

Is Beauty beyond the Boundary?
The Beastly Nature of Evangelical Theology

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St. Louis University

Evangelical systematic theology is beastly. Such a statement is bound to raise the eyebrows, if not the ire, of many a theologian. But what does it mean to describe evangelical theology as “beastly?” Does it mean that evangelical theology is brawny, bursting with power and vitality like a lion? Or does it mean that evangelical theology is ugly like a toad? In this paper it means that evangelical theology has neglected one aspect of the triumvirate of transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. Evangelicals have done well in defending the *truths* of the faith—the innerancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the incarnation, and the miracles of our Lord. Books abound on the trustworthiness of the Word vis-à-vis many current issues (e.g., the stiff attack on the Jesus Seminar). Evangelicals have also excelled in touting what is *good* about the faith and what *good* the faithful should pursue. Though surveys may show that Evangelicals are no different in terms of morality than your ordinary American (e.g., the divorce rate), there is no dearth of Evangelical books broaching ethical issues. But when it comes to speaking about *beauty* in a systematic, theological manner Evangelicals are silent and this silence renders by default evangelical theology beastly.

It is my conviction that beauty is part of being and thus reflects the nature of God. Just as God is truth and speaks truly and just as he is good and acts justly, so is he beauty and thus he communicates beautifully. God is Beauty and thus things can be beautiful. God’s self-communication of beauty can follow many avenues. The form of God’s self-communication in creation has the quality of beauty. That is, the created world, coming

from the beautiful one, is full of tantalizing sights and contemplation-causing wonder. For example, who has not had their soul filled with admiration when gazing at a blazing red sunset? The form of Scripture is full of aesthetic delights. Is it not significant that God chose to inspire Psalms that abound with literary skill? Most importantly, the incarnation of the Word of God, the concrete union of God with man, is an unleashing into this world of the beauty of God, for in the form of Christ the Father is made known. In the history of Christian theology beauty has often been discussed by leading theologians. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Edwards, to name but a few, all spoke of the beauty of God and Christ. Though the term is not used in Scripture repeatedly, the concept is nevertheless there. And that concept is that beauty is the dazzling display of the truth and goodness of God as reflected in the glory and holiness of his person and works, the incarnation, and the created world. Beauty is what is attractive about God; beauty is what enraptures the eyes of the heart as it gazes on Christ by faith through the mediation of the Word. Thus, the purpose of this paper is twofold: to prove that twentieth-century evangelical systematic theologians have neglected beauty as a significant category in constructing their theologies and to provide a possible program for correcting this deficiency.

Evangelical thought has not completely ignored beauty; my indictment does not include Evangelical reflections on Christianity and the arts. Gene Edward Veith and Leland Ryken have written a fine book on how to think Christianly about the arts.¹ Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman edited a guide devoted to showcasing the literary

¹ Gene Edward Veith, *The Gift of Art: The Place of Arts in Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1983); Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly about the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1989).

features of the Bible.² William A. Dyrness has examined seven Hebrew word groups that refer to beauty.³ At a scholarly level there are signs of a restoration of beauty.⁴ At last year's ETS conference Jo Ann Davidson presented a fine paper, "Toward a Theology of Beauty: A Biblical Aesthetics."⁵ Davidson focuses mainly on the aesthetic aspects of Scripture (e.g., the poetic language of the Psalms), the aesthetic elements described in Scripture (e.g., the temple), and the aesthetic as a legitimate category (i.e., alongside side of the true and good).⁶ Each of these works indicates that beauty is not dead in Evangelical thought. Rather, these works portend that beauty may be awakening from its slumber. However, my contention remains the same: Evangelical systematic theology remains rather beastly

A. The Beastly Nature of Evangelical Systematic Theology

In order to prove the beastly nature of Evangelical theology I shall examine several prominent systematic theologies.⁷ I am focusing on systematic theologies

² Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, eds., *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993).

³ William A. Dyrness, "Aesthetics in the Old Testament: Beauty in Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 28:4 (1985): 421-432.

