

Re-Enchanting Worship: Beauty, Heavenly Participation, and Worship Renewal

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How does earthly worship participate in the beauty of heavenly things, and what does this have to do with worship renewal?

In my presidential address in January 2018, I explored the role of objective beauty in worship. In the June 2018 address I expanded on that, riffing a bit on the subjectivity of beauty in light of the topic (Enchanted Worship) being addressed by our guest seminar speaker, Dr. Hans Boersma, and starting a conversation on the “so what” of all of this.

In the [January 2018 presidential address](#), I began with the idea that the world seems to be increasingly ugly, connected to the effects of addictive sin, manifested in the pursuits of power, money, pleasure and pride. Added to this is the growing intolerance and hostility of secularism toward any faith, but in particular the Christian faith. While I do not believe in an ontological separation of the sacred from the secular, there yet seems to be a growing distance between people and communities of faith and those who privilege such ideals as rationalism, scientism, narcissism, individualism, relativism, racism, sexism, nationalism, consumerism, violence, sexual immorality, oppression, idolatry, greed and generally a culture of death. These militate against the sacred, specifically the story of the Triune God and its fulfillment in Christ and His mystical Body, the Church.



Philosopher Charles Taylor has suggested that in our social imagination, 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. This buffered self disallows the breaking in of the light of God. It can be seen as an obsession with the here and now instead of the everywhere and always.¹

I proposed that one credible and effective way through this mess involves an embrace of objective, Christ-centered beauty, particularly as put forward in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.² Beauty is one of the three transcendentals of beingness in the great classical tradition of the last 2,500 years or so, along with truth and goodness. Balthasar was convinced that over the past five centuries beauty has been marginalized from theological discourse. Balthasar claimed that when beauty is made absent through neglect or marginalization, the good is no longer attractive, and ultimately the true no longer matters. Balthasar wrote that beauty forms the critical background or context for the true and the good, and for precisely that reason theological discourse should start with beauty. By virtue of objective beauty in Jesus Christ, truth is again really true and goodness is again really good. Together, beauty, goodness and truth reveal the

¹ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007.

² Balthasar, Hans Urs Von. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989.

nature of God manifested uniquely and ultimately in Jesus Christ, and worship plays a major role.

In the incarnation, the infinite mystery of God is revealed to us in the 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. The objective beauty of God incarnate in Christ forms the context in which truth and goodness make sense.

Balthasar defined beauty as the unity of form and splendor, or radiance. The simultaneous encounter with form and radiance results in the simultaneity of objective vision and subjective rapture, or more to it, truth, virtue and passion. In the encounter of the objectively beautiful, we are arrested, transformed and dispatched on mission. So, the beauty of God in Jesus Christ arrests us, transforms us by grace, and then sends us to facilitate transformation in others by the encounter of the form and splendor of the truth and the goodness of God.

Balthasar uses a classical understanding of what constitutes objective beauty. He borrowed St. Thomas Aquinas' restatement of the classical tradition of objective beauty. Objective beauty occurs at the intersection of three things: wholeness, harmony, and radiance. When those three things converge, you have the objectively beautiful.

My thesis in January was that the role of objective beauty in worship is 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 humankind. We 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 in our handling of scripture through interpretation and presentation, especially in our attempts to re-enchant the Gospel with wonder, awe and beauty revelatory of Jesus Christ. Additionally, we are called to live virtuous 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 only hope for our darkened days.

IWS founder [Bob Webber](#) wrote the following in *The Younger Evangelicals*: "Plato declared, 'Beauty makes truth splendid.' Beauty, whether it is that of an individual, a place, a landscape, or an environment, has the power to communicate a sense of well-being. Beauty is the eyesight of insight."³ Later in that same book, he relates the story of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, who sent a delegation of followers to discover true religion. After travelling abroad, the team discovered the goal of their search at Hagia Sofia church in Constantinople. They reported, "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among men, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that

³ Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 66.

beauty.”⁴ Webber commented that this statement points to “the unity between form and spirit in the beauty of God’s creation.”⁵ This concurs with Balthasar’s perspective that objective beauty is the simultaneous encounter of form and splendor.



