

The Beauty of God

by
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What is the essence of beauty? Relativism is the general malaise of our time. An increasing percentage of the so-called intelligentsia holds that there are no absolutes. Churches have also been seduced by the same unbiblical thinking. They have accepted the modernist position that beauty is purely a matter of preference. They maintain that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” This is the emotional or psychological theory which locates beauty in the response of the audience. Beauty, however, is a divine force with which to be reckoned. Even the unbelieving classical music lover may unconsciously know something of the profundity of beauty through common grace of which the professing Christian remains ignorant: namely, that beauty is a significant element of God’s nature and creation—that beauty is a reflection of the character and ways of God which can be objectively evaluated. As such, a God-centered view of beauty locates beauty within certain objective qualities that are real and not just imagined.

In a Christian view of aesthetics, F. Duane Lindsey identifies three qualities: (1) unity or integrity—a well-knit internal unity, completeness, or whole; (2) proportion or harmony—an orderly, harmonious relation and arrangement of the parts; (3) splendor—a definite capacity for manifesting its pattern. These three qualities result in unity without monotony and variety without chaos. God, in His person, perfections, purpose, and performance, exemplifies the qualities of unity, proportion, and splendor. The triune God is indeed the supreme example of unity without monotony and variety without chaos.¹

The Biblical Reality of God’s Beauty

The Word of God uses a rich variety of words to express the concept of the beauty of God: beauty, excellency, glory, honor, and majesty.

Job 40:9-10 Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him? 10 Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency; and array thyself with glory and beauty.

Ps 8:1 A Psalm of David. O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.

Ps 8:9 O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth

Ps 45:2-4 Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever. 3 Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty. 4 And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things.

Ps 145:5 I will speak of the glorious honour of thy majesty, and of thy wondrous works.

Ps 145:10-12 All thy works shall praise thee, O LORD; and thy saints shall bless thee. 11 They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power; 12 To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom.

Isa 24:14 They shall lift up their voice, they shall sing for the majesty of the LORD, they shall cry aloud from the sea.

Isa 26:10 Let favour be showed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the LORD.

Isa 35:2 It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the LORD, and the excellency of our God.

Zec 9:16-17 And the LORD their God shall save them in that day as the flock of his people: for they shall be as the stones of a crown, lifted up as an ensign upon his land. 17 For how great is his goodness, and how great is his beauty!

God's beauty is inherently connected to His character, name, excellency, and majesty. The whole of God's unchanging attributes forms the objective standard and truth deposit by which all things claiming to be beautiful can be evaluated. Anything not like God is ungodly! When one refers to "beautiful" music, immediately the infinite, unchanging attributes of God must be called to mind. Such an approach is in opposition to the autonomous mind set of the New Evangelicalism as exemplified by Harold Best, Dean of Music at Wheaton College, who said in *Music Through The Eyes of Faith* that "there is nothing un-Christian or anti-Christian about any kind of music" (p. 52). He later reinforced that idea stating, "The Christian is free of the moral nothingness of music ..." (p. 59). This is Best at his "Worst."

Contrary to Best, we are to sing unto the Lord in the beauty of holiness rather than surrender to every artistic whim produced by those whose have abandoned the principles of common grace and have allowed corruption to influence their artistic creations. The Scriptures are clear concerning this point:

2 Chr 20:21 And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed singers unto the LORD, and that should praise the beauty of holiness.

Ps 7:17 I will praise the LORD according to his righteousness: and will sing praise to the name of the LORD most high.

Ps 138:5 Yea, they shall sing in the ways of the LORD: for great is the glory of the LORD.

1 Chr 16:29 Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come before him: worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

Ps 27:4 One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

Ps 45:11 So shall the King greatly desire thy beauty: for he is thy Lord; and worship thou him.

Ps 29:2 Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

Ps 50:2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined.

Isa 28:5 In that day shall the LORD of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people.

We are to sing unto the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Holiness literally means “to cut, to separate, to be distinct, apartness” or “set apart” [as sacred by God’s presence] (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, p. 871). Holiness refers to the majestic transcendence of God by emphasizing the Creator/creature distinction. Second, holiness means that God is separate in His being from all that is evil, impure, and defiled. God’s own nature defines beauty rather than mere human subjectivity. Holiness is God’s self-affirming purity. Nothing outside of God, Himself, can define it. In the sheer weight (glory) of God’s almighty presence men are commanded to worship God in the majestic beauty of holiness. Since beauty is defined by God’s being, it does not reside solely in the mind of the beholder. It exists first and foremost in the mind of God. Man, having been created in the image of God, is obligated by his creaturely existence (*vis a’ vis* “Creator”) to reflect the beauty of God in holiness, righteousness, wisdom (the skilled application of God’s truth), and knowledge. Beauty must be determined by the objective character of God and not by the subjective impulses of unregenerate men who have resisted the common grace of God.

