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Beauty, the Beholder, and the Believer

by Robert P. Mills

True or False: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder?

I ask my Christian college students that question at the start of each semester. The overwhelming majority of these students, mostly underclassmen, have grown up in Christian homes and evangelical congregations. Many have been home schooled with Christian curricula for much if not all of grade school and high school. They are no doubt among the most theologically and culturally conservative collegians in the country. They answer quickly, confidently, and almost in unison.

Their answer is understandable and unfortunate: understandable because beauty is a topic that rarely receives sustained attention from Christian theologians, pastors, or lay people; unfortunate because it has enormous implications for the worship and witness of the Church in the twenty-first century.

Throughout history, most who have thought seriously about the topic, Christians and non-Christians alike, have agreed that beauty is an important part of human life, even though they have disagreed about why and how this is so. At least as far back as ancient Greece, philosophers have tried to understand the nature of beauty, our experience of beauty, and how we form judgments about what is and is not beautiful. They have

argued with each other about what beauty is and about criteria for determining which, if any, experiences and judgments are legitimate. Until fairly recently, they have also agreed that beauty is inseparably linked with goodness and truth.

Christian theologians as far back as the Church Fathers have also written about beauty. But, with rare exceptions, beauty has not played a central role in their theologies. (Since the Reformation, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians have written more about beauty than have Protestants. Among evangelicals only a few have ventured into this arena.) That philosophers have paid more attention to beauty than theologians explains the content and the sequence of the two main sections in this article.

The first section, “Beauty and the Beholder,” surveys philosophical approaches to beauty, drawing on the works of both philosophers and theologians from ancient through postmodern thinkers. Since this is a journal of theology, philosophy may seem a strange place to begin. But it has been my experience that most evangelicals base their conclusions about beauty on cultural assumptions grounded in secular philosophy, not on Scripture or Christian theology. Therefore, beginning with philosophy provides essential background for the second section.

That section, “Beauty and the Believer,” looks at the links between truth and goodness before considering biblical teachings on beauty. The central theme of the section connects the nature of beauty to the glory of God.

I will then argue that the tacit rejection of a biblical understanding of beauty (or, seen from another perspective, an uncritical acceptance of modern culture’s unbiblical view of beauty) is making it much more difficult for today’s evangelicals to defend historic Christian teachings about goodness and truth. I will further argue that this difficulty damages both the worship and the witness of the Church in the twenty-first century.

The goal of this article is to encourage additional conversations about the place of beauty in evangelical theology and in the lives of individual Christians and congregations.

Beauty and the Beholder

True or False: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder?

When I ask my Christian college students that question, the overwhelming majority instantly answer “True.”

Although these classes have 150 students or more, I have never needed both hands to count the number who answer “False.” When I ask those who answer “True” why they believe beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I get responses like, “Someone might like something but someone else might not like the same thing” and “No one can tell another person what’s beautiful.”

It is when I ask those who give that last answer “Why not?” that the conversation begins to get interesting.

Defining Beauty

We seem to have an instinctive recognition of beauty when we see a beautiful face or flower, when we hear a beautiful poem or piece of music. However, as philosophers, theologians, and lay people throughout the ages have realized, it is not easy to delineate precisely what makes a person or a poem beautiful.

As hard as it is to define beauty using a physical example, the abstract notion of “beauty,” unattached to any object, is even more difficult to define. Indeed, some people do not think it is possible to arrive at such a definition.

For example, early in his recent study *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, David

Bentley Hart writes, “It is impossible to offer a definition of beauty, either in the abstract or in Christian thought; what can be done...is to describe a general ‘thematic’ of the beautiful, a broad summary of the themes that will govern the meaning of ‘beauty.’”¹

However, the nineteenth-century theologian Herman Bavinck did just what Hart deemed impossible, declaring: “Beauty exists in the agreement between content and form, idea and appearance; in harmony, proportion, unity in differentiation, organization; in splendor, glory, radiant perfection.”²

Given that both men write from within what some have called the Great Tradition of Christian Orthodoxy (Bavinck was a Dutch Calvinist, Hart is Eastern Orthodox), how, if at all, can contemporary Christians reconcile such wholly incompatible understandings?

One place to start is by looking at the word itself. Herbert Deickmann offers the following summary:

In English the term beauty goes back to the French *beauté*, which in turn is derived from a conjectured vulgar Latin *bellitatem*, formed after the adjective *bellus*, which neither originally nor properly designated something beautiful; *pulcher* and *formosus* had this function. *Bellus* was a diminutive of *bonus* (good) and was used first for women and children, then ironically for men. Its affectionate overtones are said to explain why *bellus* (and not *pulcher*) was adopted in the Romance languages, where it survived either alone or jointly with *formosus*. The German *schön* carries in its oldest forms the meaning of bright, brilliant, and also striking, impressive.³

Deickmann continues, “To be sure, neither the etymology nor the early history of a term designating a universal idea can explain the later uses of the term.”⁴ But his brief summary introduces two crucial considerations: first, that the notions of beauty and goodness are linguistically intertwined, and second, that precision has long eluded those attempting to craft a universally acceptable definition of beauty.

Among the first to attempt to explore and explain the nature of beauty were philosophers from ancient Greece. So it is there that we will begin our necessarily brief and highly selective philosophical explorations.

I. The Ancient Greeks

Pythagoras

Perhaps the earliest philosophical theory of beauty can be found in the writings of Pythagoras (ca. 582-507 B.C.). Pythagoras believed that numbers were the essence of matter and that all the relations between

members of the universe could be expressed through numbers. Not surprisingly, Pythagoras saw a strong connection between mathematics and beauty. In particular, Pythagoras and his followers noted that objects proportioned according to the so-called “golden mean” seemed more beautiful than those that were not.

The golden mean (also known as the golden section or golden ratio) may be defined as “the division of a given unit of length into two parts such that the ratio of the shorter to the longer equals the ratio of the longer part to the whole.” This ratio may be expressed “ x is to y as y is to $x+y$.”

The resulting number, approximately 1.618, was used in designing the Parthenon, built on Athens’ Acropolis in the fifth century B.C. The Parthenon’s architects did not strictly follow the 1:2 ratio expected of Doric order temples, but instead largely relied upon the golden mean. The resulting structure has been admired for millennia.

Far from being considered an ancient artifact, the golden mean continues to be used by contemporary visual artists and composers. Moreover, recent research indicates that people whose facial features are symmetric and proportioned according to the golden mean are consistently ranked as more attractive than those whose faces are not.

Plato and Aristotle

Many of the debates throughout the history of Western philosophy have followed paths first marked by Plato (427-347 B.C.) and his student Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). Although neither ever formally articulated a fully developed theory of beauty, both discussed the topic in several of their writings.

