

## TRIUNE BEAUTY AND THE UGLY CROSS TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL AESTHETIC

John-Mark Hart  
(john.m.hart-1@ou.edu)

### Summary

*God's triune beauty is most fully revealed in the ugly spectacle of the cross, and the close connection between the concepts of beauty and glory in scripture reveals how a cruciform theological aesthetic can illuminate our understanding of God, humanity, and salvation. Moreover, Christian discipleship calls for counter-cultural ways of seeing beauty and being beautiful in the midst of a broken world. This cruciform aesthetic also informs the limited but powerful role that the arts may play in the human vocation to behold, delight in, and reflect the beauty of God by the power of the Spirit.*

### 1. Introduction

The human heart is created to delight in and reflect the infinite beauty of the triune God, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ declares that this beauty is most profoundly revealed in the ugly spectacle of the cross. These two realities — the immutable beauty of the Trinity and the irreducible ugliness of Christ's death — are the starting point for any Christian theological aesthetic. This should already make it clear that such an aesthetic is concerned with the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Rather than merely reflecting on the arts from a Christian perspective, a robust theological aesthetic will articulate the manifold ways in which the beauty of God and the Gospel can transform our character, our lives, and our vision of the cosmos. In this article, I aim to sketch out some biblical contours for such a theological aesthetic.

My argument has three parts. First, I consider the close relationship between divine beauty and divine glory in the biblical witness and then point towards some ways in which the theme of God's glorious beauty runs through the heart of four major areas of Christian doctrine. Second, I draw upon Luther's distinction between theologians of glory and theologians of the cross in order to ward off some idolatrous tendencies that often creep into Christian reflections on beauty. This section develops a cruciform aesthetic that beckons us to participate in the true beauty of God's self-giving humility and love. Third, I analyse the roles that art and aesthetic beauty may play in the Christian vocation to live for the glory of God in the power of the Spirit. My central argument, which unfolds throughout these three sections, is that the Gospel of Christ invites disciples to embody a counter-cultural way of being beautiful in the world through joyful participation in the cruciform glory of divine love.

## 2. The Beauty of God

In scripture the concepts of 'beauty' and 'glory' are closely related. This point may be illustrated by noting the ways in which they bleed into each other in biblical vocabulary as well as the ways that biblical texts use them both in parallel fashion. For example, in Exodus 28:2 Yahweh instructs Moses: 'You shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for *glory* and for *beauty*.'<sup>1</sup> The word rendered 'beauty' in this verse is *tipharah*, a term which appears 47 times in scripture and which NASB most frequently renders 'beauty' (7×), 'beautiful' (8×), 'glory' (17×), or 'glorious' (7×) depending on the context.<sup>2</sup> The connection between the concepts of beauty and glory is already apparent in this range of meaning for *tipharah*, and this connection is further emphasized by the juxtaposition of *tipharah* with *kabod*, which NASB renders 'glory' here and in 147 of its 200 occurrences overall. It is also noteworthy that in this text both of these words are connected with the concept of holiness. Because Aaron has been set apart as high priest of the holy God, he is to wear holy garments, which represent the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>2</sup> In its other 8 Old Testament appearances, NASB translates *tipharah* as 'honor' (2×), 'adornment,' 'pomp,' 'boast,' 'splendor,' 'jewels,' and 'pride' (1× each)

sacredness of his vocation ‘for glory and for beauty’. The text goes on to describe in some detail the appearance of these clothes. As J. A. Motyer notes, ‘the same colours, fabrics and gold were used for [Aaron’s] garments as for the tabernacle’, with the effect that Aaron’s clothes visually represent his consecration as God’s ‘heavenly man’.<sup>3</sup> The high priest has been set apart to serve a transcendent God whose heavenly reign is gloriously manifest among his people at the site of the tabernacle.<sup>4</sup> To put this a different way, the tabernacle and priesthood of Israel are the channels that God has chosen for his presence to break into the fallen world, and the aesthetic beauty of the tabernacle and priestly garments are meant to signify the sacredness of God’s in-breaking glory. Thus, in this text, the concepts of glory and beauty are closely parallel, and they are both related to the perceptible manifestation of God’s transcendent presence.