As one applies a biblical concept of beauty to musical worship, Christian music should not blur the Creator/creature distinction by communicating undue familiarity with or an inaccurate description of God in the lyrical text. Neither should sacred music enhance an irreverent, sensual mood or atmosphere by means of the musical composition and performance style. Furthermore, Christian music should be free from all aspects of indecency and evil in its cultural associations (Rom 12:1-2).

In addition to God’s holiness, the composition and performance of Christian music must be righteous. Righteousness corresponds to that which is right. Righteousness entails rectitude of action and disposition according to the perfect standard of holiness. Righteous music operates according to God’s self-affirming purity which sets Himself above His creation and apart from anything that defiles. There must be righteousness in musical text, composition, and performance style as interpreted by the objective, timeless principles of God’s Word which are rooted in the unchanging, absolute character of God. Man cannot operate unilaterally on his own autonomy without being an affront to his Creator. To do so is sheer, unmitigated idolatry. True beauty, which is the basis for all the arts, exists originally and eternally in the mind and nature of God. What is beautiful? Whatever God has said is beautiful, could say is beautiful, or would say is beautiful according to the unchanging principles of His Word. God commands us to mirror His holiness and perfection in all we do. To abandon such a standard only invites the severe displeasure of God and the religious deception of man. Holiness as an integral part of beauty is

the standard for sacred music. Righteousness is the corresponding action which must conform to the standard.

The world in common grace recognizes that man's ability to communicate through artistic endeavor is unique among the living creatures on this planet. Neurologist, Frank Wilson, in *Tone Deaf & All thumbs?* said, "We are natural musicians because of the special nature of the human brain. ... Our responsiveness to music, however, like our responsiveness to language (is) ... unique in the animal kingdom" (pp. 2, 68). Though he does not recognize the theological reason for this unique ability to artistically communicate, Wilson has learned something of God through natural revelation. God is an artistic being Who is the source of true and perfect beauty. Man is made in the image of God. By virtue of both the common and saving grace of God, man is able to replicate the beauty of God on a finite level. However, because man is also a totally depraved being, more often than not he uses his creative gifts from God in a corrupt manner to produce art which reflects the works of the sinful nature rather than the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5). Professing believers who compose or perform "ugly" or inappropriate artistic expressions are either self-deceived concerning their relationship with Christ, ignorant of Satan's devices, or perhaps temporarily walking in the flesh.

God so identifies Himself with beauty that He declares Himself to be our new song. The psalmist and Isaiah both affirm this idea:

Ps 118:14 The LORD is my strength and song, and is become my salvation.

Isa 12:2 Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.

When we sing and perform with our instruments for the Lord, we are to image, mirror, and reflect to our listeners who God is and what He is like.

The Historical Recognition of God's Beauty

Certainly one of the distinguishing marks of Jonathan Edwards' theology in relation to the history of Christian thought is his radical elevation of beauty to preeminence among the divine perfections. Augustine, however, reflected on the nature of beauty centuries earlier. In his *Confessions* he said:

Too late I have loved you, O Beauty, so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you. Behold, you were within me, while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and, as a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. They kept me far from you, *those fair things which, if they were not in you, would not exist at all* (italics added).

Beauty is the perfection of God's divine being. God alone is the essence of beauty in an original and exclusive sense. Beauty does not and cannot exist as an entity outside of God. God does not conform to beauty. Rather, beauty conforms to God, because apart from God beauty has no existence.

Jonathan Edwards expanded greatly upon the thoughts of Augustine. For Edwards, beauty is not only that "wherein the truest idea of divinity does consist," but also "it is first among the

perfections of God; it constitutes in itself the perfection of all the other divine attributes” (*Religious Affections*, p. 298). He argued that the source of beauty is God Himself. God’s beauty is seen in His moral virtue and in the agreement (unity) of the Godhead. Edwards said these qualities transfer to inanimate things in a *secondary beauty*, consisting in “mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quality, and visible end or design; called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, [and] harmony.” Examples of such are “the mutual agreement of the various sides of a square, the beautiful proportion of the various parts of the human body, and ... *the sweet mutual consent and agreement of the various notes in a melodious tune* (italics added) [*Essay Concerning the Nature of True Value*, pp. 62-64]. Edwards continues:

It has pleased God to establish a law of nature by virtue of which the uniformity and mutual correspondence of a beautiful plant, the respect which the various parts of a regular building seem to have to one another, and their agreement and union, *and the consent or concord of the various notes of a melodious tune* (italics added), should appear beautiful because therein is some image of the consent of mind, the different members of a society or system of intelligent beings, sweetly united in a benevolent agreement of heart. ... And here I should further observe ... that God has so constituted nature, that the presenting of this inferior beauty, especially in those kinds of it which have the greatest resemblance of the primary beauty, as the harmony of sounds, and the beauties of nature, have a tendency to assist those whose hearts are under the influence of a truly virtuous temper, to dispose them to the exercises of divine love, and enliven in them a sense of spiritual beauty (ibid.).