⁴ Popular Evangelical literature also has considered beauty from a theological vantage point. John Piper, in his book *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986), defines God's glory as "the beauty of his manifold perfections" (31). Piper, however, does not expand on beauty as an interpretative category; rather he prefers to use "glory." In *Angels in the Architecture* Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson have called for a return to beauty: "Sound theology leads always to the love of beauty. When there is no love of beauty, we may say, reasoning *modus tollens*, that there is no sound theology."⁴

⁵ Jo Ann Davidson, "Toward a Theology of Beauty: A Biblical Aesthetics" (Nashville, TN: Paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 17, 2000).

⁶ In addition, two articles that discuss aesthetics were published in the latest *Westminster Theological Journal*. In "Beauty Avenged, Apologetics Enriched," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 107-122, William Edgar traces the reemergence of aesthetics in secular and religious discourse and then argues for the incorporation of beauty into apologetics. Kevin Vanhoozer, in a fascinating article, examines music and how music is not simply a pleasurable experience of sound waves but can be the communication of truths via an aesthetic medium, "What has Vienna to do with Jerusalem? Barth, Brahms, and Bernstein's Unanswered Question," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 123-150.

⁷ Treatments of historical theology are also deficient. For example, Stanley Grenz's and Roger Olson's *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), as the title suggests, surveys the major theological players in the last century.

because of their prominence in classroom use. Bible colleges and seminaries regularly use standard systematic works in their classes. My question is: Did these authors focus on beauty as a theological category? In my seminary training we used Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*.⁸ Berkhof was a prominent theologian who served in the Christian Reformed church and taught at Calvin Theological Seminary. His systematics follows the *loci* approach: the doctrines of God, man, Christ, redemption, and church are examined in a logical manner, as befits the genre. In his treatment of God, Berkhof makes the standard division between communicable and incommunicable attributes in God.⁹ One would expect beauty to be one of the communicable attributes of God. Berkhof does not list beauty. He does mention the holiness of God—how could he not? But in his section on holiness he does not focus on the beauty of holiness, a designation found in Scripture.¹⁰ Berkhof is concerned to stress the “veracity of God;” God is the metaphysical ground of the truth and the truth itself.¹¹ He also defines the goodness of God in detail: It is “that perfection of God which prompts Him to deal bountifully and

Using the categories of transcendence and immanence, the authors construct a coherent account that moves forward logically. They begin with the nineteenth-century forbears to the twentieth-century theologians—Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Ristchl. The theologians among this bunch focused on the immanence of God but their followers, Barth and Brunner, revolted against them and stressed the transcendence of God. Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer both formulated “immanence” theologies. When focusing on Catholic theology, Grenz and Olson include Karl Rahner and Hans Küng as theologians who stress the transcendence of the human spirit. This inclusion of Rahner and Küng amounts to the exclusion of the third most important Catholic theologian of the twentieth-century, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar is well-known for his magnificent seven-volume work, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. The authors only use Balthasar as a source for commenting on other theologians. They don't mention why they neglected to focus on him. When compared to a non-Evangelical survey of twentieth-century theologians, David F. Ford's edited volume, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), Grenz and Olson's account fails in its desire to be comprehensive. Ford includes an account of Balthasar as well as Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac. Giving Grenz and Olson the benefit of the doubt, one may say that space limited their treatment; they didn't have the luxury of two volumes like Ford did.

⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939; reprint, 1993).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57-81.

¹⁰ Psalm 29:2.

¹¹ Berkhoff, 69.

kindly with His creatures.”¹² But where is the third transcendental which gives the other two their attractive power?

Next, I shall turn to perhaps the most influential Evangelical systematic textbook of the last fifteen years—Millard J. Erickson’s *Christian Theology*.¹³ In part three of his tome Erickson shows “what God is like.”¹⁴ He uses four categories: the greatness of God, the goodness of God, God’s nearness and distance: immanence and transcendence, and God’s three-in-oneness: trinity. Beauty would probably fall under the first two categories, the greatness of God and the goodness of God. Under the greatness of God Erickson includes spirituality, personality, life, infinity, and constancy. Under the goodness of God Erickson examines God’s moral purity, integrity and love. In the final section of his systematics, “concluding thoughts,” Erickson devotes one whole paragraph to the aesthetic character of theology: “There is a beauty to the great compass and interrelatedness of doctrines.”¹⁵ Overall, however, we see the true and the good, but beauty is conspicuously absent.