However, this overview of objective beauty raises a question—is the beauty we experience truly objective? I think there is a sliding scale of subjectivity to objectivity in the beauty we encounter, subjective personal preference if you will, on one end, to a more objectively and perhaps widely accepted aesthetic on the other hand. Here is the problem—we live in an analogical, sacramental world, a world created freely by God from what? Nothing! (*Creatio ex nihilo*.) Rev. 4:11 states, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (NIV). The Psalmist exclaims, “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all” (Ps. 104:24a, NRSV). In Rom. 4:17b, the God of Abraham “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” So God created everything that *is ex nihilo*, from nothing. Therefore everything that *is*, both in this world and in every universe or multiverse that exists, animate and inanimate, naturally occurring and man-made, is necessarily insinuated with the Creator.

But, he is also *other than* everything that exists. In fact, to borrow from Kathryn Tanner, God is “*otherly other*.” Everything that exists exists because of God and finds its being in God. Additionally, God is present to his creation, upholding and sustaining it, and eternally continuing to create. Therefore, everything that exists participates in some way with the Divine and the ongoing continuous creative process. That is a participatory, sacramental worldview. Do not allow “sacramental” to be a scary or negative word, a magical word, or too liturgical a word. It simply means that God mysteriously participates in his created order as the created order mysteriously participates in God’s merciful and loving *creatio continua*. Even the scriptures are sacramental. While the Bible is certainly the very soul of the Christian faith, the scriptures are iconic, or sacramental of the True Word of God. We do not worship the Bible, but the God *of* the Bible.

What does this have to do with beauty? Beauty as we experience it participates in the presence and glory of God, but never reaches the infinite perfection of God’s own beauty, which is the only truly objective beauty. All earthly beauty, even the most rapturous earthly beauty, leaves us wanting more, expecting, looking for something beyond. We are hard-wired to search for and long after perfection in beauty, goodness and truth. And, when we find a gesture toward objective beauty, we are first drawn, and then left wanting more. Augustine defined this

⁴ Ibid., 212.

⁵ Ibid., 212.

phenomena as “the restless heart seeking to find rest in God.” So beauty is sacramental, participating in varying levels in the objective beauty of God. Our experience of beauty is incarnational, the enfleshment of the glory of God. It is often surprising and, shall we say, enchanting. It removes us from the center of our lives. It leads us toward the objective goodness and truth of God. And it does all of these things simultaneously—but not completely! It leaves us wanting the perfection of beauty, who is God himself.

C.S Lewis stated this same sentiment in *The Weight of Glory*,

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.⁶

I had a social media interaction recently with Darrell Harris, IWS Vice President for Spiritual Life, on this issue of the subjectivity of beauty. While it is very difficult to identify specifics of aesthetics in that sliding scale, any move toward objectivity of beauty is essentially a move toward God. In the great classical tradition, objective beauty has characteristics that are identifiable, but the trickier part is to connect those characteristics to specific types of musical or artistic genres. Ultimately, I believe that the level to which a specific genre participates in truth and virtue determines its place on the sliding scale. I suspect that some music and art, for example, participates more vividly and viscerally in the truth and goodness of God. The question is, where and how? Is it in the intention of the composer or artistic creator? Or the intention of the performer? Or the receptivity of the artistic enthusiast? Or the content of the lyric? Or the balance, integrity, and somewhat culturally determined splendor of the art form? Are there other determining factors? Or is it a combination of all of these and more? Ultimately, when intentions are directed to participation in the life of God, the objectivity of beauty becomes more vivid—albeit still infinitely short of the fullness of objectivity. Beauty that seeks to *participate* in the only truly Beautiful, True and Good One begins to move toward objectivity. But obviously, it can't arrive since our world is only sacramental of a greater reality. Worship that seeks to participate in the Beautiful One does communicate and apply the truth and goodness of God that fires our hearts and souls with an intense love of God, and all humankind. That intensification of the love of God and love for all humanity is at the very core of worship renewal. To be renewed in worship is to fall more in love with God and with our fellow humankind.