Plato believed that human beings participate in two different worlds. One world is the physical world, which we experience through our bodily senses. The other, which exists outside of time and space, is composed of immaterial and eternal essences, which we apprehend only with our minds, never with our physical senses. For Plato, that world, the world of the Forms, is more real than the physical world. That is because the particular things that exist in the physical world are only imitations, inferior copies, of their archetypes, the Forms. Plato’s most famous explanation of this theory is his Allegory of the Cave from *The Republic*.

Plato’s theory of the Forms underlies his understanding of beauty. For Plato, Beauty, like Truth and Goodness, was immaterial. (Significantly, in his dialogues, Plato made little distinction between the beautiful and the good.) The physical objects human beings perceive and describe as beautiful are only shadows, cast in space

and time, of the ideal Beauty that eternally exists in the realm of the Forms and which is accessible only to reason, not to sensory experience. One consequence of Plato’s understanding of Beauty is that there are degrees of beauty. A painting, a poem, or a person may be more or less beautiful, depending on how closely it approaches the Form of Beauty.

In an important passage from his dialogue *The Symposium* Plato says that an object is “not partly beautiful and partly ugly; not at one time beautiful and at another time not; not beautiful in relation to one thing and deformed in relation to another; not here beautiful and there ugly, not beautiful in the estimation of some people and deformed in that of others.”⁵ In other words, Plato understands beauty as something that exists within the object, not in the eye of the beholder.

While Aristotle rejected Plato’s realm of the Forms as an unnecessary duplication of the physical world, he did share Plato’s assessment that an object was beautiful because of qualities inherent in the object. As a result, he took a more scientific, even mathematical, approach to the nature of beauty. Echoing Pythagoras, and coming close to offering a definition of beauty, Aristotle wrote, “the chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness.”⁶ Because beautiful objects possess these properties, Aristotle believed not only that beauty was objective but that mathematics could have a certain diagnostic value in making judgments about beauty.

The Objectivity of Beauty

While they may have disagreed about the criteria and the ultimate nature of beauty, Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle all acknowledged that beauty is a quality of the object itself. This is known as the objective view of beauty. To say that beauty is an objective quality is to say that that which makes an object beautiful is a quality of the object itself.

The opposite of the objective view of beauty is the subjective view, which holds that the one viewing the object, that is, the subject, determines whether the object is or is not beautiful. Those who hold to a subjective view of beauty insist that there is nothing whatsoever in the object that determines whether or not the object is rightly described as beautiful.

The objective view of beauty was almost universally accepted from the time of Plato until the Enlightenment. As we will see in the next section, the objective view of beauty was also held by the authors of the Bible, albeit for reasons that differ from those of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle.

II. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance

While Plato's understanding of beauty has been enormously influential in Western thought, much of his influence has been filtered through Plotinus and Augustine.

Plotinus and Augustine

Plotinus (205-270) was the founder of a school of thought that became known as NeoPlatonism, a spiritualized account of Plato's realm of the Forms. Plotinus considered beauty an aspect of metaphysics, as did Plato. He also explored the connection between beauty and art, which Plato did not, although those connections have occupied many later philosophers and theologians.

Drawing on Plato yet moving beyond him, Neoplatonists taught that a work of art, such as a poem or a painting, is the imperfect embodiment of an idea that transcends not only the particular work but the artist as well. This understanding, which had some influence during the Renaissance, was most fully developed by the Romantic artists of the nineteenth century.⁷

Augustine (354-430) was both one of the most influential philosophers of Western culture and perhaps the most influential theologian between the apostle Paul and Martin Luther. He wrote an early work titled *On Fit Proportion and the Beautiful*. Although this work has been lost, his title is suggestive of his perspective.

In *On True Religion*, Augustine observes, "Things are not beautiful because they give pleasure; but they give pleasure because they are beautiful,"⁸ a clear affirmation of the objective quality of beauty.

In his other writings, Augustine describes God as absolute beauty, the principle and source of all that is beautiful in this world. Augustine recognizes God not only as a unity, but also as Triune. This means that beauty must involve both unity and variety. As Étienne Gilson summarizes:

Thus it is in the Word that we find the root of unity and being; moreover we can find in it the root of the beautiful. When an image equals that of which it is the image, it brings about a perfect correspondence, symmetry, equality, and resemblance.... Now this original beauty based on resemblance is to be found again in all the partaking beauties. The more the parts of a body resemble one another, the more beautiful the body. In general, it is order, harmony, proportion, i.e., unity produced by the resemblance which engenders beauty.⁹

The language about "resemblance" and "partaking beauties" sounds Platonic, while "order, harmony,

proportion" sounds Aristotelian. Yet, while using the philosophical terminology of his day, Augustine's understanding of beauty is, as we shall see in the next section, firmly grounded in Scripture.

Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) defines beauty as "that which pleases when seen."¹⁰ Attempting to isolate the properties of the objects that do please, he identifies three conditions of beauty: perfection or unimpairedness, proportion or harmony, and brightness or clarity. As George Dickie observes:

Aquinas' theory has both objective and subjective aspects. The stated conditions of beauty are objective features of the world of experience. But the idea of pleasing as part of the meaning of 'beauty' introduces into the theory of beauty a subjective element. Being pleased is a property of a subject (a person) who has an experience, not a property of an object a person experiences. Aquinas' introduction of pleasing is a significant step away from the objective Platonic conception of beauty toward a subjective conception.¹¹

In the subjective facet of his understanding, Aquinas was ahead of his time. His move toward a subjective view of beauty would not be followed until the Enlightenment.

The Renaissance and the Reformation

The Renaissance (1300 to 1650) was an era of intellectual awakening in Europe that bridged the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment and "set the stage for the emergence of the modern world."¹²

During the Renaissance, developments in all the arts—music, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture—and the concurrent development of philosophical theories of art, led to a close connection between speculation on beauty and art theory. In Renaissance philosophy, the objective understanding of beauty is largely maintained, although by the end of the era it begins to undergo some modifications.

Philosophers were not the only ones interested in beauty at this time. It was during the Renaissance that the Protestant Reformation unfolded. An affirmation of the objectivity of beauty was offered by John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where he wrote:

Now if we ponder to what end God created food, we shall find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer. Thus the purpose of clothing, apart from necessity, was comeliness and decency. In grasses, trees, and fruits, apart from their various uses, beauty of appearance and pleasantness of odor [cf. Gen. 2:9]....

And the natural qualities themselves of things demonstrate sufficiently to what end and extent we may enjoy them. Has the Lord clothed the flowers with great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble, with a loveliness that renders them more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use? (*Institutes* 3.10.2)¹³

Here Calvin acknowledges the beauty of smells and sights, and he clearly understands them to be properties of the objects, “flowers...gold and silver, ivory and marble,” rather than merely the subjective opinions of those who encounter them.

