Especially in his *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517) and in several sermons, Luther began to speak of an “alien work” of God that reduces pride-filled

¹³ LW 31:57 (WA 1:365.5–7).

¹⁴ LW 31:57 (WA 1:365.8–12).

¹⁵ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 43.

sinners to nothing and a “proper work” that elevates repentant sinners to be new creations through the forgiveness of their sins and a new identity in Christ. In spite of the differences between these emphases in the Psalms and Romans trajectory of thinking and the Hebrews trajectory (as well as the later *solus Christus* and *sola fide*), we encounter the initial phases of Luther’s mature theology: the theology of the cross, the distinction of law and gospel, and God’s alien and proper works. But this early work in the Psalter has important consequences for a theological aesthetic, for in it Luther brings to the fore his paradoxical approach to theological aesthetics. The ugliest, namely those most adept at self-accusation and therefore the most humble, are paradoxically the most beautiful. Because God has illumined their spiritual darkness, sinners are able to acknowledge their sins and thereby concur with God’s judgment.

Whoever is most beautiful in the sight of God is the most ugly, and, vice versa, whoever is the ugliest is the most beautiful. . . . Therefore the one who is most attractive in the sight of God is not the one who seems most humble to himself, but the one who sees himself as most filthy and depraved. The reason is that he would never see his own filthiness, unless he had been enlightened in his inmost being with a holy light. But when he has such a light, he is attractive, and the brighter the light, the more attractive he is. And the more brightly he has the light, the more he sees himself as ugly and unworthy. Therefore it is true: The one who is most depraved in his own eyes is the most handsome before God and, on the contrary, the one who sees himself as handsome is thoroughly ugly before God, because he lacks the light with which to see himself.¹⁶

The aesthetic category of light (brightness and clarity) influenced Luther here: the enlightenment of God makes ugliness into beauty. The corollary is also true: the more beauty sinners claim to have, the more beauty before God they thereby lose.

In a nutshell, Luther argues, “whoever makes himself beautiful, is made ugly. On the contrary, he who makes himself ugly, is made beautiful.”¹⁷ There are precedents in the theological tradition for these kinds of paradoxical affirmations, and not only in Bernard of Clairvaux. In spite of his reservations about Augustine, Luther’s paradoxical approach echoes Augustine: “Let that fairest one [Christ] alone, who loved the foul to make them fair, be all our desire.”¹⁸ Luther may not have been consciously continuing the Augustinian line of thinking here, but he certainly took a christological approach to aesthetics as well as a two-fold approach to the hiddenness of God. God is hidden as the *deus absconditus* to those who

¹⁶ LW 10:239 (WA 3:290.23–291.3)

¹⁷ LW 11:263 (WA 4:111.7, 111.15).

¹⁸ St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of St. John*, 10:13 (NPNF 7:74).

vainly search for his inner nature when he shows only his backside (*posteriora dei*), but God is also hidden as mercy in the preaching and ministry of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

The early Luther, in his own way, affirmed pancalism. He did not do so on the basis of a metaphysics where beauty is the same as goodness, however. Creatures are not beautiful to the degree to which they participate in beauty, but rather Christ alone is beauty, and Christ makes sinners beautiful. The former approach is named a “theology of glory” in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, and Luther distances himself from such presumptuousness. Even metaphysical thinkers must be confronted by their own ugliness in sin. To claim for oneself a divine trait such as goodness, freedom, or beauty is to take from God what belongs to God alone. If Christ alone is beauty, then sinners who are ugly before God must be given beauty in faith, where they are sustained by God.²⁰

Most importantly, what is at stake is our humanity, our standing as creatures as opposed to our self-aggrandizing pride. “When you call God good, you must deny that you are good and confess that you are altogether evil. He will not suffer Himself and you to be called good together at the same time, for He wants to be regarded as God, but He wants you to be regarded as a *creature*.”²¹