Similar dynamics are at work in the interplay of the words glory (*kabod*) and beauty (*tipharah*) in Psalm 96. The Psalm repeatedly speaks of God’s glory and beauty alongside other closely related terms such as splendour (*hod*), majesty (*hadar*), and strength (*oz*). These first two terms each have a semantic range that overlaps considerably with *kabod* and *tipharah*, while ‘strength’ is repeated in this context to emphasize the manifestation of God’s transcendent power through his ‘wonderful deeds among all the peoples’ (verse 3). These wonderful deeds are also described as God’s works of salvation as well as his righteous and faithful judgements among the peoples of the world (verses 2, 13). Thus the terms glory, beauty, splendour, majesty, and strength all signify the manifestation of God’s transcendent goodness as it becomes apparent in his works of love, justice, and faithfulness. In response to these manifestations of divine goodness, the psalm invites ‘all the earth’ and the ‘families of the peoples’ to tremble before him, worship him with exuberant songs of praise, and proclaim his ‘salvation from day to day’. The psalm also contrasts God’s glory and beauty with the worthlessness of idols, in which none of God’s righteousness, grace, faithfulness, and power are apparent (verses 4-5). Thus the concepts of glory and beauty in Psalm 96 involve the manifestation of God’s transcendent greatness through his mighty acts,

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<sup>3</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage, The Bible Speaks Today Series*, ed. J. A. Motyer and John Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InvertVarsity Press, 2005), 269.

<sup>4</sup> Motyer, *Message of Exodus*, 269.

and this manifest greatness calls for exuberant worship and witness from humanity.<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally, the scriptures speak directly about the beauty of God, which gives delight to the human soul. The most important of these texts is Psalm 27:4, in which the psalmist declares: ‘One thing have I asked 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 gaze upon the beauty (*noam*) of the Lord and to inquire in his temple’ (ESV). In this context, poetic language about gazing upon the Lord’s beauty signifies joyful contemplation of God’s loving and gracious character as revealed in his covenantal faithfulness to Israel.<sup>6</sup> Behind all the glorious works of creation, providence, and redemption in which we delight stands the God of immutable beauty from whom all goodness comes and to whom all goodness points (see Rom. 11:36; Jas 1:17). This is the theological conviction that lies behind the spirituality of those countless psalms in which God is praised for the manifold beauty of the world and the astounding grace of his provision for his covenant people.

These brief reflections on the concepts of glory and beauty in biblical usage prepare the way for some working definitions of theological terms. Though scripture uses the term ‘glory’ in a variety of ways, it most frequently refers to some manifestation of God’s transcendent goodness in a way that may be perceived.<sup>7</sup> God’s glory shines forth in all of his words and works and most profoundly in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the ‘the radiance of [God’s] glory’ (Heb. 1:3). The Gospel declares that God ‘has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:6). In the Bible, the manifestation of God’s

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<sup>5</sup> These examples from Exodus 28 and Psalm 96 illustrate a close linguistic and conceptual connection between glory and beauty in the Old Testament, and this connection is manifest in numerous other passages. Consider, for example, Isaiah’s frequent use of the word *tsebi*, which NASB renders ‘beautiful’ (7×), ‘beauty’ (4×), ‘glorious beauty’ (2×), and ‘glory’ (5×).

<sup>6</sup> See Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 283.