While Martin Luther is rightly well known for his posting of the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg Cathedral door, he is less well known for revitalizing congregational singing in Christian worship. As Donald Jay Grout writes, Luther “believed strongly in the educational and ethical power of music and wanted all the congregation to take some part in the music of the services.”¹⁴

The earliest hymn-book of the Reformation was *The Wittenberg Hymnal*, published at Wittenberg in 1524, which contained eight hymns, four of them by Luther. In his Preface to that hymnal Luther wrote:

That it is good and God pleasing to sing hymns is, I think, known to every Christian...these songs were arranged in four parts to give the young—who should at any rate be trained in music and other fine arts—something to wean them away from love ballads and carnal songs and to teach them something of value in their place, *thus combining the good with the pleasing*, as is proper for youth.¹⁵ [emphasis added]

For Luther as for Calvin, “good” and “pleasing” are objective, not subjective, terms. Luther did not say, “combining what I think is good with what the young people of today say they find pleasing to the ear.” Instead he wrote “combining the good with the pleasing, *as is proper*,” linking an objective understanding of both goodness and beauty with behavioral standards for Christians.

III. The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment (1650-1800) heralds the arrival of the modern world. It may be broadly described as an

effort to base epistemology, ethics, and, most important for the purpose of this article, aesthetics, on an “enlightened” rationality. The leaders of the Enlightenment saw themselves as a courageous, elite body of intellectuals who were leading the world out of the long period of irrationality, superstition, and tyranny that they labeled “the Dark Ages.”

For Enlightenment thinkers, the “proof” of any position was found either in reason or in human experience. On those grounds, the Christian doctrine of revelation was emphatically rejected. A major goal was to explain everything in the universe without making any appeal or even any reference to divine authority. As one Enlightenment skeptic wrote, “Theology is only ignorance of natural causes.”¹⁶

This shift in perspective eventually would have a significant impact on Western culture’s understanding of truth and goodness. But first it would undermine the historic understanding of the objectivity of beauty.

The Development of Aesthetics

Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline owes its name to the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), who, in 1735, coined the term from the Greek *aisthanomai*. The ancient Greeks had used the word to mean that which is perceived by the senses. Baumgarten expanded its use to indicate judgments made by the senses instead of the intellect. His goal was to provide an overarching theory for a discipline that he hoped would become as philosophically significant as ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics.¹⁷

An important idea in the development of aesthetics was the concept of taste, which received much attention from Enlightenment philosophers. They pursued a theory of taste, at least in part, as a corrective to the rise of rationalism, particularly as applied to beauty.¹⁸ (Lack of space precludes considering another notable facet of aesthetics in this era, the development of the notion of the sublime, as that which conveys a sense of overwhelming grandeur, awe, or irresistible power.)

Significant contributions to the young discipline of aesthetics were made by Lord Shaftesbury, Frances Hutcheson, and Denis Diderot.

Shaftesbury

Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1671-1713) was one of the first and most influential English-speaking philosophers to deal with questions of beauty. Beauty, for Shaftesbury, involved harmony, proportion, and order, an objective view with overtones of Aristotle. However, Shaftesbury believed that beauty is dependent on the human mind in that beauty is ultimately

dependent on the mind of God, the artist-creator of the universe.¹⁹

A key facet of Shaftesbury's understanding of beauty is his belief that any appreciation of beauty must be "disinterested." That is, true aesthetic appreciation of an object must be independent of any thought of how the object might promote an individual's own interests. "For Shaftesbury the *conditio sine qua non* of our response to beauty is that our perception be disinterested, i.e., unselfish and without bias."²⁰

While Shaftesbury himself understood that human responses to beauty are not the origin of beauty itself, that beauty is independent of human minds, his notion of disinterested beauty would influence those who moved toward a more subjective understanding.

Hutcheson

Frances Hutcheson (1694-1746) was born in Ireland, to a family of Scottish Presbyterians. He studied at the University of Glasgow and after returning to Ireland, taught at the Dublin Academy, studied philosophy on the side, and wrote his influential *An Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725).

In his *Inquiry*, Hutcheson tried to reconcile an objective concept of beauty with the idea that beauty is a subjective, inward experience. He says "the word *beauty* is taken for the idea raised in us," and "a *sense of beauty* for our power of receiving this idea" (*Inquiry*, I, 9, italics in original). Beauty, he wrote, like other sensible ideas, "denotes the perception of some mind" adding that "were there no mind with a sense of beauty to contemplate objects," they could not be called beautiful (*Inquiry*, I, 16).

That Hutcheson understood goodness and beauty to be inseparable is evident not only in the title of his book but in his use of the phrase, "the moral sense of beauty." He said that the sense of an object's beauty simply rises up in an individual (he is not entirely clear on how this occurs), and that this sense is closely related to the pleasure we take in that object.

Hutcheson's view of beauty is not entirely subjective. He indicates that a beautiful thing displays both unity and variety. If a work has too much uniformity it is boring; if it has too much variety it is incoherent. But he does insist that our aesthetic response is influenced by the associations that the thing arouses in our mind, which can lead individuals to have very different aesthetic responses to an object.

Ultimately, for Hutcheson beauty is not a quality of an object but something that arises within an individual

from an innate "aesthetic sense," a conclusion that would influence Immanuel Kant.

Diderot

One of the defining publications of the Enlightenment was the *Encyclopedia* edited by Denis Diderot (1713-1784), which was published between 1751 and 1777 and contained more than 70,000 articles. The *Encyclopedia* heralded the supremacy of the new science, championed tolerance, denounced superstition, and celebrated the merits of deism. Its goal, "in Diderot's words, was to 'change the common way of thinking' through the expansion of knowledge and the development of critical modes of thought."²¹

Diderot himself wrote the article on beauty in which he argued:

we can define [beauty] as that which rouses in our mind the idea of relations. *Beauty* is a notion of the mind, accompanied by pleasure, but *a notion founded on something real, existing outside of us*. The concept of relations comprises those of order, symmetry, proportion; it is a general and abstract concept, but only such a concept can comprise all the various appearances of beauty.²² [emphasis added]

Thus Diderot, writing late in the Enlightenment, still held to the historic notion that beauty was objective, "a notion founded on something real, existing outside of us," even though earlier writers such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson were leaning toward a subjective understanding.

The philosophical debate between objective and subjective views of beauty would be effectively ended for the next 200 years by the work of Immanuel Kant.

Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is arguably the most influential philosopher of the last 200 years. A large part of his work addresses the question "What can we know?" Kant argued that the human mind is not a blank slate waiting to receive raw data from experience. Rather, he said, the knowledge we gain from experience is possible only because the mind itself provides a way of structuring the data it receives. While philosophers like John Locke argued that our perceptions must conform to the object, Kant reversed this proposition, insisting that human minds give objects at least some of their characteristics since objects must conform to human conceptual capacities. In other words, for Kant, the structure of the human mind actually shapes reality.

Kant immodestly suggested that with this insight he had achieved a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy, a complete restructuring of the way human beings must

view our relationship with the members of the universe. In order to understand the world around us we must first understand the structure and the function of the human mind. Thus with Kant, man becomes the center and ultimate arbiter of all knowledge, including the knowledge of the beautiful.

Kant's aesthetic theory is presented in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Building on the work of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, Kant said that the beautiful is that which gives us "disinterested pleasure," contemplative delight free from the active ordering of the understanding. The appreciation of a work of art or a natural wonder is a product of one's own judgment. The apparently universal assessment of some works of art or nature as "beautiful" is the inevitable result of the universality of human nature.

Breaking from Shaftesbury, Kant insisted that all appraisals of beauty are "*judgments of taste.*" Kant drew a sharp distinction between the subjective nature of such aesthetic judgments and the objective nature of sense experience. The judgment of taste, he writes, is one "whose determining ground can be no other than subjective."²³ Thus, for Kant, the enjoyment of beauty takes place in a sphere that is separate from both knowledge and moral experience.

Here we find the intentional, unapologetic separation of beauty from truth and goodness. Kant does think a "beautiful" object should affect all people in a similar way. Nevertheless, as Trevor Hart summarizes, for Kant beauty is subjective in the sense "that it has *nothing whatever to do with the thing's situation in the world beyond our mind*, and everything to do with the very specific affect which this thing has on the *subject* who considers it aesthetically."²⁴ [emphasis added]

In a telling passage from his *Critique of Judgment* Kant declares:

If someone reads me his poem or takes me to a play that in the end fails to please my taste, then he can adduce Batteux or Lessing, or even older and more famous critics of taste, and adduce all the rules they established as proofs that his poem is beautiful.... I will stop my ears, listen to no reasons and arguments, and would rather believe that those rules of the critics are false...than allow that my judgment should be determined by means of *a priori* grounds of proof, since it is supposed to be a judgment of taste and not of the understanding of reason.²⁵

(Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), a German philosopher, playwright, and art critic, had written that Aristotle's aesthetic criteria were as certain in their application to dramatic plays as were Euclid's axioms in the practice of geometry, an emphatic affirmation that

objective standards of beauty had been held from the time of the Greeks through the Renaissance.)

Although he never used the phrase, and would likely have some objections to it, Kant effectively established in the modern mind the belief that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And as Jeremy Begbie observes, in replacing the objective view of beauty with the subjective view, "Kant's work on aesthetic experience encapsulates a characteristic frame of mind which sums up, and to a significant extent has affected, a very large proportion of modern thinking and writing about the arts."²⁶ Kant's work is, if anything, even more influential in the emerging postmodern culture.

IV. Postmodernism

The word "postmodern" first seems to have been used to describe a style of architecture. Moving far beyond this initial use, the term has become a widely, though not universally, accepted label applied to a cluster of intellectual movements that, taken together, distinguish the postmodern age from the premodern and modern eras.

Premodernism held that the universe was rational—that is, that the world in which we live could be understood by educated individuals—and that there was more to reality than could be seen, touched, or tasted. This unseen reality was assumed to include a deity or deities.

Premodernism believed that the universe was moving toward a goal and that there was therefore a larger pattern into which human life was fitted. Premodern metaphysics included belief in an objective reality external to the observer. Premodern epistemology included the correspondence theory of truth and a referential theory of language, which recognized that words reliably refer to external realities.

Modernism, which began with the Enlightenment, retained key features of premodernism but moved beyond it in significant ways. Modernism continued to hold to realism in its metaphysics as well as to the correspondence theory of truth and a referential theory of language.

It left behind, however, premodernism's belief that the universe was moving toward a goal. Modernism insisted that history had no transcendent purpose, no ultimate meaning. Modernism effectively abandoned supernaturalism for naturalism; it exchanged the will of a personal God for an impersonal closed universe ruled by cause-and-effect.

Other identifying marks of modernism include: that human beings are the highest reality; that knowledge is

intrinsically good; that the scientific method is the best, indeed the only, method for acquiring reliable knowledge; that human progress is inevitable; that individuals can obtain objective knowledge of reality; and that human beings are the ultimate source of truth and authority.

The modern era is now drawing to a close. Western culture is in a time of significant cultural transition, one at least as dramatic as the opening of the Enlightenment. The modern era is waning and the postmodern era is dawning.

Characteristics of Postmodernism

While postmodernism is not a monolithic phenomenon, Millard Erickson has identified seven broad characteristics of postmodernism, each of which can be described in terms of denying some facet of modernism or premodernism.

1. Postmodernism denies that knowledge is objective.
2. Postmodernism denies that knowledge is certain.
3. Postmodernism denies inclusive explanatory systems. In the famous formulation of the French sociologist Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernism is characterized by “incredulity toward metanarratives.”
4. Postmodernism denies that knowledge is intrinsically good.
5. Postmodernism denies the modern notion of human perfectibility and its corollary of inevitable human progress.
6. Postmodernism denies the possibility of individual knowledge and replaces it with an ideal of communal knowledge.
7. Postmodernism denies that the scientific method is the only, or even primary, mode of acquiring legitimate knowledge.²⁷

Taken together, these seven denials have enormous implications for the culture and the Church, notably in the areas of goodness, truth, and beauty.

From Objective to Subjective to Relative

For most of human history, certainly since Plato and Aristotle, most people have recognized that goodness, truth, and beauty are objective qualities. Only since the Enlightenment has that historic understanding of beauty been challenged. Only in the last few decades has the view that beauty is subjective become dominant in Western culture.

One contemporary philosopher affirms Kant’s aesthetic theory, “The first necessary condition of a judgment of taste is that it is essentially *subjective*. What this means is that the judgment of taste is based on a feeling of pleasure or displeasure.... The subjectivist doctrine

needs to be refined.... But it must not be abandoned. The doctrine is basically right.”²⁸

In popular discussions of beauty after Kant, which is to say in the cultural conversations that have had the most influence on the undergraduates in my classroom and the members of evangelical congregations, the objective notion of beauty has often gotten confused with the subjective notions of preference and taste.

As both culture and Church are being drawn into an increasingly postmodern intellectual environment, the subjective view of beauty is being extended to include goodness and truth as well. Advancing the subjectivist view is a theory known as “deconstructionism.”