In focusing on a forensic approach to God’s justification, Luther repositioned Bernard’s bridal mysticism. That tradition had strongly affirmed beauty and thought that the soul desired a beautiful Christ as much as Christ desired the beautiful soul. The forensic character of Luther’s theology colored his appropriation of aesthetics. Jesus Christ, the eager lover, desires not the beautiful soul but instead the debtor laden with liabilities, “sins, death and damnation.”²² Christ the bridegroom “must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his?”²³ Accordingly, Luther said, “here we have a most pleasing vision not only of communion but of a blessed struggle and victory and salvation and redemption.”²⁴ Jesus Christ assumes these debts from his “wicked harlot.”²⁵ Likewise, the bride has a right to claim, and in fact can claim, his treasures and status just as he takes on her debts. Forensic beauty goes both directions. The “divine bridegroom Christ marries the poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her [makes her beautiful] with all his goodness.”²⁶

¹⁹ See B. A. Gerrish, “‘To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 131–49.

²⁰ LW 11:387 (WA 4:252.10–14).

²¹ LW 11:411 (WA 4:278.37–279.2).

²² LW 31:351 (WA 7:55.1).

²³ LW 31:351 (WA 7:55.5–6).

²⁴ LW 31:351 (WA 7:55.7–8).

²⁵ LW 31:352 (WA 7:55.26).

²⁶ LW 31:352 (WA 7:55.26–27).

MATURE LUTHER AND AESTHETICS

Luther's mature theology furthers this early approach to beauty. For instance, Luther's commentary on Psalm 45 (1532) insists that Christ's beauty is attributable to Jesus's spiritual traits, not his physical ones. If beauty is rightly a spiritual characteristic, then it is a feature of God's faithfulness even to sinners and not some kind of Aristotelian golden mean of proper proportion. It is found in God's self-donation and in human trust in God's promise. Repeating his disdain for humans' attempts at self-justification, Luther reminds us that sinners who claim beauty on their own overlook their ugliness before God. Beauty threatens social and individual well-being when it boastfully claims recognition from God. This threat is ubiquitous to the sinful person. The danger is worsened when it blinds sinners not only to their own ugliness but also to Christ's great beauty. The sinner needs God not only to become beautiful but even to see her own nothingness before God, for such an understanding is truly a work of the Holy Spirit's enlightenment. Christ alone is truly beautiful. Interpreting Psalm 45, Luther writes,

It could perhaps be that some were fairer in form than Christ, for we do not read that the Jews especially admired His form. We are not concerned here with His natural and essential form, but with His spiritual form. That is such that He is simply the fairest in form among the sons of men, so that finally He alone is finely formed and beautiful. All the rest are disfigured, defiled, and corrupted by an evil will, by weakness in their resistance to sin, and by other vices that cling to us by nature. This ugliness of man is not apparent to the eyes; it makes no impression on the eyes, just as spiritual beauty makes no visual impression. Since we are flesh and blood, we are moved only by the substantial form and beauty that the eyes see. If we had spiritual eyes, we could see what a great disgrace it is that man's will should be turned from God.²⁷

Can we become more specific about what it is for Luther that makes Christ beautiful? Is Christ spiritually righteous by the standard of the law? Luther did not indicate this. Instead, he thinks that Christ's beauty consists in his identification with and participation in sinful humanity. In rescuing and saving us, Christ becomes beauty. Christ "did not keep company with the holy, powerful, and wise, but with despicable and miserable sinners, with those ruined by misfortune, with men weighed down by painful and incurable diseases; these He healed, comforted, raised up, helped. And at last he even died for sinners."²⁸ What makes Christ beautiful, then, defies the standard medieval criteria of proportion, clarity, and perfection. In identifying with sinners, Christ mingles with the disproportionate, the soiled, and the imperfect. In fact, he *becomes this ugliness*. Christ's beauty, then, is

²⁷ *Commentary on Psalm 45* in LW 12:207 (WA 40:2:485.5–11).