Last, I shall survey Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.¹⁶ Grudem does better than the previous two systematic theologies considered by including beauty as one of the communicable attributes of God.¹⁷ Grudem classifies beauty as a “summary” attribute along with perfection, blessedness, and glory and defines beauty as “that attribute of God whereby he is the sum of all desirable

¹² Ibid., 70.

¹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983; reprint, unabridged, one-volume edition, 1995).

¹⁴ Ibid., 265-344.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1245-1246.

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).

¹⁷ Ibid., 219-220.

qualities.”¹⁸ Grudem rightly includes conduct as a manifestation of beauty. He implores us to live lives that reflect the character of God. He includes two questions at the end of the chapter devoted to beauty. Thus, Grudem has considered beauty from a theological standpoint, but has failed to relate beauty to his explication of the doctrines of revelation, Christ, the church and even the cross. Credit is due to his effort to include beauty, but even he is left somewhat beastly.

B. Turning the Beast into a Beauty

Having examined a few representative Evangelical systematic theologies and having shown, on the whole, their lack of dealing with beauty at a theological level, I would like to mention and briefly develop four things that will turn the beast of Evangelical theology into a lovely queen.

I. Beauty from History

As I already mentioned in the introduction to this paper, past theologians did a much better job speaking about beauty theologically, but ever since the Enlightenment theologians have generally failed to consider beauty.¹⁹ Alejandro Garcia-Rivera laments: “We have lost confidence, perhaps belief, in the human capacity to know and love God as Beauty. Thus, while some may still believe that God is the source of Beauty, and many that the beautiful can be experienced, few would be willing to say that these two are connected in a profound and organic way.”²⁰ Previous sages of the faith can challenge and correct us in this regard. Probably the greatest exemplar of a theologian utilizing the concept of beauty is Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Of beauty Edwards said, “it is what

¹⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁹ Balthasar devotes volume two of *The Glory of the Lord, Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles* to Irenaeus, Augustine, Denys, Anselm, and Bonaventure.

we are more concerned with than any thing else whatsoever: yea, we are concerned with nothing else.” Commenting on his creator Edwards said “God is God, and distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above ‘em, chiefly by his divine beauty, which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty.” Edwards found hints of the savior in the beauty of the natural world: “When we are delighted with flowery meadows and gentle breezes of wind we may consider that we only see the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ.”²¹ Roland Delattre argues that no theologian in the history of Christian thought elevated beauty to such a radical place in the divine perfections.²² In fact, beauty is the best vantage point with which to view Edwards’s thought; beauty is the key to unlocking his doctrines of God, soteriology, religious life, human freedom and responsibility.²³

Though it would be impossible to describe Edwards’s view of beauty in the space of this paper, I would like to mention a few helpful things we can learn from him. The first is his distinction between primary beauty and secondary beauty. Primary beauty refers to spiritual beauty. Edwards defined primary beauty as the “cordial or heart-felt consent of being to being.” Using this definition, Edwards bases his doctrine of the trinity on beauty. Within the Godhead there is the mutual consent of one person to the other, a constant self-giving of love. Secondary beauty is natural beauty. His conception of secondary beauty is akin to the traditional understanding of beauty. It consists in the agreement of things in form, manner, quantity, and symmetry. This distinction is helpful

²⁰ Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book published by the Liturgical Press, 1999), 11.

²¹ Quoted in Roland Andre Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 1, 117, 182.

²² *Ibid.*, 118.

