

Re-Enchanting the Gospel: The Role of Objective Beauty in Worship

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IWS Professor Dr. Reggie Kidd wrote the following in his book *With One Voice*:

A theology that cannot be preached is not worth having,” I once heard a preacher declare. I can’t argue with that. Truth that can’t be applied isn’t worth bothering about... The whole premise of Christianity is that to do us any good God’s love had to come down from heaven, right here to where we live.

Here’s a corollary to the preacher’s quip: a theology that cannot be *sung* is not worth having either. Authentic Christian faith is not merely believed. Nor is it merely acted upon. It is sung—with utter joy sometimes, in uncontrollable tears sometimes, but it is sung.¹

He goes on to say, “Song is a means he has given us to communicate our deepest affections, to have our thoughts exquisitely shaped, and to have our spirits braced for the boldest of obediences. Through music, our God draws us deeper into a love affair with himself.”²



I want to suggest that this is not only true with music, but it is potentially true with all artistic expression. But more to it, this is precisely the role of beauty in worship—the communication and application of the truth and goodness of God that fires our hearts and souls with an intense love of God, and therefore an intense love of all mankind.

The news around us seems to be increasingly filled with reports of sabre rattling, political power posturing, aggressive aggrandizement both in privacy and the body politic, and in general, an attitude of self-serving superiority through abusive domination and even oppression. Domination through oppression or humiliation, socially and/or politically, is always misguided.

Self-centeredness seems to rule the day, and it is ugly and boring, let alone evil and sinful. In my lifetime, I don’t know that I have ever seen the world in such an ugly condition. Much of what I see and hear happening in the world is connected to the ugliness and polarizing effects of addictive sin in the world, manifested in the pursuits of power, money, pleasure and pride. Added to this is the growing intolerance of secularism toward any faith, but in particular the

¹ Kidd, Reggie M. *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005, p. 13

² Ibid, 14.

Christian faith. In his book *A Secular Age*,³ the philosopher Charles Taylor describes the downward progression of secularism since the early 1500's, and he describes it in three manifestations. Early on, secularism was defined as that which was not sacred, contrasting religious life from worldly affairs and concerns. Here secularism is in a peaceful co-existence with the sacred, serving as a sort of counterpart to concerns *directly* related to God. Then secularism progressed in the Age of Reason into a non-religious posture toward the sacred, marginalizing and compartmentalizing the divine life of God as decoupled from the world, or the public square, beginning to separate human flourishing from submission to divine lordship. One's ultimate concern may, or may not, involve one's religious life. Now, we have come to an age where the secular stands at least separately indifferent if not actively opposed to the sacred through intolerance of faith. The non-religious concerns or institutions are privileged over the religious. The intolerance towards faith can and sometimes does result in active oppression, violence and suffering, even martyrdom. (The 20th century saw more martyrs for the Christian faith than all of the previous 19 centuries combined! The 21st century is looking just as grim!) Taylor proposes, I think correctly, that in our modern (or postmodern) society, the self has become consumed with immanence and buffered against the transcendent, becoming immunized against seeing the world as enchanted by divinity, or as God-haunted as some have said. This buffered self disallows the breaking in of the light of God.

Please hear me on this—I do *not* think this is a time to be wringing our hands. When the darkness gets darker, the light can shine brighter. The Church has often thrived most gloriously when she is under pressure from the surrounding culture. This is a time to press into God, or as Meister Eckhart expressed it, “sink into God” in full reliance and surrender.

So what does all of this have to do with theological study of Christian worship, or with the role of beauty in worship? One way to break through the buffer that secular culture has against the faith is to re-enchance ourselves and the world with the beauty of God. Many theologians, philosophers and authors have dealt with or addressed this idea, including C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton, George MacDonald, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Flannery O'Connor, to name just a few. This brings me to Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar was a 20th century theologian (a favorite of Bob Webber) who advocated for a “kneeling theology” instead of the usual “sitting theology.” This gets at the same point being made by Dr. Kidd—the best theology derives from a posture of worship, because that's who God is, a community of worshipping love. Likewise, the most effective attainment of theological application comes through an enthusiastic embrace of objective beauty, because that is also who God is, the manifestation of infinite beauty. Balthasar had the intuition that beauty should take the lead, so to speak, when we are trying to find connection with the secular world and to advocate for the re-enchancement of life, faith and even theological reflection through beauty.

