

Beauty as an Evangelical Invitation in Secular America

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The beauty of preaching is a gift of God, addressed by Augustine in the language of prayer and praise, “Late have I loved you, Beauty, ever so ancient and ever so new.” I want to propose that a theological aesthetic is “fitting” to invite secular people to perceive and wonder at the evangelical beauty of Christ, the image and expression of God’s glory in human form (Heb. 1, Col. 1). In Christ, the image of God which for Israel is humanity and the glory of God which for Israel is God himself come wondrously to coincide in the incarnate Word, the scriptural Word, and the proclaimed Word for the sake of the world.

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Romans 16:25)

There is a kinship between a preacher’s aesthetic and ascetic sensibilities and the relation of beauty to goodness and justice. These sensibilities are active in the capacities of judging, discerning, recognizing, and perceiving what is visible, as well as apprehending what is real or illusory.¹ Spiritual and moral wisdom, which are necessary for maturing as a preacher, are as much a matter of love, imagination, and perception as cognitive knowing and technical skill.

We are drawn by desire and delight to what we “see” as beautiful. Goodness embodied in beautiful form evokes the power of imagination and stirs the affections to perceive its reality. Mark McIntosh suggests the Christian life requires training in aesthetic vision for speech that is true, good, and beautiful, possessing a “generated depth, freshness, and vibrancy.”² This also requires freedom from visions of controlled, managed, flattened truth that captivate our homiletical imaginations and desires. McIntosh identifies this freedom as “loving attention,” an apprehending of the beauty of God shining within the world. “This is in some ways the most difficult act of discernment, the recognition that the great truth we so long to grasp, to make appear as beauty, to display, is more likely to make itself felt in a new quality of our regard for others, or reverence for life, our courage and loving perseverance in the face of suffering and death.”³

Aesthetic vision is conditioned in love, by love, and for love. But there is also an ascetic requirement for discerning the intelligible beauty that awakens hearers to behold God’s generous self-sharing. “Once we realize that everything is sheer gift, we begin to notice the radiance and glory of the universe shining with the divine life that gives it being.”⁴ This is the “evangelical beauty” that invites the world to see what it truly is: creation known, loved, and delighted in by the Creator. Illumined by the wisdom of Christ’s self-giving love, the church is freed to reimagine the world in

“lifting up those existing things into the flowing of giving and receiving, praise and delight that is the life of God.”⁵ Speaking the truth of God, humanity, and the world in Christ is indeed a “beautiful thing.” Such beauty springs from attentive, receptive listening, faith that comes by hearing and is manifested in love. “By lifting up all things in praise, the mind is able to translate them, so to speak, back into their native tongue, which is the language of pure giving and receiving. In so doing, believers receive these things as gifts, know the deepest truth of them, and delight God who created them to be enjoyed.”⁶

The astonishing event of the gospel and the preaching it generates invites us to consider the significant re-turn to aesthetic and affective ways of knowing in Western cultures. William Dryness refers to this turn as “post-Romantic.”⁷ He advocates for recovering an understanding of how people are moved by causes, practices, agendas, and activities that are the object of affection and desire and not just reason and will. Such “movements of the soul” that drive and move us as human creatures, if nurtured more deeply, would lead them to God (*Poetic Theology*, 5). The beauty of creation and created things, the actions of human creatures, are to be taken seriously as ways in which God is deeply involved and already in communication with them. While the things of creation are not ultimately satisfying in themselves, when seen in light of the story of Scripture and faith of the church, “they are places where, because of God’s continuing presence in Creation and God’s redemptive work in Christ and by the Spirit, God is also active, nurturing, calling, and drawing persons—and indeed all of creation—toward the perfection God intends for them” (*Poetic Theology*, 5 - 6).