²³ *Ibid.*, vii, 2.

in that it properly distinguishes the creator from the creature. When speaking of beauty we must make clear that though there may be an analogy of being between the creator and creature, the dissimilarity is always greater.²⁴ Secondary beauty may be a part of the beauty of God (e.g., the diversity-in-unity of the trinity), but it is more properly a quality of the naturally beautiful. To make this clear, Edwards would not have been surprised that many of the Nazis were lovers of Mozart and proficient at playing Mozart. Those Nazis appreciated secondary beauty without delighting in primary beauty. Secondary beauty overshadowed concern for primary beauty, but for Edwards secondary beauty must be ordered first according to primary beauty. That is, human beings must be enraptured with the beauty of God, consent to God's being, and so order all other desires under that one structuring desire.²⁵

II. Beauty from fellow Brothers

²⁴ Von Balthasar uses this principle too, derived from the Fourth Lateran Council's doctrine of analogoy: *maior dissimilitudo in tanta similitudine* (ever-greater dissimilarity however great the similarity), *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, I, 461.

²⁵ Edwards makes an interesting connection between beauty, holiness, and glory. Holiness is the sum of God's moral perfections but reaches beyond just the moral sphere to include God's glory. "For Edwards the relation between beauty and glory in God is one of virtual identity," Delattre, 127. Christians do not merely perceive that God is holy; they see the beauty of his holiness and wherein this holiness consists—the fullness of God. Glory is a more comprehensive term for Edwards than holiness. Glory includes all the good internal to God and externally revealed in his works, *Ibid.*, 137. Edwards notion that glory and beauty are bound together is worth considering and exploring further. Beauty is so central to Edward's thought that his interpretation of God's relationship to the world is best understood in terms of beauty.²⁵ Creation and redemption both proceed from the beauty of God. God so wanted his divine perfections to go forth that he created the world. God infinitely delights in communicating himself. This is not a deficiency in God for a deficiency wants to receive but a sufficiency wants to communicate. God is the all-sufficient one who creates *ex nihilo ad extra*. Beauty is also the means and the goal of redemption. The beauty of creation was only restored by an immediate emanation from God's own beauty, the Word made flesh. Jesus Christ appears to humans in all his attractive power as their ultimate good, and the Holy Spirit indwells sinners so as to enable them to have the spiritual ability to taste and see that the Lord is good. In the eschaton beauty will reign as God dwells with his people and when nations from all over the earth dwell together as diversity-in-unity. Edwards's understanding of creation and redemption as manifestations of the beauty of God provides impetus for further reflection for Evangelical theology: If the Word made flesh is the means of redemption and the goal of redemption how is the cross a revelation of the beauty of God? Though we may disagree with Edwards's utilization of beauty as the linchpin to his system

A second way that we can recover beauty as a theological category is to dialogue with and digest the works of non-evangelical Christians.²⁶ The great theologian of beauty of this century is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who was a conservative Roman Catholic. Richard Viladesau, another Catholic, has written on beauty from a Rahnerian perspective.²⁷ On the Protestant side Frank Burch Brown has written several articles and two books.²⁸ These authors raise several issues for the Evangelical theologian to consider. These are the authority of theological beauty, the sources for theological beauty, and the formulations of theological beauty. First, the Evangelical theologian must decide if they will pursue a theological aesthetics, aesthetic theology or some other hybrid form of aesthetics and theology. Balthasar advocates a theological aesthetics. By that term he means a form of theology that uses theological methods to derive its aesthetic categories from the data of revelation and not from “the extra-theological categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetic.”²⁹ Balthasar believes that only an aesthetic derived first from revelation will be useful for theology because revelation is the

and the Platonic overtones of his conception of beauty, he certainly challenges us to consider afresh how we think of God.

²⁶ Wayne Grudem, in his presidential address at the 51st meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1999, suggested that “God may want many of us to pay less attention to the writings of non-evangelical scholarship,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:1 (2000): 16. Grudem is concerned that Evangelical scholars are bothered with an “intellectual inferiority complex” and want to prove themselves by being acceptable to liberals (16). The reason that I advocate that we should read and ponder non-evangelical scholars critically is that I think they have something to offer. The motive, as Grudem notes, is everything (18). Evangelical scholars should not quote non-evangelical scholars to be trendy but only if non-evangelical scholars have something substantive to offer. I do not think that being a non-evangelical scholar categorically excludes one’s theological viewpoints. If we can plunder the Egyptians (and by that term Augustine meant non-Christians) then we should be able to plunder other Christians.