In writing about the combination of virtue and beauty in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, philosopher Peter Kreeft states, “I think beauty is one of the most important forms of goodness. Beauty is very good. And goodness is the highest form of beauty. . . . Beauty, as well as goodness, is an attribute of God, and therefore eternal and necessary. And since God is one, beauty and goodness must be ultimately one.”⁷ Beauty and virtue go hand in hand.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Accessed at: <https://www.verber.com/mark/xian/weight-of-glory.pdf>), 3.

⁷ Peter Kreeft, "Language of Beauty, Part 2: Beauty and Goodness." Transcribed from a talk given at Trinity Forum Academy (June 6, 2005).

I have been involved with worship leadership for somewhere around 40 years. As I reflect on what it means to be “formed in Christian worship renewal.” I think it means exactly this: to fall more in love with God and with our neighbors, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, to be divinized, to be formed into the virtues of Christ-likeness. That is the entire meaning of worship renewal, and really the entirety of the Christian life. All else is commentary.

I confess to you, my brothers and sisters, I participate in that renewal very unevenly. I consistently fall short. I am not as formed into Christ-like virtue as I want to be. But, I am also constantly reminded of the mercy and goodness of God in Jesus Christ, whose love is unending, who constantly calls me to himself to renew and reconcile me, and send me back on mission.

My thesis work here at IWS was on a recovery of the Daily Office of prayer for my church. In one book I read, the author asked a monastic what it was like to pray the Psalms seven times a day, every day of the year, for many, many years. I thought the answer would be something like, “It’s glorious to be constantly in the presence of God with my Christian community in continual prayer.” Or perhaps something like the comment of Thomas Merton when he visited the Gethsemani Abbey for the first time: “I have found the still point around which the whole country revolves without knowing it.” (He was referring to the worship of God formed in the womb of the historic and living Church.) I thought that would be how the monk would respond. But no. When asked about praying the Psalms all through the day he said, “It is relentless.” Relentless.

After some 40 years in worship leadership I understand how it can be relentless, every Sunday, every year, Christmas stress, Easter stress, on and on. My daughter Erika is an IWS grad. I often visit Erika’s denomination, where I may not receive communion. I said to her one day, “I don’t get the point of going to this church when I can’t receive communion. I don’t really feel very motivated to go.” She said to me, “Dad, you don’t go for you. You go for the life of the world.”



Right. The life of the world. St. John wrote the words of Jesus as he proclaimed, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51 NRSV).

Hans Boersma was our seminar leader and commencement speaker in the June 2018 session. In his book *Heavenly Participation*, he interacts theologically with St. Augustine’s Sermon 227. He writes, “One of the most interesting lines in Sermon 227 says the following about consuming Christ’s body and blood [at Holy Communion (or Eucharist)]: ‘If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive. You see, the apostle [Paul] says, *We, being many, are one loaf, one*

body.’ (1 Cor. 10:17).”⁸ Dr. Boersma explains the radicality of that statement from Augustine: In partaking of the Eucharist, “*You become the body of Christ; you become what you eat.*”⁹ In fact, that is exactly how Alexander Schmemmann begins his great book, *For the Life of the World*: “*You are what you eat.*”¹⁰ A clergy friend of mine leads an instructed Eucharist every year with his congregation. He asks the question, “What is the Eucharist?” After receiving mostly blank stares he exclaims, “You are the Eucharist!” ***He is right.*** As we partake of the Eucharistic bread, the Body of Christ broken for the life of the world, we become the ecclesial bread, the Church, the mystical Body of Christ broken for the life of the world. Through the Eucharist Christ, the Living Word, constitutes the Church, sends the Church on mission, and then the Church regathers to celebrate the Eucharist, which again constitutes the Church!



Why embrace beauty, goodness and truth? Why relentlessly gather to worship every week? Why allow yourselves to be transformed into Christlike virtue? Why fall in love with God and our brothers and sisters? Why? To be broken and poured out for the life of the world.

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

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⁸ Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011) pp. 113-114.

⁹ Ibid. 114

¹⁰ Alexander Schmemmann. *For the Life of the World* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973) p. 6.