Dryness calls attention to the “picture” that limits faith to the knowledge of biblical topics and facts, right doctrine and morality, which means the affections and the emotions are perceived as unreliable at best. Image, metaphor, figure, and poetry are therefore suspicious, seen as deceiving, misleading, or even idolatrous. He points to the current recovery of classical devotional practices, particularly among younger Christians, seminarians, and pastors, as giving more weight to being embodied creatures dwelling in special places and times (*Poetic Theology*, 8 - 9). “Indeed, all the practices of corporate worship—prayer, song, preaching and service—creative actions which necessarily have emotional and aesthetic dimensions to them.” Rather than celebrating or lamenting such sensibilities, Dryness suggests these developments may “provide opportunities for Christian engagement and witness—indeed, that many betoken the attracting presence of God’s Spirit” (*Poetic Theology*, 9 - 10).

We should welcome this desire as an invitation to rediscover deep roots, especially for the practice of preaching. The concern for style, beauty, love, passion, and good form may actually be correlated with an increased desire for God. As Dryness notes, what is needed is a renewed “theology of desire” (*Poetic Theology*, 11 - 13). Our listeners need to see how we are shaped more by what and whom they love and adore than what they know and do, a “therapy of the affections.”⁸ They want to be attracted, invited, and drawn out and beyond themselves by something or someone that is perceived as gracious, “glorious,” and disruptive of our ordinary ways, and thus capable of awakening their imaginations and eliciting love and desire (*Poetic Theology*, 19 - 21). This is not a turn more deeply into the self, but rather a kind of joy, pleasure, and delight that is both true and good, a vulnerable receptivity to God’s self-sharing in wonder and gratitude (*Poetic Theology*, 25).

Our great need as human creatures is to be awakened to the astonishing power

of divine love which is able to illumine the “eyes” of hearts to perceive the beauty of God’s creative and redemptive works.⁹ Dryness points to the spiritual exercises practiced by Christians, “It is telling that all the spiritual exercises—prayer, meditation, and reading of Scripture—involve focusing our attention outside ourselves and, eventually to God” (*Poetic Theology*, 33). Attentiveness to the “otherness” of God does not take us out of the world, but rather situates the church as a social reality that occupies a social space and historical path representing, albeit incompletely, God’s Trinitarian purposes for creation. “The church should be in the business of reflecting, visibly and concretely, the ‘desire of the nations,’ not just because that answers to contemporary longings, but because that best represents this Triune God” (*Poetic Theology*, 243).

The amazing newness of the world generated by the gospel story is rendered beautifully by the paradigmatic performance of Spirit-inspired apostolic preaching in the Book of Acts: Peter’s breath-taking proclamation during the observance of Pentecost, an annual festival during which Israel remembered and gave thanks for God’s faithfulness. At the heart of Pentecost was the joyful acknowledgement of God’s generous provision in the ordinary cycles of planting, tending, waiting, and harvesting. Moreover, Pentecost also marked the remembrance of the events at Sinai, of God’s giving of the Law to Israel in fire and loud thunder. Peter’s announcement of Christ as Lord is situated within the story of a pilgrim people gathered to remember the future of God’s faithfulness in a mighty outpouring of God’s Spirit as the end-time arriving “today.”¹⁰

Pentecost marks the origins of evangelical preaching as speech generated by the action of God’s Spirit. Peter is receptive and responsive to the Spirit, his sermon an act of worship proclaiming God’s mighty action in the past and unveiling God’s astonishing activity in Christ’s presence. Peter turns back to the Scriptures of Israel, particularly the poetic speech of the prophet Joel, to declare the delightfully disruptive beauty of God’s Spirit poured out in abundance on all flesh. Michael Welker describes Peter’s preaching well: “The ‘frank’ proclamation—an open and public proclamation, unafraid and borne by joyful confidence—of God’s ‘deeds of power’ is just as much the result of the pouring out of God’s Spirit as is a new community of diverse persons and groups of people.”¹¹

Exercising a practical wisdom akin to that of the prophets, Peter’s attentiveness to the Spirit *and* the narrative of Israel’s Scripture reframes the experience of his listeners within the story of the gospel. Peter boldly testifies to God’s action which has generated a remarkable new state of affairs for both Israel and the nations through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. There is a timeliness and “fittingness” about this proclamation. The grand narrative of Israel’s Lord and his faithfulness through the life and ministry of Jesus is of such cosmic scope that it generates a multitude of languages for “gospelling” the mighty works of God to the nations.¹²