²⁷ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Art, and Beauty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁸ Frank Burch Brown, “An Essay on Aesthetics and the Theologian,” *The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 3 (Fall 1990): 11-14; “The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God’s Eternal Design,” *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 329-356; *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University, 2000).

touchstone and source for truth. Frank Burch Brown disagrees with such a view. He says that Christians may want to assert that all truth, including aesthetic truth, is compatible with Christianity but it does not follow that all truth is derived from revelation. Do scientists use the Bible to discover the truths of logic or quantum mechanics?³⁰ Evangelical theologians would probably lean towards Balthasar's position. This issue is one of authority. We want to know what the Bible says about the nature of beauty before we hear what Plato has to say.

Second, once we have a set of control beliefs to use then we may walk hand in hand with Brown and thus we expand the subject matter of beauty.³¹ We should not exclude in toto the insights of the Brown camp, particularly Brown's definition of aesthetics:

Aesthetics [is] nothing less than basic theoretical reflection regarding all aesthetic phenomena, including their modes of significant interrelation with, and mediation of, what is not inherently aesthetic: abstract ideas, useful objects, moral convictions, class conflicts, religious doctrines, and so forth.

Brown defines aesthetic phenomena as "all those things employing a medium in such a way that its perceptible form and 'felt' qualities become essential to what is appreciable and meaningful."³² Both definitions open up the possibility that *aesthetica* are not just perceptibles, things we can see with our eyes or hear with our ears but also thoughts, ideas, convictions, doctrines, and acts. Thus in constructing our own theology we should not exclude art, worship, lay piety, acts of courage, and prayers as sources of beauty. Just as a systematic theologian reads and interacts with Calvin when he articulates a doctrine

²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, 117.

³⁰ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, 21.

³¹ For a defense of control beliefs see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), especially 71-108.

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

of predestination so too should the same theologian interact with the art of the Middle Ages, so influenced as it was by doctrine and of itself making doctrinal claims. In other words, written texts are not the only source for theologizing. A Gothic cathedral or medieval painting may also be a source for theology.³³

Third, we can learn from specific theological aesthetic formulations of non-evangelical Christians. Here the field is vast and fertile but let me briefly mention Karl Barth's and Balthasar's insight that the cross is a form of Christian beauty.³⁴ As Balthasar contends, the beauty of Christ consists in his redemptive acts for his people. "We ought never to speak of God's beauty without reference to the form and manner of appearing which he exhibits in salvation-history."³⁵ Not only is the transfiguration a sudden revelation of the glory and beauty of Christ, hidden in his state of humiliation, but so too is the cross a serendipitous manifestation of the beauty of Christ. The cross, isolated in and of itself may be viewed as an ugly murder of an innocent man, but when seen in its cosmic scope and in all of its ramifications it is a beautiful act.³⁶ God's hidden beauty is revealed as Christ overcomes the ugliness of sin on the cross. Christians have affirmed that Christ "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). However, the acts of Christ are

³³ For a fascinating account, which is artistically informed and theologically astute, of why late medievals were fascinated with depicting Christ's pudenda see Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. revised and expanded (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Steinberg does not theologize but he does show how one may interpret art, noting its theological meaning. I do not mean to say that he is advocating interpreting all art in a theological way. Rather, he is noting the theological import that is explicit in these specific paintings.

³⁴ For an extended treatment of beauty see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrence (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), vol. II, part 1, 650-677. Some in the early church asserted that Christ was physically ugly while others like Athenagoras regarded beauty as basic to deity and thus asserted that Christ was physically beautiful. See Betram, "καλος in Christological Statements in the Early Church," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 551.

³⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, 124.