Unregenerate people do not appreciate beauty because they perceive this analogy; rather, their appreciation of beauty is directly attributed to the common grace of God as opposed to the saving grace of God. In summation, Beauty cannot originate from anyone other than God Himself, and it is a window into heaven for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see (regenerated hearts). ***What Christians call beautiful, therefore, speaks volumes to a watching world about Whom we call beautiful.*** God’s beauty is self-evident and speaks for itself through its intrinsic power of attraction to a mind not surrendered to the noetic effects of sin.

The Theological Implications of God’s Beauty

God is beautiful in His person as seen in the integrity of His being. God’s self-revelation corresponds to what He actually is. The tri-unity of God culminates in absolute beauty. The Son is the perfect image of the Father, the “express image of His person” (Heb 1:3), and the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Likewise, the Holy Spirit perfectly testifies of the Son (John 15:26). In the incarnation the Son reveals the beauty of God in a special way and to a supreme degree through the personal (hypostatic) union of two such diverse natures as deity and humanity in one person. Here, we have perfect unity without monotony, diversity without chaos, accompanied by perfect proportion and splendor.

God is beautiful in His perfections. God’s attributes unite in perfect harmony. There is no greater variety than God’s infinite perfections, nor a more intensive unity. Though holiness governs all of God’s attributes (Isa 6), the Bible does not exalt one attribute of God to the

expense of the others. They form a glorious, harmonious whole without any inherent contradiction. The absence of chaos or monotony in His divine attributes amplifies His absolute beauty.

God is beautiful in His purpose. God has an eternal plan which embraces all that comes to pass (Rom 9:8-24; Eph 1:4-42; John 6:22-66). Based on His own holy and wise counsel, God governs, efficaciously or permissively, every detail of His universe in accordance to His perfect and unchanging plan. The chief aim of His purpose is to bring glory to Himself which is the aim of all beauty.

God is beautiful in His performances. In the beginning each Person of the Godhead perfectly and harmoniously exercised His role in the Creation of the universe, earth, and man. The product, prior to the fall, was absolutely beautiful including a natural order which reflected the glory of God and culminated in man who was made in the the unmarred image of God (Gen 1:3). The mistake many have made at this point is to seek beauty in God's creation and miss the beauty of the Creator (cf. Rom 1:18ff). God's performance in redemption exemplifies the true qualities of His beauty. Salvation is beautiful in that it involves the perfect and harmonious actions of the triune God. The product of salvation is beautiful in that it blots out the ugliness of sin and restores the believer in the image of God which was marred at the fall. The believer is a new man created by God in righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge. Finally, salvation culminates in the believer being conformed to the image of Christ through glorification (Rom 8:28-29)—a perfect, yet, finite replica of the infinite beauty of God.

The Practical Response to God's Beauty

"Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us" (Ps 90:17).

God's beauty must regulate our worship in its artistic expression, if we are to obey the admonition of the psalmist. The objective view of beauty evaluates the arts on the basis of excellence of craft and the admirability of the object, because God is perfectly excellent, virtuous, and admirable. The subjective view of beauty evaluates artistic expression on the basis of human experience alone. Immanuel Kant, father of the Enlightenment, maintained that beauty was solely subjective, and that art could be considered beautiful only if it produced the *desired feelings* in the audience (*Critique of Judgment*). Kant's ideas have deep roots in modern culture. Since Kant denied the objective reality of God, he also denied the reality of objective beauty. To Kant, God was whatever one "postulated" Him to be; likewise, beauty was whatever the individual wanted it to be. Kant worshiped at the shrine of man's autonomy. Since the concept of God was relative and subjective according to Kant, then beauty was also completely relative and subjective. Relativism encourages us to make choices based primarily on what makes us *feel good*, rather than making choices on the basis of excellence and admirability (Phil 4:8). We must learn to enjoy that which is admirable and excellent through study, discipline, proper exposure, and teaching.