Deconstructionism began as a method of interpreting literature; in effect, its origins lie in the realm of art criticism. For deconstructionists, there is no inherent meaning in any written text, whether a story or a poem, the Bible or the U.S. Constitution. They reject the very possibility of “authorial intent,” the time-honored belief that a writer is able to convey some specified meaning to a reader. Rather, deconstructionists insist that any written work—whether a play by Lessing or the Bible—means only what the *reader*, not what the writer, thinks it means. There is no objective meaning in the text, there are only an infinite number of equally accurate interpretations. Having started with the notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, postmodern theorists have progressed to insisting that truth is in the eye of the beholder as well.

Gene Edward Veith, a keen evangelical observer of postmodernism, writes, “Today it is not just some esoteric and eccentric philosophers who hold this deeply problematic view of truth, but the average man on the street. It is not the lunatic fringe rejecting the very concept of truth, but two-thirds of the American people.”²⁹

The trend Veith has identified may be described as a move from subjectivism to radical relativism. “According to the different forms of radical relativism, basic epistemological notions such as truth, evidence, reason, rationality, and perhaps most importantly, the method of inquiry are *relative* to a context, frame of reference, paradigm, or cognitive scheme.”³⁰

V. Conclusion

Radical relativism now shapes the way many, if not most, Americans, including American evangelicals, understand beauty. The reflexive response that beauty is in the eye of the beholder may not be a conclusion reached by careful study, but it is no less powerful for

being carelessly assumed rather than rigorously defended.

The next section will consider what the Bible teaches about beauty and explore what can happen to the Church's worship and witness when the biblical view of beauty is ignored or rejected.

Beauty and the Believer

Does it really matter if undergraduates in my college classroom or the pastors and lay leaders of your congregation uncritically accept the cultural convention that beauty is ultimately subjective, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder? Yes. The reasons why, and the evidence that supports understanding beauty as an objective quality are the focus of this section.

I. The Three Transcendentals

There are three things that will never die: truth, goodness and beauty. These are the three things we all need, and need absolutely, and know we need, and know we need absolutely.... For these are the only three things that we never get bored with, and never will, for all eternity, because they are three attributes of God, and therefore of God's creation: three transcendental or absolutely universal properties of all reality.³¹

The connections made between truth, goodness, and beauty at the end of the previous section were neither arbitrary nor accidental. From at least the time of Plato and Aristotle through contemporary thinkers, secular philosophers and Christian theologians alike have recognized interrelationships between what are sometimes called "the three transcendentals."

In philosophy, the terms transcendent and transcendental "are used in various senses, all of which, as a rule, have antithetical reference in some way to experience or the empirical order."³² For Christian philosophers and theologians to describe beauty, truth, and goodness as "transcendental" is to affirm that they are neither grounded in nor defined by human experience or any aspect of creation. That means that neither truth, nor goodness, nor beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Instead, each is defined by God. Indeed, each is a quality of God.

Historically, Christians have accepted Jesus' declarations "I am the truth" (John 14:6) and "No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18) as evidence that truth and goodness are qualities of God himself, which

in turn is evidence of the objective nature of truth and goodness.

However, nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus say "God is beauty." Yet the lack of a verse with that phrase does not mean it is unbiblical to say that God is beauty. For nowhere in the Bible do we find the statement "God is Triune," and yet, as Christians have studied Scripture, we have found that God has revealed himself in such a way that we must understand him as a Trinity.

References to the Trinity are often found in Christian considerations of the transcendentals, and not simply because of the numerical identity. In particular, the difficulty philosophers have experienced attempting to craft a precise definition of beauty may be seen as analogous to the difficulties theologians have encountered in effectively describing the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

When we speak of God the Father as Creator or God the Son as Redeemer, the activities described by those titles enable us to form substantive impressions of their person and work. We understand, in our finite, creaturely way, the act of creation. We appreciate what Calvin called "the wonderful exchange"³³ by which Christ accomplished our redemption. It is rather more difficult to form a precise impression of a person (and the Holy Spirit is the third *person* of the Trinity) who is presented to us as wind and fire, as Comforter and Advocate.

Similarly, "the definition of beauty, like beauty itself, is more obscure and mysterious than either truth or goodness."³⁴ That the nature of truth and the nature of goodness seem more amenable to precise definition than does beauty does not mean that beauty cannot be defined.

Comparing the study of the Holy Spirit to the study of beauty is also important because "the Holy Spirit is the point at which the Trinity becomes personal to the believer."³⁵ It is the Holy Spirit who leads us to Jesus: "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:3). It is Jesus who leads us to God the Father: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

In a similar way, our experience of beauty leads us to the good, and goodness leads us to truth. Remove the Holy Spirit from the Trinity, and the Christian's understanding and experience of the Son and the Father will be diminished and distorted. Remove beauty from the transcendentals, and our experience of goodness and truth will suffer as well.

While philosophical and theological exploration can add breadth and depth to our understanding of the nature and role of beauty, what Christians believe about beauty must ultimately be grounded in what Scripture teaches.

II. Biblical Teachings about Beauty

Nowhere in Scripture is there a verse that says “God is beauty.” Yet, beauty is a theme that runs from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22.

In Genesis 1, God looks at his creation and calls it good, a designation that as we have seen is closely connected with beauty. The first use of the word “beauty” in the Bible comes in Genesis 12:11-14:

¹¹ When [Abram] was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman *beautiful* in appearance.... ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very *beautiful*.”

The Old Testament uses seven different Hebrew words to express the idea of beauty. Sarah, Abigail, Rachel, and Esther are noted for their beauty, while David, Absalom, Daniel, and Joseph are described as handsome. In Exodus 28:2 and 31:1-11, God commands craftsmen to create beautiful items in which his people will see his glory and his beauty.

If beauty were not an objective quality, if beauty were merely in the eye of the beholder, these and similar descriptions and instructions would be, at best, indicators of contemporary cultural preference. Perhaps they would simply reflect the writer’s personal opinion.

When Scripture speaks of truth and goodness, evangelical Christians do not automatically assert that these references are to what seems good to the culture at the time the text was written, or to what seems true based on the opinions or experience of the biblical author. Why, then should we assume that when the human authors of the Bible use the word “beauty” they are speaking of a subjective, not an objective, quality?

Nothing in the Old (or New) Testament ever suggests that beauty is subjective, a judgment of taste or a matter of personal preference. Instead, in much the same way that the Bible simply accepts that God exists, without offering any philosophical or even theological arguments to defend the proposition, Scripture clearly and consistently presumes that beauty, like truth and goodness, is an objective quality.

Isaiah 28:1-6 is a passage where that assumption becomes explicit. There, the tribe of Ephraim is compared to a drunkard. Ephraim’s “proud crown” is its capital city, Samaria. In vv. 1 and 4 we find this proud

crown described in terms of “the fading flower of its *glorious beauty*.”

