

Evangelistic Preaching: Bearing Witness to Beauty

Bryan Stone

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, Massachusetts

When telling the story of Pentecost in a pragmatic, consumer-oriented, and technocratic culture, it is tempting to begin at the end — “and that day about three thousand persons were added” — and then work backward with a type of evangelistic calculus that might trace the kind of homiletical strategies capable of producing those staggering results. Clearly there was something captivating and compelling in the preaching of Peter and the apostles on that day. The problem with that temptation, of course, is that we can’t craft or construct Pentecost any more than we can predict or secure the work of the Holy Spirit or calculate how our obedience might translate into effectiveness in the hands of the Spirit. What we *can* do is seek to be faithful and transparent witnesses to the beauty of God’s activity in Christ by first allowing ourselves to be transformed by that beauty. The very possibility of Christian evangelism is always premised upon the activity of the Spirit in our lives and is both a “doing” and a “be it done unto me.”

Thus it is that evangelistic witness in all its forms is, by its very nature, a “response” that presupposes encounter and transformation. As Amos put it, “The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?” (3:8).¹ Peter’s preaching on the day of Pentecost adopts the same logic. In explaining why it was that the apostles came stumbling out of the upper room telling of God’s power in the manifold native languages of those present, Peter told the crowds that it wasn’t because they were drunk. Rather, even though Jesus of Nazareth had been handed over and crucified: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear” (2:32-3). Peter and the apostles had a story to tell, but that was only because they had first been made witnesses—not just “reporters”—by the power of the Spirit.

To claim that bearing witness to beauty should be our aim and purpose in evangelistic preaching rather than attempting to add to our numbers is admittedly to swim against the stream of competitive and outcomes oriented modes of thought and practice that govern much of our lives and thinking, both inside and outside the church. It is commonly held that evangelistic preaching is preaching that is powerful, persuasive, and effective. It directs the gospel message to the unconverted with a sense of urgency and is oriented toward moving them to a place of decision. Thus understood, it is carried out strategically, and measured by how well it achieves that end. Evangelistic preaching may at times lean more heavily on rational argument and apologetics while at other times it may rely more heavily on passion and emotion; but its primary aim and end, so the consensus goes, is decision—and ultimately conversion. At its worst, the end is severed altogether from the means so that evangelism becomes an exercise in doing “whatever works” to achieve that end. But once evangelists learn that they can secure results by any means necessary, there is no longer any good reason to practice evangelism well, virtuously—or, even better, beautifully. In thinking about evangelism as a practice, as James McClendon has said, “the perversion associated with evangelism is potentially the more demonic, becomes demonic just to the degree

that in a crass way it succeeds.”² But what if, by contrast, the logic of evangelism is not shaped by some end it seeks to produce or achieve but by the beauty to which it seeks faithfully to bear witness?

Reconnecting Evangelism to Beauty

Reconnecting evangelism to beauty is one of the crucial challenges of our time, and that is especially true when it comes to preaching. In a culture awash with violence, cruelty, and a politics-as-usual where “usual” has come to mean ugly and mean-spirited, we could stand a bit more beauty in our lives. Philosophers in contemplating reality have long talked about three transcendental properties of being that are in some sense convertible, or interchangeable: truth, goodness, and beauty. What is true is good and beautiful, what is good is true and beautiful, and what is beautiful is true and good. But in modernity, beauty is the more forgotten of these three, having been supplanted by an emphasis on reason and action, and severed from both. One can see this in contemporary preaching, which typically seeks to get people either to believe something or to act in some way. It is not hard to find preaching, in other words, that is oriented toward truth and goodness. But what of beauty? What would it mean to preach in a way that bears witness to beauty?

One can only imagine what the future of faith in our culture might look like if it were offered as an invitation to celebrate and embrace beauty rather than a list of rules to follow or beliefs to be adopted. But the challenges here are formidable. The idea that beauty is transcendent has increasingly been discarded in modernity, and it is instead taken to be a matter of individual aesthetic preferences (“beauty is in the eye of the beholder”), an emotional response to sensory stimuli, or an arbitrary and socially imposed set of norms that have no basis in anything other than power. Perhaps worst of all, beauty is reduced to sentimentality. This can readily be seen with Christian praise music (a slow moving target, to be sure) in the form of “Jesus-is-my-boyfriend” choruses or with Christian kitsch such as Precious Moments figurines, Thomas Kinkade paintings, or syrupy movies moralizing that God is not dead or that heaven is for real. But the problem with sentimentality is not that some art forms are cheap, derivative, or “kitsch” in comparison to “high” art, or that they produce emotional responses.³ The problem is that sentimentality distorts reality and sedates believers. Preaching that has become sentimental is preaching where the beauty of Christ is shorn of its costliness and the depth of its reach into the ugliness, sinfulness, and evil of the world. Beauty that has become sentimentality is not unlike what Bonhoeffer famously identified as “cheap grace . . . the grace we bestow on ourselves.” As Bonhoeffer put it, “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”⁴