²⁸ *Commentary on Psalm 45* in LW 12:208 (WA 40:2:486.11–12).

“hidden under the opposite appearance.”²⁹ He who knew no ugly sin became sinful ugliness for us.

Luther’s criterion for beauty is not the standard threefold schema of proportion, clarity, and wholeness but rather is Christ’s compassionate, self-originating love. That love reaches out to the outcast and forsaken. These beloved of Christ do not score high marks on the scale of law or power. In fact, the powerful (those scoring high in terms of clarity, perfection, and proportion) are endangered by Christ’s compassion. In response, naturally (and defensively) they reject Christ and deem him ugly. Thus, the medieval criteria for beauty are devised under the rubric of law, not gospel. Luther’s aim was to reconfigure beauty as a gospel concept, not a law one. Because the beauty that counts is beauty before God, enforcers of beauty in the public realm, such as, in Luther’s view, the self-righteous Pharisees and priests, are threatened by the gospel and seek retaliation against Christ.

[The Pharisees and priests] were so inflamed with hatred for Christ that they could not even bear to look at Him. While He was present and speaking among them, there still proceeded from His mouth rays—in fact, suns—of wisdom, and from His hands beams of divine power, and from his entire body suns of love and every virtue. But whatever of His beauty He showed them was nauseating and an abomination to them, not through Christ’s fault but through their own.³⁰

God gives his beauty as compassion in Jesus Christ. His compassion goes to those oppressed by the law. But this kind of gift threatens the underlying structures propping up human self-justification.

Beauty before God is thus rather like righteousness before God, and vice versa. But this allows our usual understanding of justification by faith alone to be expanded: God gives beauty to sinners, clothing them in his beauty. “To be justified by faith” and “to be made beautiful” are synonymous.

Given sin’s distortion of nature, causing nature to be “turned in on itself,” only as something different from nature can grace allow nature to be nature. “Then you are beautiful not by your own beauty, but by the beauty of the King, who has adorned you with His Word, who has granted you His righteousness, His holiness, truth, strength, and all gifts of the Holy Spirit.”³¹ Beauty before God is thus rather like righteousness before God, and vice versa. But this allows our usual understanding of justification by faith alone to be expanded: God gives beauty to

²⁹ *Commentary on Psalm 45* in LW 12:208 (WA 40:2:487.26).

³⁰ *Commentary on Psalm 45* in LW 12:208 (WA 40:2:487.26).

³¹ *Commentary on Psalm 45* in LW 12:278 (WA 40:2:580.28–30).

sinners, clothing them in his beauty. “To be justified by faith” and “to be made beautiful” are synonymous. Humans are made “acceptable to God” as well as “lovely” by means of trusting Christ.

BEAUTY AND CREATION

It’s clear that Luther’s aesthetic is profoundly christological. But does it at all bear on creation? That is a valuable question if we wish to situate our own appreciation for nature as well as see where Luther’s aesthetic impacts art. In a word, Luther did not limit his understanding of beauty solely to matters of redemption. His doctrine of creation, especially his discussion of Adam and Eve’s “original righteousness,” is laden with the language of beauty. Here, the medieval standards of clarity, proportion, and integrity that Luther took away or significantly revised in his attempt to understand Christ’s beauty reappear when he speaks of the creation of Adam, although Adam’s perfections actually exceed these criteria. Given that Luther associated law with creation as providing healthy boundaries designed to sustain healthy community, we can distinguish a beauty of the law, or a creation beauty, from the beauty of the gospel, a redemption beauty. Naturally, sinners use these standards in a perverse attempt at self-justification. But that was not the case prior to the fall. Adam’s pre-fall mental and physical traits—interpreted by means of the Augustinian trio of will, intellect, and memory—are described like this by Luther:

Both his inner and his outer sensations were all of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquility of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety. To these inner qualities came also those most beautiful and superb qualities of body and of all the limbs, qualities in which he surpassed all the remaining living creatures.³²