³⁶ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*, 192.

beautiful because they are acts of love and love in action is beautiful to behold. A worldly aesthetics would not consider the cross as beautiful but a Christian ought to be enraptured by it.³⁷

III. The Beauty of the Bible

A third way that we can recover beauty as a theological category is to reflect on the beauty of the bible. By that I mean that God has chosen to communicate to us in aesthetic ways. The form of Scripture is beautiful. G. Henton Davies says, “The supreme expression of Israel’s capacity for beauty is in her gift of language.”³⁸ Perhaps God could have spoken to us using bad narrative and poor poetry but he did not. The literary forms of the bible are sophisticated, especially the Psalms. The prophets too spoke in stern language that was memorable not only for its message but also for its mode (e.g., Nathan rebuking David). In the New Testament Jesus spoke in artfully crafted parables, and the narrative linkages in the book of John reveal theological motives (e.g., the woman at the well scene followed immediately by the night visit of Nicodemus).³⁹ Frank Burch Brown stresses that aesthetics teaches us that one cannot separate the form from the content.⁴⁰ That is, from my point of view, the truths of Scripture cannot be separated from the historical context and written forms in which they have been embodied. Aesthetic interpretation is as important to the exegetical/theological enterprise as philological know-how and the distilling of the passage into a doctrinal truth. You can not have the whole truth without perceiving the form.

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, 124.

³⁸ G. Henton Davies, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, George A. Buttrick, ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 372.

³⁹ Jo Ann Davidson, “Toward a Theology of Beauty: A Biblical Aesthetics,” 18-19.

⁴⁰ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, 41.

What does it mean that God chose to speak in creatively aesthetic ways? Is beauty just a superfluous quality that God added to the Scripture so as to entice us to read them more? Or, is beauty somehow a reflection of the nature of God? I think that the beauty of the form of Scripture indicates the beauty of God. God did not make us as walking minds, brains on two legs. Evangelicals should not succumb to Gnosticism. We were made in his image and this indicates to me that just as he delights in the beauty of creation and the beauty of the Word, so to should we. Though we have done well in our exegetical studies in noting the literary artistry of the Word, we should move forward and utilize those insights in the construction of our theology.

IV. Beauty in the Bible

The fourth way in which Evangelicals can reclaim beauty as a significant theological component is to meditate on the beauty in the Bible. Not only is the form of the Bible beautiful, so too is the content of the Bible. Here I have in mind the descriptions of the created world, the artful inventions of man, and the glory and character of God, the last of which we shall examine.

Although many passages mention the glory and character of God as beautiful, I shall focus on the key verses in the Psalms. The Psalms, being God's official hymnbook for the Old Covenant saints, are expressions of worship that God has inspired for his people to say.⁴¹ The Psalms show us the kinds of ways that we should come to God in corporate worship, primarily, and also in individual prayer.⁴² Thus, it is significant that God has inspired expressions of praise concerning his beauty.

⁴¹ C. John Collins, *A Study Guide for Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (St. Louis, MO: by the author, 1995, revised 1997), 16-18, 19.

⁴² I do not think that the Christian Church should only use Psalms in worship. We should write and sing "a new song" to the Lord (Psalm 96:1). However, we would do well to use the Psalms as

For Evangelicals to deal better with beauty biblically we should realize that the concept of beauty best categorizes the manifold terms in the Psalms like light, splendor, majesty, pleasant and fitting. Psalm 96:6 says, “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.”⁴³ The NIV Study Bible correctly comments on the word “glory,” “The Hebrew for this word here connotes radiant beauty.”⁴⁴ But the word “glory” is joined together with the words “splendor and majesty.”⁴⁵ This double affirmation of God comports well with what we term “beauty.” Beauty may refer to the visual sensation of an artifact or the spiritual sensation one perceives by faith, as the Psalmist did, in the sanctuary. Majesty refers to the greatness of the King in his sovereignty and would seem to overlap with beauty; majesty is kingly beauty. Psalm 104 is a hymn to the Creator, modeled after the Genesis one narrative. Verses 1-2 say, “Praise the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty. He wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.” Here we have the words “splendor,” “majesty,” and “light;” a triad of truth to the enrapturing vision of God. If we categorize such words under the overarching concept of beauty then the number of passages worth considering increases dramatically.

templates. Few contemporary choruses match the spiritual grandeur, simplicity, scope, and artistry of the Psalms. The key themes in the Psalms should be key themes within our own worship services.

⁴³ All Bible quotes are taken from the NIV.