In his great work *The Glory of the Lord*,⁴ Balthasar proposes a reversal of the order of the classical transcendentals, typically listed as truth, goodness and beauty. Balthasar suggests a reversal of this order of the transcendentals to beauty, goodness and truth. He posits that the beauty of God (which is objective in his theology) arrests us (or captures us), claims us, and then

³ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007.

⁴ Balthasar, Hans Urs Von. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989.

sends us on mission to discover and share the goodness and truth of God with the entire created order. Together, beauty, goodness and truth reveal the very nature of God manifested uniquely and ultimately in Jesus the Christ, and worship plays a major role, perhaps *the* major role.

Let's look at this with a bit more depth. Philosophers, perhaps best demonstrated in the work of Immanuel Kant, tend to come to beauty last, placing the transcendentals in the order of truth first, then goodness, and finally beauty, almost as an add-on. Balthasar saw that as problematic. As a concert pianist, he had a natural attraction toward aesthetical reflection. He was convinced that over the past four or five centuries, objective beauty had been marginalized or even neglected from theological discourse. Balthasar claimed that when beauty is "made" absent through neglect or intentional marginalization, the good is no longer attractive, and ultimately the true no longer matters.

The purpose of Balthasar's work was really what all theological work is meant to do: to communicate the faith. Faith has both an objective content and a subjective disposition. Communicating the faith involves both. Faith is fundamentally the appropriation of the mysteries of God. So, how do we communicate or appropriate the infinite mysteries of the unknowable God in a way that neither reduces God to human capacities (making God in our own image), nor overwhelms human capacities with infinitude, thereby disallowing God from making real claims on our lives. In other words, how do we finite, sinful creatures understand and encounter the God who is both infinitely true and infinitely good? This is where beauty comes in. It's the way out of this conundrum. Beauty lifts us up into the mystery of God. It has the capacity to reach into our flesh with a purely spiritual light. Beauty conjoins or holds together immanence and transcendence, body and soul, intellect and senses, mind and heart, subject and object, supernatural and natural, even God and the world. But note—this is the whole point of the incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ—the infinite mystery of God is revealed to us in the ultimate beauty of Christ, the ultimate mediation of God. In the incarnation, the infinite God entered into human flesh and became flesh himself, became what he created. Likewise, objective beauty is the enfleshment of the truth and the goodness of God. There is no truth more beautiful than the truth of the incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ. The objective beauty of God in Christ forms the context in which truth and goodness make sense. By virtue of objective beauty in Jesus Christ, truth is really true and goodness is really good.

Why does Balthasar start with beauty first in his theology, instead of truth and goodness? (By the way, he stands with a long tradition of theologians who likewise privileged beauty: Augustine, Origen, John of the Cross, Newman, etc. I would even say N.T. Wright.) Balthasar wrote, "Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another."⁵ His perspective was that beauty forms the background or context for the true and the good, and for precisely that reason he sees that theological discourse should start with beauty. He defines beauty as the unity of form and splendor, the simultaneous coming together of appearance and radiance. The simultaneity of this form and radiance results in the simultaneity of objectivity and subjectivity, or vision and rapture, or more to it, truth and passion (which draw us to the good). In the encounter of the truly objectively beautiful, we are arrested, claimed, and sent. Or to state

⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

it another way, we are stopped, transformed and dispatched on mission. Think of Thomas Merton, who was converted by visiting the Gothic cathedrals and contemplating Christian art of Europe; or C.S. Lewis who was converted through reading Chesterton and MacDonald.) Ultimately, the beauty of God in Jesus Christ transforms us and then sends us to transform others. How? By the simultaneous encounter of form, and experience of splendor, of the truth and the goodness of God.

Furthermore, Balthasar uses a classical understanding of what constitutes objective beauty, differentiating it from subjective beauty, that which is “in the eye of the beholder.” He borrowed St. Thomas Aquinas’ restatement of the classical tradition of objective beauty. Objective beauty occurs at the intersection of three things: *integritas*, or wholeness; *consonantia*, or harmony, and *claritas*, or radiance. When those three things converge, you have the objectively beautiful.