<sup>7</sup> See the statement of Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman III: ‘Glory is an image of divine transcendence as it makes itself visible to people’ (‘Glory’, in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 330).

glory always evoke a profound response from those who behold it, and these response range from abject terror to ecstatic delight.<sup>8</sup>

The experience of delighting in the manifestation of divine goodness provides the conceptual link between glory and beauty. The classic definition of beauty in the Christian theological tradition comes from Thomas Aquinas: ‘Beauty is that which, when perceived, gives pleasure.’<sup>9</sup> One recent analysis of the concept of beauty as it is used throughout the biblical canon by a team of evangelical scholars comes to the similar but somewhat broader conclusion that beauty ‘names what we find attractive, satisfying and excellent in an object or person’.<sup>10</sup> This latter definition is quite consistent with the word’s most common meaning in contemporary English usage, which is ‘that quality of a person or other object which is most pleasing to the sight, the senses more generally, or the mind’.<sup>11</sup> Thus it is appropriate to say that insofar as we delight in anything good, we are experiencing beauty. Moreover, when we make distinctions between different kinds of beauty — aesthetic, moral, spiritual, and so on — we are making distinctions between different manifestations of delight-invoking-goodness within God’s world. Since Christians confess that all these forms of goodness are gifts of God that signify the ultimate goodness of the Giver, we may say that all experiences of creational beauty are signposts pointing to the beauty of the One in whose glory we find the fullness of joy.<sup>12</sup> Because we have already defined God’s glory as the manifestation of his transcendent goodness in such a way that it may be perceived, the close relationship between glory and beauty becomes apparent. In fact, we could define true beauty as any expression of God’s glory that, when perceived, evokes our delight. To behold and enjoy the glory of God in any of his works and words is to experience true beauty.

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<sup>8</sup> See Ps. 102:15; Isa. 59:19; Jer. 33:9; Luke 2:9; Rom. 5:2; 1 Pet. 4:13; and Jude 24.

<sup>9</sup> See John Navone, *Towards a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996), 24-25. Of course, there are important differences between the concept of beauty as it existed in ancient Near Eastern cultures and in the Greek philosophical traditions that lie behind the formulations of Aquinas. However, I am suggesting that Aquinas’s basic definition of beauty is consistent with the biblical usage discussed above.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Beauty’, in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*.

<sup>11</sup> This is my amalgamation of definitions 1a through 1d of ‘beauty’, *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), accessed 11 December 2014, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

<sup>12</sup> See Ps. 19:1; 27:4; 63:1-3; 92:4-5; 104:1-34; 148:3-13; Jas 1:17.

With this conceptual framework in place, I am in a position to start describing how the concept of beauty is sown into the fabric of Christianity's central doctrines. The following four theological examples make this point clear:

### ***2.1 Beauty and the Triune Life of God***

According to classical Trinitarian theology, the Son is eternally the image of the Father and the radiance of the Father's glory, and the Father eternally knows, loves, and delights in the Son in the fellowship of the Spirit (cf. John 17:5, 24; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). This is why Augustine speaks of the harmonious beauty with which the Son perfectly expresses the glory of the Father 'as one perfect Word to which nothing is lacking, which is like the art of the almighty and wise God'.<sup>13</sup> Augustine declares that this union between the Father and the Son is 'not without enjoyment, without charity, without happiness' and then refers to the Holy Spirit as 'the sweetness of the begetter and begotten' such that the Trinity 'is the source of all things, and the most perfect beauty, and wholly blissful delight'.<sup>14</sup> In short, 'beauty' names the triune dance of God's eternal delight in God's own glory.<sup>15</sup>

### ***2.2 Beauty and Human Delight in God's Glory***

I have already noted David's famous prayer that he might 'gaze upon the beauty of the Lord' all of his days (Ps. 27:4 ESV). The Psalms also employ a host of metaphors for sensory delight to express the endless joy that God's people find in contemplating his glory: 'The children of mankind ... feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light' (Ps. 36:7-9 ESV). Insofar as humans are made to enjoy the glory of God, we are made to experience beauty, and our redemption in Christ calls us back to this end. By connecting this point to the last, we can note that Christian contemplation of the beauty of God also entails transformation into the likeness of God via

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<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, X.11.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, X.11-12.