Note the objectivity of the phrase “glorious beauty.” Isaiah does not say, “the fading flower that I personally happen to believe is quite beautiful.” He does not say “the fading flower that some of the people who live there describe as beautiful.” He does not say “the fading flower that thinks of itself as being beautiful.” No, he makes a simple statement of fact: “the fading flower of its glorious beauty.”

Further testimony to the objective nature of beauty comes in v. 5, which, in the Hebrew text is poetry, not prose: “In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people.”

While much English poetry is characterized by rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry makes no use of rhyme and only limited use of meter. Instead, Hebrew poetry relies on a technique known as poetic parallelism, where one phrase is echoed or amplified by the phrase that follows. Note the parallelism in v. 5: “In that day the Lord of hosts will be *a crown of glory*, and *a diadem of beauty*, to the remnant of his people.”

What is a diadem? Simply another word for crown. That is one example of poetic parallelism. But the key connection in these two phrases is that between glory and beauty: “*a crown of glory*, and *a diadem of beauty*.”

The Hebrew word for glory (*kabod*) comes from a root that means “weight” or “importance.” Although sometimes used of human beings, in the Old Testament, “glory” is most frequently applied to God. Specifically, this word is used to indicate the invisible God’s visible manifestation of himself to his people, as, for example, in Exodus 33:22 and Deuteronomy 5:22. In the New Testament, God’s glory appears supremely in Jesus.

The word “beauty” is found only occasionally in the New Testament. James writes. “For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes” (James 1:11, ESV). Peter speaks to wives about the “imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” (I Peter 3:4, ESV). Jesus told his disciples, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28b-29, ESV).

The beauty of the flower and a wife’s quiet spirit, the visual appeal of the lilies, and the visible splendor of Solomon all support an understanding of beauty as a quality of objects, not a feeling elicited in subjects.

III. Beauty and the Glory of God

In his insightful article, “*Theosis* and Beauty,” Richard Viladesau makes the connection between beauty and God’s glory:

Although the concept of beauty itself plays little part in Hebrew thought or in the New Testament, much of the theologically significant content of the idea of beauty is contained in the scriptural idea of God’s glory.³⁶

That the idea of beauty is contained in the idea of God’s glory undergirds the Christian’s affirmation that beauty is objective, not subjective. Throughout both Testaments, God’s glory is visible and objective. God’s glory is not in the eye of the beholder. God’s glory is a part of who God is. Hans Urs von Balthasar specifically connects these concepts by describing glory as “transcendental beauty.”³⁷

Isaiah 28:5 shows that the terms glory and beauty are synonymous: both objectively belong to the nature of the object. God’s glory is a part of who God is. The beauty of a painting or a symphony is objectively a part of the painting or the symphony, not merely an individual’s decision about it or response to it.

The connection between beauty and the glory of God, found throughout the Old Testament, finds its fullest expression in the Incarnation of God’s only begotten Son: “we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Von Balthasar writes, “In that [Jesus] is the visibility of God...the Incarnation of the Word of God becomes the absolute canon of all aesthetics.”³⁸

To say that Jesus is the “canon [from a Greek word meaning rule or standard] of all aesthetics” is not to say that his visible manifestation of God’s glory gives us a detailed description of every possible sight, scent, or sound that may properly be described as beautiful. It does give us the knowledge that such determinations are possible.

After all, we do not have to know all facets and dimensions of truth to know that God is truth. We do not have to have exhaustive knowledge of all the ways in which God’s goodness manifests itself to know that God is good. Since we have not required that God give us a list of all possible true statements, or a list of all possible good actions, must we require such a list of what is and is not beautiful before we are willing to acknowledge that God is beauty and that, therefore, beauty, like goodness and truth, is a quality with objective standards?

Following theologians like Hermann Bavinck, we may derive certain general principles from God’s very being

and suggest that beauty includes: “the agreement between content and form, idea and appearance; in harmony, proportion, unity in differentiation, organization; in splendor, glory, radiant perfection,”³⁹ all terms rightly used in descriptions of the Triune God’s person and work.

Obviously these few paragraphs merely hint at the rich rewards of an exploration of God’s glory. (Von Balthasar wrote seven volumes on the topic and, I suspect, did not feel his treatment of the subject was exhaustive.) My hope here has simply been to establish the biblical and theological rationale for linking beauty and God’s glory as additional evidence supporting the objective nature of beauty.

IV. Beauty and Christian Worship

Although Scripture, Christian theology, and even secular philosophy have testified for millennia that beauty is objective, the Enlightenment notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder has trickled down from secular culture into many evangelical congregations. Worship is one aspect of the Church’s life in which the denial of the objective nature of beauty is having an unfortunate impact.

Beauty and Church Art and Architecture

Should the beauty of the building where we worship be an important consideration for Christians and congregations? What, if any, type of artwork is appropriate in or around the building that houses a worshipping congregation? Paintings? Sculpture? Banners? Stained glass windows? A cross? All of the above? None at all? Why or why not?

To that list of questions add one more: When, if ever, has your congregation engaged in sustained conversation about these or similar concerns?

As John Hugo notes, “In both the tabernacle and the Solomonic temple, artistic design, metal craft, sculpture, architecture, and textile arts were employed with God’s blessing and special inspiration (Exodus 31:3-11; 1 Chronicles 28:11-21). These examples show that God has uses for the artistic skills of people and that art works are fit vehicles for serving him.”⁴⁰

The earliest surviving works of specifically Christian art date from the third century and are found in Roman catacombs. After emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in A.D. 313, works of Christian art, and buildings designed for Christian worship, become more prominent.

In the twelfth century, Abbot Suger wrote about the beauty of the artwork in the recently rebuilt Abbey of Saint-Denis, near Paris:

When...the loveliness of the many colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial... then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven, and that by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.⁴¹

That the beauty of the artworks and the furnishings of the sanctuary “transported” the abbot to a “higher world” speaks to the power of beautiful art. Throughout the Middle Ages, an era when most Christians were functionally illiterate, much of the artwork in churches was designed to tell the Christian story to those who could not read. And as Abbot Suger testifies, even apart from its message, the inherent beauty of such art had the effect of drawing souls toward God.

Trying to correct Roman Catholic theological excesses, some Protestant Reformers advocated stripping their sanctuaries of all works of art. Many today would argue that was an overreaction. But whether due to ambivalence or simple lack of awareness, the place of art in and around Protestant sanctuaries is a topic that receives far less consideration than it merits.

What is true of the inside of our church buildings is true of the outside as well. Again looking back to the medieval era, Romanesque cathedrals (named for their use of the Roman arch) had thick walls with small windows, creating solid but not very tall buildings. They were laid out in the form of a cross, a massive expression of the centrality of that symbol for Christian faith and life. Later the flying buttresses of Gothic cathedrals led to taller, more ornate structures.