Due to sin, Luther here holds that human memory, intellect, and will are presently “utterly leprous and unclean.”³³ While suffering the effects of Adam’s sin, the creation currently in “travail,” there is no reason to believe in a post-fall state that all beauty has been erased from creation. After all, Luther even called reason “something divine.”³⁴

Luther counted not only perfection as attributable to Adam but also proportion. Luther agreed with Peter Lombard that humankind was “created for a better life in the future than this physical life would have been even if our nature had remained unimpaired.” So he repeatedly insisted that “at a predetermined time, after the number of saints had become full, these physical activities would have

³² *Lectures on Genesis* in LW 1:62 (WA 42:46.18–27).

³³ *Lectures on Genesis* in LW 1:61 (WA 42:46.7).

³⁴ *The Disputation Concerning Man* in LW 34:137, thesis 4.

come to an end; and Adam, together with his descendant, would have been translated to the eternal and spiritual life.”³⁵ Here Luther, like Lombard before him, drew upon the Pythagorean tradition, which so highly valued mathematics as the key to unlocking the meaning of the cosmos.

Finally, the pre-fall humanity’s original righteousness was beautiful because nature and grace were not separate and external to each other but rather interpenetrated each other. Adam’s nature was graced in such a way that he lived in perfect harmony with God, with his wife, and with all other creatures. Adam loved God innately, naturally. Drawing on the metaphor of “intoxication,” favored by many mystics as an apt way to describe spiritual union with God, Adam was “intoxicated with rejoicing toward God.”³⁶ To anticipate creation’s fulfillment, God’s renewal of the sinful world, Luther claims in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15 that the resurrection body will be beautiful.³⁷ He notes, “in this life we lay hold of this goal [the likeness of God] in ever so weak a manner; but in the future life we shall attain it fully.”³⁸

CONCLUSION

God’s alien work is not beautiful, but it exists for his proper work of giving favor to repentant sinners, which indeed is beautiful and shows us that God is beauty itself. The gospel restores desire such that it is no longer unnaturally self-serving but instead allows us to desire “what God desires.”³⁹ Luther’s Reformation disdained the iconoclasm of other Protestants not just because images teach but because the human mind only thinks using images and, more importantly, the gospel comes tangibly, in, with, and under visible signs. Thereby, humans have a physical means to help them hold onto God’s promise. As we see in Luther’s teaching about Christ’s presence in the physical elements at the Lord’s Table, there is no “kernel” (promise) without the physical “shell.”⁴⁰ Indeed, God only ever presents himself to humans as “covered,” and so all physical things present God, but not always clearly or mercifully. Hence, the charge that Luther’s theology leads to a “disenchantment” with the natural world—as Charles Taylor, following Max Weber, claims,⁴¹ a stance perpetuated by secular critiques of the Christian faith—should be challenged.⁴² Gospel beauty, paradoxically granted in the ugliness of Jesus Christ who

³⁵ *Lectures on Genesis* in LW 1:56 (WA 42:42.24–27).

³⁶ *Lectures on Genesis* in LW 1:94 (WA 42:71.31).

³⁷ “This will make the whole body so beautiful, vigorous, and healthy, indeed, so light and agile, that we will soar along like a little spark, yes, just like the sun which runs its course in the heavens.” See *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15* in LW 28:143 (WA 36:494.40–495.1).

³⁸ “Lectures on Genesis” in LW 1:131 (WA 42:98.22–24).

³⁹ LW 1:337 (WA 42:248.12–13).

⁴⁰ *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* in LW 37:219 (WA 26:333.17).

⁴¹ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 25–27, 29–43, and other places.

⁴² Ronald Thiemann, “Sacramental Realism: Martin Luther at the Dawn of Modernity” in *Lutherrenaissance Past and Present*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 165–73.

bears human sin, so reorders humans as creatures to God through faith. As reordered to God through faith, believers not only live as Christs for the well-being of their neighbors and this good earth, but they also enjoy the beauty that God has fashioned in creation. ⊕

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