<sup>15</sup> David Bentley Hart develops a robust and eloquent vision of divine beauty in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), esp. 155-78. For representative evangelical treatments of the eternal happiness of God in the loving fellowship of Trinity, see Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 61-96, and John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2000), 25-46.

participation in the triune life. Thus Paul speaks of the Spirit liberating the church to behold, delight in, and reflect the image of the Father's glory in the face of the Son (2 Cor. 3:17-18; 4:6).<sup>16</sup>

### ***2.3 Beauty and the Church's Reflection of God's Glory<sup>17</sup>***

In his famous statement that human marriage signifies Christ's covenantal love for the church, Paul argues that Jesus died 'so that He might sanctify [the church], having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless' (Eph. 5:26-27). Perhaps the royal wedding song of Psalm 45 lies behind Paul's imagery, in which the psalmist exhorts the bride: 'Forget your people and your father's house; Then the King will desire your beauty. Because He is your Lord, bow down to Him' (Ps. 45:10-11). The church's sanctification is her transformation into the image of Christ, who is the beautiful radiance of divine glory.<sup>18</sup> As such, this sanctification is also the renewal of humanity's original glory to be the image of divine beauty within the created order (Gen. 1:26-27). As God's covenantal community in Christ beholds and reflects divine beauty, the church enters into its eternal business of glorifying God and enjoying him forever.

### ***2.4 Beauty and the Cultural Mandate***

The Bible's first chapter narrates God calling humans to fill the earth and exercise dominion therein. This dominion does not entail ownership or unmitigated sovereignty; rather, the text portrays human vocation as a kind of stewardship or vice-regency wherein humans

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<sup>16</sup> Along these lines, Jonathan Edwards writes: 'The Spirit of God so dwells in the hearts of the saints, that he there ... exerts and communicates himself, in this his sweet and divine nature, making the soul a partaker of God's beauty and Christ's joy.' *Religious Affections* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2013), 129. See also Dane C. Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Works of 'civil righteousness' — that is, the good deeds of unregenerate persons — also reflect divine beauty insofar as they signify any aspect of God's moral excellence. I emphasise the beauty of the church not to deny that non-Christians often do beautiful deeds (e.g. the moral beauty of Gandhi's self-sacrificial advocacy for social justice) but rather to point out that sanctification may be thought of as beautification.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:20-24.

creatively participate in God's reign over the earth.<sup>19</sup> As God transformed the primordial chaos of the world into a beautiful temple of peace that signifies his glory, so humans have been commissioned to cultivate beauty within the created order for the glory of God and the joy of all peoples.<sup>20</sup> Being human involves sub-creational participation in God's *creatio continua* via the cultivation of beauty and justice in the world.

These four brief reflections (2.1-2.4) could be expanded considerably, but they are sufficient to demonstrate how the biblical and theological concept of beauty is tied into the most central doctrines of the Christian faith.

However, it is important to note that the Bible bears witness to a dark side of beauty within the fallen order of creation. Classic Christian reflection on the transcendental nature of truth, beauty and goodness has held that since all three of these qualities find their ultimate source and referent in the perfect simplicity of God's essence, they also signify one another in their perfect form.<sup>21</sup> In a perfect world, beauty would always lead us to truth and goodness, and every manifestation of truth, beauty, or goodness in the world would always lead us to God. However, in creation's current subjection to futility, corrupted forms of beauty often trigger our vain desires and thus lead us into evil and falsehood. Isa. 28:1-6 signals this danger by comparing the 'glorious beauty' (*tsebi*) of those who are unfaithful to the Lord to a quickly fading flower and then contrasting this false beauty with the greatness of God, who promises to 'become a beautiful (*tsebi*) crown and a

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<sup>19</sup> Craig Bartholomew and Michel Goheen concisely and skilfully articulate this view of the cultural mandate in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), esp. 33-36. See also Nicholas Wolterstorff's discussion of the vocation of the artist within the framework of humanity's vocation to subdue the earth in *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 72-78.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Gen. 1:1-2:4; Ps. 8; 19; 104.