Apostolic preaching on the day of Pentecost, by contrast, is about as far from these sentimental distortions as one can imagine, despite the emotional effervescence that accompanied the gift of the Spirit poured out in the upper room, and mistaken for drunkenness. The apostles claimed that the one who had been raised up by God from the dead was the very same one who had been crucified and killed. To be sure, they held that resurrection rather than crucifixion has the last word in human existence; hope is not swallowed up in tragedy. But the apostles’ hope was wide-eyed

and realistic—not in the sense that it was chastened, pragmatic, or restrained, but rather in the sense that it did not underestimate evil or view death with rose-colored glasses. Apostolic preaching, moreover, was incomprehensible apart from its call for conversion, a call that transitions immediately in the Acts narrative to individual and corporate transformation in the form of a community of shared goods, fellowship, generosity, and praise. The apostles had encountered divine beauty, but their response to it was not to paint it in pastels. They bore witness to it concretely in their lives and in their preaching, and in such a way as to stand as a visible, corporate, and embodied offer of that beauty to others.

Jeremy Begbie has identified three strands of sentimentality in Christian art and worship, each of which distorts the capacity for bearing witness to divine beauty. I suggest that these can be applied to preaching as well. The first is when the preacher “*misrepresents reality through evading or trivializing evil*,” whether by projecting innocence onto the world (evasion) or overstating the goodness, progress, and rationality in the world (trivialization).⁵ The second is when preaching is emotionally self-indulgent, pandering to superficial emotional responses, whether more positively as with tenderness, compassion, and sympathy or more negatively as with outrage and anger. The sentimentalist, says Begbie, “cannot engage in depth with another’s pain *as pain*” and is instead more “concerned with the satisfaction gained in exercising their emotion.”⁶ The third strand of sentimentality follows from the first two: “the sentimentalist fails to take appropriate costly action. Because her emotional engagement is not with reality X but a falsification of reality X and to a large extent for the pleasure of exercising the emotion, it cannot generate action that is appropriate to reality X.”⁷ To return to the three transcendentals, in the case of sentimentality, beauty is cut off from both truth and goodness.

Just as there is false art—art that shades out discomfort, pain, or ugliness, plays to superficial emotions, and fails to enlist appropriate costly action—so likewise, there is false preaching. A good example of a preacher who understood this keenly is eighteenth century Anglican reformer John Wesley, who criticized preachers in his time for focusing wholly on the promises of the gospel while shading out Christ’s commands:

The gospel Preachers, so called, corrupt their hearers; they vitiate their taste, so that they cannot relish sound doctrine; and spoil their appetite, so they cannot turn it to nourishment; they, as it were, feed them with sweetmeats, till the genuine wine of the kingdom seems quite insipid to them. They give them cordial upon cordial, which make them all life and spirit of the present As soon as that flow of spirits goes off, they are without life, without power, without any strength or vigour of soul; and it is extremely difficult to recover them, because they still cry out, ‘Cordials! Cordials!’ of which they have had too much already, and have no taste for food which is convenient for them.⁸

To borrow from musical terms, preaching that bears witness to beauty is not content only with harmonies, melodies, and consonance, but includes tension and dissonance.

Historically, one can find an indifference, if not resistance, to beauty, especially

in its sentimental and self-indulgent distortions, among Protestant reformers such as some Calvinists and Puritans, who sought to break with medieval and Catholic traditions, but often with the consequence that the category of beauty ended up greatly diminished along with a central role for the arts in ecclesial contexts. That was certainly not the case with Jonathan Edwards, who made beauty central to his concept of God. God's beauty is the source of all creaturely beauty, taught Edwards, and the basis upon which we can talk about the very possibility of human virtue and love. In his *Nature of True Virtue*, he writes, "For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so [God] is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fulness of brightness and glory."⁹