What term might best describe the prevailing architectural style of churches being built in America today? The label “big box” seems appropriate. The prevailing model of church design seems to owe more to the nearest Super Wal-Mart or basketball arena than to St. Sernin, Notre Dame, or Chartres.

If the American architect Louis Sullivan was correct in his assessment that “form ever follows function,” the form of much contemporary church architecture suggests that the function is to keep masses of people comfortably seated for brief periods so that they may be entertained. While many contemporary evangelical criticisms of medieval catholicism are well founded,

might we not learn something from their understanding of church architecture?

Beauty and Liturgy

In some Christian circles today, especially those inclined toward contemporary styles of worship, one of the harshest criticisms that can be leveled against the worship of a Christian congregation or denomination is to describe it as “liturgical.”

The English word “liturgy” combines the Greek *leos*, meaning people, and *ergos*, meaning work. Thus, at a literal level, liturgy is the work of the people. As the term is widely used today, especially with negative overtones, it refers to a worship service that is more structured rather than spontaneous, a service more likely to take place in Presbyterian, Lutheran, or Methodist rather than in Baptist or Pentecostal congregations.

Some argue that any significant level of structure in a worship service, particularly using hymns and prayers that have served the Church for generations or even centuries, inhibits the genuine worship of God. Others, however, find that such structure enables them to worship freely; that there is a beauty to words that have been prayed and proclaimed for centuries, even millennia. Indeed, it may be argued that one reason those prayers and hymns have been preserved by the Church is that they are objectively beautiful since inherent within them are qualities that transcend the trends and fads of constantly evolving cultural standards of taste and preference.

One writer describes Christian liturgy as “the highest art. It is holy art. It leads us beyond the horizon of the finite and the immanent to the anchor of all being and the root of all meaning: God.” “Liturgy [is] the supreme undertaking of corporate devotional beauty, an undertaking meant not merely to discipline, inspire, inform, instruct, and orient, but also to transform worshippers in an encounter with God.”⁴²

In an intriguing article, architect J. David Richen observes: “Many of the qualities that comprise beautiful architecture can apply to liturgy:

- A sense of balance and harmony
- Nothing showy or out of place
- Avoidance of monotonous repetition
- Authenticity of expression
- An underlying structure of integrity
- Avoidance of personal conceits and idiosyncrasies
- Creative use of rhythm, meter and sequence.”⁴³

Space does not permit the further exploration of these observations except to say that there may be more connections between where we worship and how we

worship than most Christians today may expect, and that these connections may find their common ground in the objective nature of beauty.

Beauty and Church Music

Many important questions may be asked about music in Christian services of worship, including: Why do we sing hymns and choruses in church on Sunday mornings? Why do we include instrumental preludes, offertories and postludes? Why does the whole congregation (at least in more liturgical churches) sing the doxology and the Gloria Patri yet only the choir sings the anthem? Who should choose the music for, and who should sing and play the music in, our worship services?

Unfortunately, in recent years, most of the discussions I have heard about music in Christian services of worship have largely ignored such fundamental questions as who, why, and how and instead have focused on such secondary questions as what and which: What music do we sing: traditional hymns or contemporary choruses? Which, if any, instruments are appropriately used in a church: organs and pianos or guitars and drums?

Questions of what and which are not unimportant. But they are secondary, best addressed only after considering the who, why, and how of music in the Church. Psalm 33:1-3 helps us answer these foundational questions.

Shout for joy in the Lord, *O you righteous!* Praise befits the upright. Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; *make melody to him* with the harp of ten strings! *Sing to him* a new song; *play skillfully* on the strings, with loud shouts. (Psalm 33:1-3, ESV)

Who is to sing and play instruments in the worship of God? The righteous, the chosen people of God. Why is this commandment given specifically to them? In his commentary on this psalm John Calvin answers succinctly: “because they alone are capable of proclaiming the glory of God. Unbelievers, who have never tasted his goodness, cannot praise him from the heart.”

Who is the intended audience of this music? God. “Make melody to *him*...sing to *him*.” In the historic understanding of Christian worship, God is the primary audience and the entire congregation is the principal choir. A smaller subset of this choir may be called upon to take a leadership role in singing and making melody (“play skillfully” answers the How? question). But all of God’s people are to be involved in God’s praises.

Why? Because “praise befits the upright.” Again quoting Calvin’s commentary, “God creates for himself a church in the world by gracious adoption, for the

express purpose that his name may be duly praised by witnesses suitable for such a work. [T]he real meaning of the clause, *Praise befits the upright*, is, that there is no exercise in which they can be better employed.”

Answers to the questions of the who, why, and how of church music are inevitably informed by our understanding of the nature of beauty. If God is the audience, if praise befits the upright, and if we are called to sing and play skillfully, then choosing, singing, and playing not just any music but beautiful music must be the goal of all involved. This does not mean that only highly trained professionals may be church musicians. It does mean that all who choose the hymns and anthems, preludes and postludes, and all who sing and make melody are to do their best with the abilities God has given them.

Unfortunately, in many congregations today there is a tendency to overlook Psalm 33 and to look at music in the church only through the lens of what would please people who, congregational leaders assume without any evidence, are not coming to their church simply because they do not like the style of the music. The question of how we rightly worship God has been made subservient to the question of how we can get more people into the pews (or folding metal chairs).

Certainly music can be a valuable component of a congregation’s outreach to its community. There are reasons (not all of them good) why music is a prominent feature of evangelistic services. But in our services of corporate worship, the primary choir is the whole congregation and the primary audience is God. If we never learn, or if we choose to ignore this biblical truth about music in the church; if we decide that church music’s ultimate goal is to entertain non-Christians in the style to which they are accustomed, if we forego the beautiful for the popular, we will have done a grave disservice to our congregations and to our God.

V. Beauty and Christian Witness

Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with her in an act of mysterious vengeance.⁴⁴

Few if any evangelical Christians would openly suggest that their congregations abandon theological considerations of truth or goodness. The dangers of pluralism and relativism have been made clear by many pastors, authors, and educators, and we are rightly concerned about these issues.

Unfortunately, few Christians seem as concerned to consider beauty's importance in the life and work of the Church. The twentieth-century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote in the opening of his seven-volume systematic theology titled *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetic*:

We here attempt to develop a Christian theology in light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful (*pulchrum*). The introduction will show how impoverished Christian thinking has been by the growing loss of this perspective which once so strongly informed theology. It is not, therefore our intent to yield to some whim and force theology into a little traveled side-road, but rather to restore theology to a main artery which it has abandoned.... It is true, however, that the transcendentals are inseparable, and that neglecting one can only have a devastating effect on the others.⁴⁵

The accuracy of von Balthasar's concern that separating beauty from goodness and truth can be devastating can be readily documented. For as the Church has accepted the culture's assertion that beauty is subjective, it has found itself increasingly willing to accept the culture's claims that goodness and truth are also relative. One brief example of each will have to suffice.