<sup>21</sup> Umberto Eco's energetic and lucid *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2002) chronicles the development of Christian reflection on the nature of beauty throughout the mediaeval period, which reaches its culmination in Aquinas's mature theory of transcendentals. Theological aesthetics drawing on this theory is still vibrant within the Thomistic tradition; see Navone, *Beauty*. Kevin Vanhoozer chronicles the division of these transcendentals in modern thought followed by their deconstruction in postmodernism in his 'Praising in Song: Beauty and the Arts', in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 110-22. Vanhoozer goes on to articulate a brief but robust argument for reintegrating truth, beauty, and goodness in our theological reflections on the nature of Christian life.

glorious (*tipharah*) diadem to the remnant of His people' (verse 5). Isaiah's warning calls for a sharp distinction between corrupted beauty that masks arrogance, drunkenness, and injustice (verses 1-2, 7-8) and true beauty that becomes manifest in Yahweh's reign of justice and strength (verse 6). Similarly, Proverbs warns against the seductive 'beauty' (*yophi*) of the 'evil woman' who would lure foolish youth away from faithfulness (6:24-25; cf. 11:22; 31:30) while promising that Lady Wisdom will place a 'crown of beauty' (*tipharah*) on the heads of those who live according to her ways (4:8-9). In the New Testament, Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees, whose works appear 'beautiful' (*hōraios*) but mask death and decay. In an apparent allusion to Isa. 28:1-2, James warns: 'For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away' (Jas 1:11). In these and other scriptural texts, the true beauty wherein some manifestation of divine goodness calls forth from humanity an appropriate response of worship is contrasted with false beauties that delight, allure, and seduce humans to their destruction.<sup>22</sup>

In essence, this false seductive beauty is one way of talking about the temptation to idolatry. Seductive beauty draws us to seek comfort, joy, or hope in that which is opposed to God. It offers a false sense of transcendence, either by exalting the self or by calling us out of ourselves only to bind us to some object unworthy of our adoration. As such, the way to battle against false beauty is to go to the foot of the cross, where the worthlessness of idols is exposed by the resplendent glory of God's love.

### 3. The Ugliness of the Cross

Since we have noted the strong biblical and theological connections between the concepts of beauty and glory, it should not be surprising that any theological aesthetic faces the dangerous temptation to idolatry

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Navone, *Beauty*, 79. Daniel Treier, Mark Husbards, and Roger Lundin warn against a naïve celebration of art in some forms of theological aesthetics by reminding us that 'the reality of sin and the claims of the gospel mean that artistic forms stand under judgment and in need of grace as fully as human ideas and actions do' ('Introduction', in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbards, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 10).

that Martin Luther warns of in his comments on ‘theologians of glory’. Theses 19-21 of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation are as follows:

19. The one who beholds what is invisible of God, through the perception of what is made, is not rightly called a theologian.
20. But rather the one who perceives what is visible of God, God’s ‘backside’, by beholding the sufferings of the cross.
21. The ‘theologian of glory’ calls the bad good and the good bad. The ‘theologian of the cross’ says what a thing is.<sup>23</sup>

In thesis 19, Luther asserts that no Christian theologian worth the name will draw conclusions about the invisible essence of God based merely upon reasoned reflection on the visible created order. Such a practice would inevitably lead to the invention of ‘graven images’ — false ways of representing God — because fallible human reasoning about the perceived excellences of a finite creation can never reach high enough to grasp the infinite, transcendent God. If we reflect on the beauty of the world and then project our ideas of beauty upon the being of God, we will surely be idolaters. The alternative is to find God’s glory revealed, as thesis 20 asserts, in his ‘backside’. This provocative language alludes to the story of Exodus 33:18-23, in which Moses asks to see the glory of God and the Lord responds that no one may see his face and live. However, the Lord places Moses in the cleft of a rock and then passes by so that Moses may look upon the glory of his ‘back parts’ (AV). Luther connects this text to God’s revelation in Christ in order to assert that — as creatures and sinners — humans must ever be content to see the glory of God as it is revealed by his ‘backside’, the sufferings of the incarnate Son. To paraphrase thesis 21, we might assert that ‘theologians of beauty’ will perpetually follow corrupted forms of beauty to evil and falsehood, while ‘theologians of the cross’ will find the beauty of God’s triune love revealed most fully in the ugly spectacle of the crucified Messiah.