As an example, let’s go back to Dr. Kidd’s quote. He writes, “Song (aesthetics) is a means he has given us to communicate our deepest affections, to have our thoughts exquisitely shaped, and to have our spirits braced for the boldest of obediences.” How does this happen? This happens at the conjunction of form and splendor, and the embrace of objective beauty. To steal Dr. Kidd’s words, objective beauty touches deepest affections. This beauty arrests us (stops us), exquisitely shapes or transforms our thoughts and our hearts into Christ-likeness, then sends us on mission in obedience, to love the World to the God who is love.

When we speak of God’s beauty, we are speaking of his glory, his *kavod*, his manifestation (sometimes referred to as his *shekinah*), the coming together of the infinite God in the finite world. Ultimately, Christ is the purest and definitive manifestation of God’s beauty or his glory. He is the ultimate intersection of wholeness (one purpose), harmony (hypostasis) and radiance (ecce homo: behold the man). Hebrews 1:3 states, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power...” In 2 Cor. 4:4 St. Paul wrote of “...the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” And in Col. 1:15 he stated that Christ is “...the image of the invisible God...” Throughout the scriptures we read of God’s beauty and glory as manifested in all of creation. Then in the New Testament we see that God’s beauty and glory are ultimately revealed “...in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:6). As we proclaim and re-enact and remember the story of God in Jesus the Christ, we are communicating the beauty and glory of God.

What does all of this mean for us worship leaders? First, we must always keep the Gospel of Jesus Christ at the very center of our worship. This Gospel should not be an overly discursive or overly moralizing Gospel. Rather, it should be a re-enchanted Gospel, full of wonder, awe and beauty, revelatory of Jesus Christ himself. He is *the* most beautiful one who will arrest those who encounter him, transform them and send them on mission. But we must also participate in God’s beauty and glory by giving attention to the full employment and embrace of objective aesthetics in our liturgies, our preaching, in all of our worship arts, and even in our handling of scripture through interpretation and presentation. Additionally, we are called to live lives of beauty, filled with the Holy Spirit and participating fully in God’s goodness and truth through Jesus Christ our Lord. That beauty is alluring and winsome to our world that is so devoid of such beauty, and living lives of beauty, goodness and truth is truly the hope for our darkened days.

Joseph Ratzinger, commonly known as Pope Benedict XVI, stated, “I have often affirmed my conviction that the true apology of Christian faith, the most convincing demonstration of its truth . . . are the *saints* and the *beauty* that the faith has generated.”⁶ Benedict has, time and again, emphasized that the *via pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty, constitutes a privileged path by which to advance the Gospel in our age. In a post-Christian society that is often hostile to the Church’s truth claims and moral norms, Benedict believes that recourse to the universal language of beauty is indispensable if we are to compellingly present and live out the Gospel.

We need to ask ourselves: do our liturgies, preaching, sacred arts, sacred buildings, scripture interpretation and presentation, and even our lifestyles, lift our spirits out of the ordinary and toward God, or do they let us remain in the comfort of the increasingly hostile secular world around us? Certainly all of us in our various communities could stand to reflect more deeply on what we are doing to make our worship, liturgies, homiletics, worship arts, and our faith life, something that draws us out of ourselves into an encounter with the transcendent.

I will close with the words quoted by Balthasar in the first chapter of *The Glory of the Lord*. This is taken from the Preface of the Christmas liturgy, and sums up the role of beauty in worship and spiritual formation. Here we see that vision and rapture, form and light work simultaneously to bring us to God through Jesus Christ. Here is the prayer:

Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give You thanks through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*For in the mystery of the Word made flesh a new light of your glory has shone upon the eyes of our mind, so that, as we recognize in him [Jesus] God made visible, we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible [or the invisible God].*⁷

Vision and rapture, form and light work simultaneously to bring us to God. That’s the beauty of God in Christ! In being caught up, we see with the eyes of our mind, and in seeing we are caught up to the invisible God. That is the work of beauty, in the beauty of the only truly objectively beautiful one, Jesus the Christ.

And so, with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones and Dominions, and with all the hosts and Powers of heaven, we sing the hymn of your glory, as without end we acclaim:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty” (August 24, 2002). Other formulations of Ratzinger’s leading apologetics principle are found in *Feast of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 124; *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 129-30; *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 373; *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 226; Meeting with the clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone (August 6, 2008).

⁷ Nativity Preface I, *The Order of the Mass*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970.

*Hosanna in the highest.*⁸

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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⁸ Ibid.