For the preacher who wishes to extol the beauty and grandeur of creation from the pulpit, Edwards might help us avoid some of beauty's sentimental distortions by grounding it in the loving, Trinitarian nature of God. But that does not mean that in order to recover beauty, the theologian's or the homiletician's task is one of starting with abstract transcendental categories such as goodness, truth, or beauty and then demonstrating how God's activity in Christ illustrates or embodies those categories. God is, to be sure, the infinite sovereign of the cosmos, but also the One who came alongside us in the form of an itinerant Galilean prophet who lived and laughed, prayed and taught, and suffered and died on a cross. Rather than begin with some transcendental quality of being or with the splendor of nature more generally, to bear witness to Christian beauty we begin with the extravagant and gratuitous overflowing of God's love to the world in Christ, who is the measure of divine beauty. As Russell Reno puts it, "In Christ we are not overpowered by God as a sublime truth; we are romanced by God as pure beauty."¹⁰ Or as Edwards would put it, according to Gerald R. McDermott, God "does not drive us by duty, but draws us by beauty, not by fear, but by irresistible attraction."¹¹ Admittedly, Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* may not be the best homiletic example of this principle.

To open listeners to the beauty of God's revelation in Christ, the preacher imaginatively paints a portrait of Christ's life and work, and points to saints, both living and dead, whose lives constitute an invitation into this world of beauty. But Christian beauty that is fixed in Christ will always bear the marks of the cross, and so it will always be, in some sense, grotesque. That is not to say that the cross is really beautiful if we would just understand it properly or that the crucifixion alone is the essence of the Christian gospel (the incarnation and resurrection are also essential). But the Christian story is one in which the cross is not simply eclipsed by the resurrection nor is the suffering, vulnerable, and non-violent pattern of Christ's life set aside in favor of a "happy, happy, joy, joy" message that asks persons simply to look past evil, pain, or poverty toward a brighter horizon. Wherever the beauty of Christ is conveyed or portrayed in such a way as to mute the cries of those who experience pain and suffering in the world, then beauty has become sentimentality. It is a mask, and we have beauty without truth or goodness.¹²

The Uselessness of Beauty

When we encounter truth, we are obligated to believe it. When we encounter goodness, we are obligated to enact it. But to what are we obligated when we encounter beauty? A host of answers suggest themselves as responses to beauty: desire, pleasure,

appreciation, praise, awe, wonder, meditation, replication, imitation, or sharing.¹³ Perhaps “consent” is a word that sums them all up, for in encountering true beauty, we are inclined in various ways toward an existential posture of “yes.” “Openness” may be an even better way of describing this posture in that it accentuates the uncontrollability and mystery of beauty, along with the variety of human responses to beauty.¹⁴ Beauty, after all can inspire both awe and terror, and the line between the two may at times prove exceptionally thin. So, for example, it is hard to turn away from gazing on the majesty and beauty of crashing ocean waves in a storm. But they can also punish, dwarf, and overpower. When Isaiah encountered the Holy One in the temple with all of the accompanying sights, sounds, and smells, he was utterly undone. “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5).

Preachers might well ask, “What is the point of bearing witness to beauty? To what end and for what purpose?” Openness to beauty is, of course, an openness to transformation in ways we cannot predict ahead of time, and preaching that bears witness to beauty cannot easily chart for listeners what a faithful response to beauty might be. In this way, the recovery of beauty in preaching connects well with the Pentecost emphasis on the activity of the Spirit, which, as Jesus said, is like the wind in that it “blows where it chooses, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8). The preacher hopes that her witness will be met by an openness on the part of her hearers, but she can never manufacture or secure that openness through “effective” witness. Indeed, the preacher who bears witness to beauty must herself adopt a posture of openness, refusing to package, contain, or oversimplify beauty, reducing it to what will prove attractive and appealing.

This point may be precisely why so few preachers are interested in bearing witness to beauty and instead incline toward trying to get people to believe certain things or to act in certain ways. Beauty, though it is at the heart of Christian faith, is unruly and defies attempts to capture or contain it, or to use it as a means toward some pre-determined end. To put it simply, beauty doesn’t “work.” And so to preach in a way that bears witness to beauty may mean that we have to abandon a tendency to think our job is to secure results. As Alexander Schmemmann says, “Beauty is never ‘necessary,’ ‘functional,’ or ‘useful.’ And when, expecting someone whom we love, we put a beautiful tablecloth on the table and decorate it with candles and flowers, we do all this not out of necessity, but out of love.”¹⁵