This same point could be made by thinking about the nature of divine beauty in relation to Paul’s reflection on the ‘word of the cross’ in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. Just as God’s perfect wisdom and power are hidden in the apparent folly and weakness of the cross, so is God’s perfect beauty hidden in the naked bleeding corpse of the crucified Jesus. As Paul proclaims that the foolishness of God is wiser than men

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation’, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 500-3.

and the weakness of God is strong than men, so must we proclaim that the ugliness of God is more beautiful than men. As Paul observes that the church is primarily an assembly of the weak and foolish through which God has chosen to exercise his power and wisdom to renew the world, so must we observe that God's church is primarily an assembly of the unseemly — a congregation of the world's refuse, of those who do not live up to cultural canons of good taste — through which God's beauty is breaking into a fallen cosmos.

The first implication of all this is that the would-be theologian must begin by standing under God's word of judgement and grace proclaimed at the cross. This is the place where all boasting is precluded, and it is the only place from which any authentic theological aesthetic may be articulated. It is inevitable that those who write books and articles on the theology of beauty are almost universally members of a cultured elite; thus it should not be surprising that such treatises are often laced with a subtle disdain for the inferior taste of the embarrassing multitudes of Christians whom the Spirit has gathered into Christ's church from the ranks of those who are 'low and despised in the world' (1 Cor. 1:28 ESV). The word of the cross delivers theological aesthetics from this besetting sin by pronouncing God's emphatic judgement on cultural elitism along with every other form of human pride. The cross exposes to us our own moral ugliness so that we might become open to the beautifying grace of the suffering servant who 'had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him' (Isa. 53:2 ESV). Likewise, the cross opens our eyes to see the hidden beauty of the church as it is revealed in the light of the gospel of God's grace, so that we can sing with David: 'As for the saints who are in the earth, they are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight' (Ps. 16:3). In short, the Bible's witness to the cruciform love of God enables us to see ourselves and the church in a new light that ruthlessly exposes our pride and trains us in the way of charity.

In this regard, a cruciform theological aesthetic will be aimed at cultivating disciples who embody a counter-cultural way of being beautiful in the world. This way of being is nothing other than the life of faith (which joyfully rests in the glory of God's love revealed in the atoning death of Christ), hope (which delights in the assurance that God's glory will fill the new earth as the waters fill the sea), and love (which sees and delights in the beauty of God that is imaged in every

human person and so acts in ways directed towards drawing this beauty to its *telos* for the glory of God and the joy of the beloved). Such disciples are trained by the word of the cross to reject false value judgements, to discern the beauty in much that is called ugly and the ugliness of much that is praised for its beauty.

The Gospels describe Jesus schooling his disciples in this discipline of discernment. Mark 13:1-2 narrates one such lesson: ‘As [Jesus] was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, “Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down.”’ In this account, an unnamed disciple invites Jesus to share in his aesthetic delight at the beautiful architecture of the temple (which the disciple understands, presumably, to be the consummate expression of aesthetic beauty designed to evoke awe in God). But Jesus pronounces God’s judgement upon this religious and aesthetic object. The temple has become corrupt, and its external attractiveness is a form of seductive beauty. Jesus’s strong words bring to mind the Lord’s harsh denunciation of Israel’s vain songs of worship through the prophet Amos: ‘Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (Amos 5:23-24). In Amos’s powerful prophecy, God denounces worship music that drowns out the cries of the oppressed who are suffering under the boots of the singers. Jesus stands squarely in this prophetic tradition of being unimpressed with forms of beauty that seduce human hearts away from divine truth and goodness.