A reading of Acts 2 conveys the sense of such evangelical beauty. God is already here, for, with, and at work in the world, inviting listeners to a change of mind and heart in joyful response to the way things are now that Jesus, as Israel’s Messiah, has been raised from the dead and has poured out the Spirit on “all flesh.” This is both God’s conclusive revelation of himself and beautiful expression of God’s design for the world: the creation of a new heavens and a new earth. Peter describes the appropriate response to the announcement of this new state of affairs, the blessed freedom of

allowing one's self to be taken up by the Spirit into the beauty of living in the world ruled by the risen crucified Jesus over all created rulers, authorities, and powers.¹³

This proclamation of good news evokes the gift of repentance, or change of mind, as an intellectual, affective, and volitional turning, a remaking of the self in relation to God and others by the power of the Spirit. And while this re-turning is not the cause of salvation, it is the fruit and consequence of God's saving beauty enjoyed with neighbors from all nations, peoples, and cultures. What this looks like for the life of the church in the world shines brightly through the whole narrative of Acts. The astonishing announcement that God rules heaven and earth through the risen, crucified Jesus takes beautiful form as the Word advances in the Spirit's power and through the joyful obedience manifested by the church in its inviting evangelical witness to the Roman world.¹⁴

Peter's preaching springs from and enacts the good news announced by Jesus in Luke 4 at a synagogue in Nazareth. The proclamation of good news by Jesus announced an astonishing "reversal of norms and values" in which the empowerment of the Spirit joined with the prophetic word of Isaiah 61.¹⁵ "Peter's speech at Pentecost thus functions for the narrative of Acts much the way in which Jesus' inaugural speech at Nazareth functions in the Gospel narrative." In both instances, proclaiming good news in the power of the Spirit is programmatic for a narrative of prophetic speech and its enactment by a people that manifest God's advent in intensely personal and social ways.¹⁶ "When the Spirit is received and given room in the church, the world will be created anew—toward its perfection."¹⁷ Rowan Williams comments on the power of Christian speech to open the imagination:

We speak because we are called, invited and authorized to speak, we speak what we have been given, out of our new "belonging," and this is a "dependent" kind of utterance, a responsive speech. But it is not a dictated or determined utterance: revelation addresses not so much to a will called upon to submit as to an imagination called upon to "open itself". ...The integrity [and beauty] of theological utterance [including preaching] ...does not fall into line with an authoritative communication, but in the reality of its rootedness, its belonging in the new world constituted in the revelatory event or process....God "speaks" in the response as the primary utterance: there is a dimension of "givenness," generative power, and the discovered new world in the work of the imagination opening itself.¹⁸

I hope this brief description of Pentecost makes clear how many contemporary strategies of evangelical preaching are often substitutes for the gospel and a departure from Peter's astonishing announcement of Jesus, the crucified and exalted Lord who speaks in the Spirit's power "today." Speaking in a manner that echoes the narrative of the Prophets and Jesus, Peter's announcement of Christ as Lord must be seen as the work of nothing less than being taken up and filled by the joy of God's Spirit. Much "evangelical" preaching today appears to be devoted to topics, ideas, principles, rules, programs, and partisan political positions. However, if the primary emphasis of preaching is what people need to know and do, the timeliness of God's "evangelical beauty"—descending in the Spirit here and now—recedes into the distant past and remains enclosed within an ancient text.¹⁹ The underlying assumption is that

becoming Christian entails the acquisition of knowledge, and that the right application, self-awareness, and sufficient motivation lead to effective living and influential action in the “real world.”

This popular approach, however, fails to take into account the attractive and compelling nature of the gospel by which the Spirit awakens listeners to the astonishing reality of God who speaks and acts through the announcement of Jesus the risen Lord “today.” God takes the initiative; God fulfills God’s promises; God creates faith; God empowers response: “Faith always includes knowledge; it includes recognition. It responds to the other, surrenders itself to the other, and adopts the other’s view of reality.”²⁰ It is faith in the risen crucified Lord that illumines the “eyes of the heart” to perceive the beauty of the gospel that is a summons to rejoice in giving God glory “today.” This, then, is the paradox of evangelical beauty, that both preachers and their listeners find their true selves by losing themselves in responding to the beauty of Christ in their midst.