C. S. Lewis wrote in *An Experiment in Criticism*, "the first demand art makes on us is to surrender." Art is communication and we must carefully analyze artistic expression to know the object of our surrender. Unity (without monotony), diversity (without chaos), proportion (without distortion), and splendor (the ability to manifest one's perfections and attributes) describe the

object, not the listener. They are qualities describing artistic expression and either they are there or not there. Just as a reader must have an accurate knowledge of language to appreciate fine books, so a good listener must have a proper knowledge of music to appreciate fine composition and performance. In our post-modern, pop-culture age people who are enslaved to their own autonomy tend to gravitate to the lowest common denominator in the arts. As a result of this entropy, good, excellent, virtuous, and admirable artistic expression is discarded or ignored. Our culture is so steeped in pop music which requires so little of us, we may soon forget there is anything else to be known other than the trite or profane. If we understand, for instance, that it takes a musician fifteen to twenty years in order to learn to play the cello well, shouldn't we be willing to learn to listen well? With an objective, God-centered view of beauty *vis a'vis* a subjective, man-centered view, we will understand what is genuinely good when the artistic expression doesn't appeal to that complex of fleshly attributes known as our sinful nature, giving great works of music the opportunity to speak to us over time.

An objective view of beauty also protects our sensibilities from lethargy and carnality. It takes little patience or work to enjoy the things on which Americans spend most of their time. Television sitcoms, pop music, fast food, and ubiquitous advertising are all designed to be easily digested by the general public. These things require little if anything of us. As a result, we become lethargic, and our attention span decreases, ignoring our responsibility to see as God sees, hear as God hears, and perceive as God perceives.

A theocentric (God-centered) view of beauty also develops a sense of "taste." Some think taste simply means "personal preference," but the Miriam-Webster Dictionary defines taste as "the power or practice of discerning or enjoying whatever constitutes excellence, especially in the fine arts." As such, taste is a facet of wisdom, the skillful application of God's truth, and the ability to distinguish what has value from what does not. Learning to enjoy what is admirable is to improve our tastes and a sure way of glorifying God for the gifts He has given our artists. Animals do not possess "taste" and appreciate beauty; it is a gift to men and women made in His image (Gen 1:27-29).

Some mistakenly equate subjective enjoyment with objective excellence. There is such a thing as a counterfeit aesthetic experience, that is, the feeling that you have experienced something profound when all you have really experienced is a fake. Whether it is a telephone commercial on TV that brings a tear to the eye or a pop song that manipulates our emotions, entertainers have learned how to get a cheap response from their audience when nothing admirable or excellent has been offered. Modern Christian entertainers often offer a sensual or purely emotional experience, and the naive mistake it for a spiritual experience. This is the artistic equivalent of fast food—all the fun of real food with none of the nutrition.

Pop culture, unfortunately, is determining the worship in many "evangelical" churches. The result is that we are increasingly offering cheap, sensational, sensually-erotic or superficial Christian music which at best is smarmy and "feel good" or at worst is an offense to the beauty of God. There is a creeping banality in our musical choices. The main requirement in today's contemporary worship is popularity without admirability. If the most important thing in music is that we "feel good," what is to stop us from following our appetites for their own sake in other areas. When left to ourselves, our sensibilities tend toward the low, debased, superficial, trendy, and eventually the depraved (Rom 1:18-31).

Why Not Here?

Kant articulated the modernist position: There are no absolutes; therefore, we can know beauty only by our subjective feelings. Edwards, who has all but been forgotten in our modern age, reflected the biblical view declaring that the source of beauty is the objective, unchanging nature of God. Christians hold to absolutes. Why not here?

The way to live faithfully in our world and not be of our world is to lead the way regarding the nature of beauty. If we do not delight in refined things, we will delight in debased things. If we do not delight in beautiful music, we will delight in debased music. What a tragedy that MTV has become the paradigm to which many modern Christian entertainers conform their music, image, and performance style. Imitation is the highest form of admiration—ask any “Elvis” impersonator.

Man must submit his intellect to the truth of God, his emotions to the love of God, his will to the holiness of God, and his aesthetic values to the beauty of God. Since Christ is the apogee of God’s beauty, conformity to the image of Christ is the chief end of man’s response to the beauty of God. The apostle John said, “we shall be like him; for we shall see him as He is” (1 John 3:2). Isaiah foretold of that day when we shall see the returning Christ: “Thine eyes shall see the King in His *beauty*” (Isa 33:17). Those who see Christ in His beauty will worship Christ according to His beauty.

1. The structural outline has been taken in part from an essay by F. Duane Lindsey entitled “Essays Toward a Theology of Beauty.” Points two and three are brief summaries of Lindsey’s argumentation.