Conversely, Jesus also schools his disciples to see the hidden beauty that lurks beneath the surface of the world. On one occasion, an unnamed woman breaks several rules of propriety by entering a house in which Jesus is dining and then pouring out an alabaster jar of expensive ointment upon his head. This socially unseemly act offends the disciples, and they rebuke the woman for wasting such an expensive commodity instead of selling it and distributing the proceeds to the poor. Jesus responds by questioning his disciples: ‘Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful (*kalos*) thing to me’ (Matt. 26:10 ESV). What the disciples fail to see is the beauty of the woman’s bold love, which propels her to violate cultural conventions of tasteful behaviour in order to display her extravagant affection for

Christ. Just as the disciples must learn to see the ugliness (falsehood, evil) lurking beneath the surface of the world's beauty, so must they learn to see the beauty (truth, goodness) that lies beneath the often-unseemly surface of truly loving acts.

At this point, it should be clear that Christ's values rate moral and spiritual beauty more highly than aesthetic beauty, and that the latter is often at odds with the former.<sup>24</sup> This raises several important questions: Given the potential for seductive beauty to lure us away from goodness and truth, would it not be wise to eschew aesthetic pleasures (at least until the *eschaton*) in favour of cultivating moral and spiritual beauty? Should we abandon the arts entirely in order to focus all our energy on more urgent matters such as evangelism and the mortification of the flesh? Is not aesthetic delight virtually indistinguishable from the lust of the eyes? My answer to these questions is a resounding 'no'. God has made us embodied, sensory beings in a world that is teeming with holy and delightful sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that are among those good gifts descending from above for which we should give thanks. Moreover, he has made us creative beings with a great capacity to sing songs, paint pictures, write poems, and otherwise cultivate the raw materials of the world into innumerable beauties that may give pleasure to our neighbours for the glory of God. These gifts — like all God's gifts — can be abused, and the danger of this abuse should be taken seriously. However, this should not deter us from receiving God's good gifts with gladness and directing them toward noble ends.<sup>25</sup>

As J. I. Packer writes, Christians must reject the heretical impulse to underrate or neglect the goodness and glory that remains in God's fallen world:

It is the Manichaeic heresy to affirm that the world of matter, physical life, and sensory pleasure is valueless and evil. Down the centuries that heresy has haunted Christian minds and produced many ugly things: a

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<sup>24</sup> See also Matthew 23:27.

<sup>25</sup> As I have briefly suggested above, one manifestation of the brokenness of the present world order is that aesthetic beauty often points us away from truth and goodness instead of drawing us towards these other 'transcendentals'. As a result, Christians must often learn to see the moral and spiritual value of that which is aesthetically off-putting as well as the moral and spiritual ugliness of that which is aesthetically attractive. However, human art at its best has the capacity to appeal directly to our aesthetic sensibilities as a way of training us in new ways of seeing the world. This is apparent, for example, in the thousands of beautiful paintings of the crucifixion of Jesus. See also my brief comments on the aesthetic of Pieter Bruegel the Elder below.

false antithesis between the material and spiritual; false guilt about enjoying food, physical comfort, and sex in marriage; glorification of dirt, seediness, and uncouthness; pride in one's world-denying asceticism; contracting out of the arts and all cultural endeavor ('not spiritual, you know'); and so on. But the truth of the goodness of creation teaches us to negate all such nastiness (for such it really is), and that we must learn to do.<sup>26</sup>

Packer is right to list 'world-denying forms of asceticism' and 'contracting out of the arts' in his litany of 'nasty' consequences that follow from the heresy of Manichaeism. We are called to receive the gift of lawful bodily pleasures in God's world with thanksgiving, and to cultivate all kinds of pleasure-giving beauty in the world from a heart of love. Learning to delight the glory of God as it is displayed in nature and art is a beautiful part of the church's common life in the Spirit. To this theme I now turn.