⁴⁴ *The NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 96:6.

⁴⁵ The word translated as “glory” in 96:6 is not כבוד but הדר. It can mean to beautify and to glorify and in its nominative form it can mean beauty and glory. Here it means “glory as the divine presence,” see C. John Collins, “הדר,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. The word הדר is translated as “splendor.” Delitzsh describes the combination of הדר and כבוד as “the usual pair of words for royal glory,” quoted in C. John Collins, “כבוד,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. The nominative of כבוד can be used as a technical term for the manifest presence of God. God’s glory was tied to the cloud and was said to travel with Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 16:7). The word can also mean dignity and in that sense conveys splendor or in my terms, beauty, (Psalm 145:5, 11-12) see C. John Collins, “כבוד,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*.

Having beauty as an umbrella term for the manifold terms in the Psalm allows us to see that the Psalms declare that the beauty of God shines forth from his person and his works. Psalm 96 is a call to all nations to worship the Lord. Rather than reducing the revealed God to a redemptive mantra—he saved me—the Psalmist focuses on who God is and what he has done in a more comprehensive nature.⁴⁶ Psalm 96:4-6 proclaims, “For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all gods of the nations are idols but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.” These verses make it clear that God radiates beauty like the sun releases light. Where God is, beauty is.⁴⁷ God’s beauty far outshines the dull luster of the idol. In our proclamation of the Gospel would we not do well to emphasize how the vision of God fills the heart with a sense of wonder, awe, completeness and beauty?

The acts of God are also beautiful. Psalm 111:2-3 pronounces: “Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever.” The Psalmist links together contemplation and delight, thinking and spiritual titillation. When God does, he does beautifully. Thus, his great work of redemption is beautiful. Psalm 111 goes on to describe what God has done for his people, showing that the redemptive works of God are great, glorious, majestic and delightful, all components of biblical beauty. Thus we would have biblical justification that the work of the cross is somehow beautiful.

⁴⁶ Incidentally, many commentators on beauty have argued that beauty is diversity in unity or complexity in simplicity. This Psalms keeps together the simplicity of who God is and what he has done redemptively without sacrificing the complexity of the wholeness of God.

⁴⁷ One may wonder if the beauty of God will be in hell. Is it proper to say the “beauty of God’s wrath?” Is every attribute of God beautiful, even his wrath or are the attributes joined together in his person beautiful? That is wrath, of itself, is not beautiful but when added to the plethora of God’s

C. A Meditative Conclusion: Ugly Beauty

Augustine, before he was converted, wondered if we ever love anything that is not beautiful.⁴⁸ He decided that we love only what is beautiful. Of God he said, “Late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved you!”⁴⁹ Augustine’s insight highlights the reason why the cross and the person on the cross are so compelling. We love only what is beautiful but the beauty may be hidden. On the cross the Godness of the God-man is overshadowed, like the sun’s eclipse, by the frail wounded body of the crucified man. The Light of the World is snuffed out by dark death. In identifying with the pain, suffering, and sin of this world, the holy one becomes beaten, bruised, and battered. But in the steely gaze under the blood-stained brow, the intent of that one shines through. Though death be great, love is greater. And so the story does not end there. After three days in the tomb proleptic beauty is unleashed upon the world. That resurrected body foreshadows the eschatological reality when this physical world is raised up into the next world, giving impetus for, apprehension of, and creations of beauty now. The cross, once dominating the skyline in its menacing height, fades as the beauty of the risen Lord shines brighter than the sun.

The symbol of the cross and the hope of the resurrection ought to fill our hearts with a sense of beauty—something rich in elegance—a refined praise which the bride of Christ can adorn herself as she meets her groom. These sources mentioned above can offer ideas and images for contemporary Evangelicalism to use as we expand our boundaries to recover the lost beauty that ought to characterize our theology.

attributes it adds a needed balancing element that gives symmetry to his love. See Frank Burch Brown, “The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God’s Eternal Design,” *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 329-356.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans., Rex Warner with an introduction by Nernon J. Bourke (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1963), bk. 4, ch. 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid., bk. 10, ch. 27.