Separating Beauty from Goodness

In 1960, Joseph Fletcher, an Episcopal priest, published a book that became hugely influential in the culture and in many Christian congregations, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*.⁴⁶ At the heart of situation ethics is Fletcher's argument that certain "moral principles," specifically the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, may, indeed must, be disobeyed if the situation calls for such disobedience.

One of Fletcher's most notable applications of this principle is adultery. In certain cases, Fletcher argues, committing adultery, which the Bible calls "sin," is not only not sin but the good, loving, God-honoring thing to do. According to Fletcher, every individual has to base each decision whether or not to commit adultery on an immediate perception of the situation, not on archaic rules and regulations about universal absolutes of right and wrong behavior.

In other words, for Fletcher, and for the individuals, congregations, and denominations that have embraced his ethical prescription, goodness is in the eye of the beholder. Those who have followed mainline denominational, or even national, news over the past few years, have seen how the claim that goodness is in the eye of the beholder has been aggressively extended from heterosexual adultery to homosexual behavior.

In an analysis posted on his website on March 6, 2009, the evangelical pollster George Barna reports, "One-third of all adults (34%) believe that moral truth is absolute and unaffected by the circumstances." In other words, two-thirds of adult Americans now accept Fletcher's ethics. Of more concern, Barna notes that "Slightly less than half of the born again adults (46%) believe in absolute moral truth."⁴⁷

Why has situation ethics, an emphatic rejection of the Bible's revelation about absolute standards of right and wrong, made such headway not only in the culture but in many mainline congregations and denominations? Doubtless there are many explanations. One may well be that an uncritical acceptance of the unbiblical notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder has made it easier to accept the equally unbiblical belief that goodness is also in the eye of the beholder.

If, through ignorance or apathy, contemporary Christians abandon the historic Christian teaching about the objective nature of beauty, we will find it much more difficult to defend biblical standards of right and wrong. By yielding to Kant's aesthetics, we have become much more susceptible to Fletcher's ethics.

Separating Beauty from Truth

Similarly, and perhaps even more visibly, the notion of objective standards of truth is under attack in both the culture and the Church. Phrases like, "That may be true for you" or "That's not my truth" are filtering through the culture into our congregations.

The June 2008 issue of *Faith and Freedom* has the following quote from a resource designed by self-identified "progressive Christians," for a nationwide event they dubbed "Pluralism Sunday." The Welcome Statement from this resource reads in part: "By calling ourselves progressive, we mean we are Christians who recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us."⁴⁸

Read those final phrases again: "their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us." For those who have "progressed" beyond Christian orthodoxy, not only beauty and goodness but truth as well are in the eye of the beholder.

God sets the standards for truth as he does for goodness and beauty. Christians may choose to ignore those standards. We may even deny that they exist. But when we do, we put ourselves in the position of the Samaritans who ignored Isaiah's prophecy: we make ourselves ripe for the picking, ready and willing to be overrun by a culture that insists that beauty *is* in the eye

of the beholder, that goodness depends on the situation, and that truth may be defined and redefined by anyone and everyone.

Reuniting the Transcendentals

Commenting on von Balthasar's assessment of the essential relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty, John W. de Gruchy says, "If Balthasar is right, then the neglect of beauty has been devastating not only for the other transcendentals but also for Christianity."⁴⁹

Not only must Christians today understand why it is important that the transcendentals remain connected, we must also recover our understanding of how they are connected. As Peter Kreeft writes, "The *order* of these three transcendentals of truth, goodness and beauty is ontologically founded. Truth is defined by Being... Goodness is defined by truth... And beauty is defined by goodness, objectively real goodness, not by subjective desire or pleasure or feeling or imagination, all of which should conform to it."

Kreeft continues, "However, the psychological order is the reverse of the ontological order. As we know Being through first sensing appearances, so we are attracted to goodness first by its beauty, we are attracted to truth by its goodness, and we are attracted to Being by its truth."⁵⁰ Kreeft's assessment points to beauty's role as a witness to God in a postmodern world.

Beauty as Evangelist

Karl Barth writes, "If we can and must say that God is beautiful, to say this is to say how he enlightens and convinces and persuades us."⁵¹

Barth does not say that God is beautiful in the sense that human beings apply their own subjective standards of preference and taste to God. Rather, according to Barth, God is the "basis and standard of everything that is beautiful and of all ideas that are beautiful."⁵²

Jeremy Begbie develops this theme: "Much cultural theory would suggest that in the decades to come, the arts will play an ever more active role in shaping the way we come to terms with the world... As the western Churches face the enormous challenge of how the faith 'once delivered' is going to be redelivered in a society increasingly alienated from the institutional Church and increasingly ignorant about the Christian faith, to neglect the arts' potential would be curious, perhaps even irresponsible."⁵³

To be sure, in a culture where the notion of beauty has been deeply distorted, the notion of beauty as that which draws people toward God may be not merely disbelieved, but even deemed dangerous. But awareness of the risk is longstanding. "Augustine emphasized the

beauty of God and the role of desire for the beautiful in drawing us to God—but also the danger that beauty on its lower levels may distract us from its ultimate source and goal."⁵⁴

That beauty may be misunderstood and misused should not deter us from reclaiming its significance any more than fallacious arguments or moral failures should deter contemporary Christians from defending biblical notions of truth and goodness. In an age where goodness has been relativized and truth has been devalued, beauty may be poised to reclaim a preeminent role in leading men and women into a personal relationship with the Triune God.

VI. Final Considerations

In a world without beauty—even if people cannot dispense with the word and constantly have it on the tip of their tongues in order to abuse it—in a world which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it; in such a world the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why *it* must be done and not rather its alternative, evil....

In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. In other words, syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses or computers which infallibly spew out an exact number of answers by the minute. But the logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone. The very conclusions are no longer conclusive.⁵⁵

Implicit in von Balthasar's words is the criticism that those who, for whatever reason, have effectively abandoned an objective understanding of beauty will find that neither goodness nor truth can long remain good or true. And yet, in this criticism is an affirmation of the central and inseparable role of these three transcendentals in worship and witness of the Church and a challenge for today's Christians to seek a deeper understanding of an appreciation of the role that beauty plays in the Church's life and work.

It seems appropriate to end this article as Johann Sebastian Bach ended many of his most beautiful compositions: S.D.G. *Soli Deo Gloria*. To the Glory of God Alone.

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