Much of what we are learning about how people come to faith in our time points to the fact that decisions and commitments are generally not the starting point in the journey to Christian faith.¹⁶ On the contrary, participation and belonging come first. Persons must be able to journey and to explore, to touch, taste, see, hear, and try on for themselves the life of faith. They must, moreover, experience a company of saints whose lives have been made witnesses to beauty by the Spirit. Through corporate practices of worship, preaching, service, study, peace-making, and justice-seeking, Christians on the journey are formed into a way of seeing and sensing that we might well be described as a Spirit-formed aesthetic sensibility. Coming to faith requires the church as “a school of attention,” a phrase that Timothy Gorringer uses to describe art, but which could well be used to describe the church.¹⁷ As Gorringer says, “All great art helps us to see, attend to, sense, the depth, mystery and glory of God’s creation.”

So it is with the church as a communion of saints that has been made beautiful by the Spirit, despite its imperfections and sinfulness—indeed, precisely insofar as it remembers faithfully how to confess its sins and forgive those of others.

In cultures that crave utility, efficiency, and outcomes, preaching is often oriented toward securing results. Preaching must “help.” But if the goal and purpose of evangelism is to bear faithful witness rather than to secure results, then the emphasis can never fall on effective technique or the achievement of outcomes, but on virtuous lives that bear witness to God’s beauty and are in fact made beautiful by the Spirit because of that witness. The point of bearing witness to beauty, moreover, is not because it works better than other strategies. Bearing witness to beauty is not a homiletic strategy. For when the logic of evangelism is the logic of witness rather than the logic of production and results, there is no other end we seek toward which witness is aimed. Faithful witness to beauty is its own end and aim. Accordingly, the logic of evangelism is the logic of witness as measured by clarity, embodiment, openness, and incarnation rather than the logic of production and accomplishment.

All this does not mean that beauty never produces results or that the preacher who witnesses to beauty should not hope for transformation. As with the apostles and those who saw and heard them on the day of Pentecost, it is impossible to encounter beauty authentically without being transformed. But to treat the significance of Christ in rational and ethical terms only apart from its aesthetic dimensions is not only to truncate and short-change the gospel but to disconnect our preaching from the beauty through which faith comes alive. Preaching should be thoughtful and action-inspiring, but it is also a means for connecting us with the source of all beauty and the creation of pathways through which we receive God’s glory and offer praise in return. In this way, preaching is a sacramental act in that it mediates a participation in divine beauty. Evangelistic preaching, then, is not just preaching that aspires to get people to believe something or to do something, but to experience and participate in something—namely, the beauty of God’s extravagant, gratuitous, and overflowing love in Christ.

Notes

1 Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

2 James William McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 439.

3 As Betty Spackman has pointed out, to understand Christian kitsch, one has to consider economic and class dimensions that do not allow us simply to dismiss it out of hand; on the contrary, kitsch often gives expression to profound truths and a sincere faith. Betty Spackman, *A Profound Weakness: Christians and Kitsch* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2005). This reference to Spackman noted in Jeremy Begbie, “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts,” in Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin, eds., *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 55-6.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: SCM Press, 1959), 44-5.

5 Begbie, 47.

6 Begbie, 51.

7 Begbie, 52.

8 John Wesley, “Letter to an Evangelical Layman” [December 20, 1751] in Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1987), 26:487-8.

9 Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 14-15.

10 Russell R. Reno, “Return to Beauty: Review of *The Beauty of the Infinite*, by David Bentley Hart,”

In *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (September 2004), 51.

11 Gerald R. McDermott, "Surprised by Beauty: The Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *The Anglican Way*. Accessed January 7, 2019, <http://www.ad-ne.org/the-anglican-way/surprised-beauty-theology-jonathan-edwards/>.

12 Begbie, 63-5.

13 All of these include moral dimensions, but aesthetic obligations cannot be reduced to moral obligations. On this point, see especially Alfred Archer and Lauren Ware, "Beyond the Call of Beauty: Everyday Aesthetic Demands under Patriarchy," *The Monist* (2018), 114-27, doi: 10.1093/monist/onx029.

14 My thanks to Kaitlyn Martin Fox for suggesting this in the context of a feminist critique of logocentric (or, as Derrida put it, phallogocentric) theologies, which tend to impose a determinateness of meaning that constricts creativity and openness.

15 Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1965), 29.

16 Bryan Stone, *Finding Faith Today* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

17 Timothy J. Gorringer, *The Education of Desire* (SCM Press, 2001), 2.