Beauty as an evangelical invitation may still “entice and enchant us not only to desire but also to fall in love with God the Trinity, and thereby love our neighbors.”²¹ As Mark McIntosh notes, because the church is a life of grace, it may itself be a “divine speaking” or “word of God” within the world a sign of the possibility of a new creation appearing in the midst of this old creation, a provisional yet visible sharing in the reign of God which even now anticipates the hope of attaining our true end in the joy and delight of the Trinity.²² Luke testifies to the beauty of the church created by the Spirit of Christ. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the Temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people” (Acts 2:44 - 47a).

Notes

1 Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 285 - 296.

2 Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004).

3 McIntosh, 204 - 5.

4 McIntosh, 245.

5 McIntosh, 247.

6 McIntosh, 248.

7 William A. Dryness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 13. Hereafter cited in the text as *Poetic Theology*.

8 See here the excellent discussion of desire, the affections, exegesis, and beauty in Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 115 - 48.

9 Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate*, 136 - 152.

10 Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 100 - 03.

11 Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 230. Willie Jennings’s comments are worth repeating here. “If this is the first Christian sermon, then we must take note of several of its moments. First, it exists only within the Holy Spirit. It begins only after the Spirit has come. It is a second word after the words of praise have been given by God. Before the Spirit came, Peter had little to say. His words will now and forever be only commentary on what the Spirit is doing, and God has done for us in Jesus. Second, he does not stand alone. As he stands, the other disciples stand. As he stands and speaks, Israel’s prophets are echoing in his words. It is a life-draining deception to ever believe that one preaches alone. Of course, one voice speaks in the preaching, yet

at every moment, at any given moment when a speaker speaks, many preachers past and present, are speaking. The preacher is always a company of preachers.” Jennings, *Acts*, 34.

12 William H. Willimon, *Acts: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 28033.

13 See here C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco - Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 91 - 138.

14 Stone notes, “The church, far from being one more social organization within civil society ... is instead the eschatological sign, the living demonstration that the end of time has come. Its very existence is a witness to the resurrection of Jesus, and this means that believers are now to live together before the world *as if* the end has come. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 104 (italics in the original).

15 Russell Mitman writes, “The approach of the ... interpreter is that of a servant who allows the texts of Holy Scripture to take over so that, through the working of the Holy Spirit, these encounters with the texts may become communal experiences of the presence of God in Christ What constitutes the community and community’s conservation is the one Word, Jesus Christ, becoming enfleshed in the body of Christ through the conversation with the Scriptures that occurs in the worship event.” F. Russell Mitman, *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 26.

16 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke - Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 87- 89.

17 Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 306; See also the discussion of the Spirit and beauty in Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (SCM Press, London, 2002). 145 - 7.

18 Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 146 - 7.

19 “Preaching tells us who God is and what he does: it is about God” ... “Preaching that is about us is not gospel preaching; in fact, it is not preaching at all. That would be bad news, not good news.” Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 163 – 4. See here the extended argument in James K.A Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Vol. 1, in *Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). “The telos [or end] to which our love is aimed is not a list of ideas or propositions or doctrines; it is not a list of abstract, disembodied concepts or values. Rather, the reason a vision of the good life moves us is because it is a more affective, sensible, even aesthetic picture of what the good life looks like. A vision of the good life captures our hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideals, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well.” 53.

20 Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 21.

21 Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 216.

22 Here I have benefitted from the insight of Mark A. McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 187; See also Jennings’ helpful comments, “What is at stake here was not the giving up of all possessions but the giving up of each one, one by one as the Spirit gives direction, and as the ministry of Jesus may demand. Thus anything they had that might be used to bring people into sight and sound of the incarnate life, anything they had that might be used to draw people to life together and life itself and away from death and end the reign of poverty, hunger, and despair — such things were subject to being given up to God. The giving is for the sole purpose of announcing the reign of the Father’s love through the Son in the bonds of communion together with the Spirit.” (Jennings, *Acts*, 40 - 1.