#### 4. The Pneumatology of Aesthetic Experience

Disciples of Jesus must be trained by the Spirit to see the world's beauty — and its ugliness — through the lens of the scriptures. I have already stated that this involves learning to see moral and spiritual beauty in places where the world can only see ugliness. In particular, to embody the beauty of God's love for our neighbours, we must learn to see and value the beauty of God's image in every human person and then to act accordingly. Furthermore, I have argued that discipleship involves resisting the ways in which perverse forms of earthly beauty can draw us towards evil and falsehood or (more subtly) towards lesser goods masquerading as God. Thus, Christians need minds that have been renewed by the Spirit through meditation on the Word so that we can see the beauty of God manifested in his world even as we learn to see through the alluring beauty of false gods.

It remains to be said how all of this relates to that aspect of our God-given humanness that involves making and enjoying beauty through the arts.<sup>27</sup> I have briefly suggested above that art — by cultivating

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<sup>26</sup> J. I. Packer, 'The Christian and God's World', in *Serving the People of God: Collected Shorter Writings on The Church, Evangelism, The Charismatic Movement, and Christian Living*, Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, Vol. 2 (Vancouver: Regent College, 1998), 180.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that, in the history of aesthetics, theories of beauty and the practice of art have often been seen as two separate matters that are only tangentially

gratuitous beauty in the world — is one expression of humanity's calling to sub-creational participation in God's *creatio continua*. A Christian theological aesthetic will value art that forms human persons towards God's truth, beauty, and goodness as they are revealed in the scriptures and consummately in Jesus Christ. This does not mean that art is reduced to a crude form of didactic rhetoric. Art does more than communicate propositional truths or inspire virtuous actions. Art shapes our vision of the world, ourselves, others, and God. It forms our imagination and our affections. Thus Christians should be enthusiastically involved in writing, painting, dancing, sculpting, and every other kind of artistic creation aimed at inviting people to perceive truth, beauty, and goodness. This kind of aesthetic activity can and does enrich the liturgical life of the church, but the people of God should not think that 'sacred art' refers only to art that is used in the assembled worship of the institution church. Rather, any art created for any setting is a sacred expression of human vocation insofar as it forms people towards truth, beauty, and goodness. Works of art may accomplish this end not only by helping us to see beauty but also by exposing and lamenting the ugliness of the world. Great art can be a powerful form of cultural critique and social protest as well as an avenue for celebrating the goodness of God and his world.

In addition to making art, Christians should be the most enthusiastic appreciators of art insofar as we see it as an expression of the God-given human vocation to cultivate beauty in the world. Of course, the wise enjoyment of art will be shaped by a certain critical discernment. We have already seen the power of seductive beauty, and artistic works often shape us in ways that we are not aware. As appreciators and creators of art, we must learn to evaluate the complex and multivalent ways which we are differently formed by particular works, genres, schools, and movements within the arts. This kind of critical wisdom, like all forms of wisdom, can only be gained through the hard work of training our 'powers of discernment [through] constant practice to distinguish good from evil' (Heb. 5:14 ESV). Ultimately, this practice involves continually analysing and evaluating aesthetic works through

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related. My own approach is to consider the arts one way among many in which humans fulfil the cultural mandate by cultivating beauty in the world that reveals the glory of God. Those interested in tracing the development of Western thought on the relationship between art and beauty might begin with Umberto Eco's helpful and eminently readable *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2002).

the lens of a theological imagination that has been formed by the Spirit through constant meditation on the word of God within the communion of saints. A few paragraphs of suggestive observations on some broad movements in the Western aesthetic tradition may help to demonstrate how this can work.

The Christian humanism of the high Renaissance gave birth to a host of masterpieces, which are generally characterized by a quest to represent an idealized form of beauty that surpasses nature. Latent within this quest is an undercurrent of eschatological longing insofar as such art simultaneously bears witness to and awakens human appetites that transcend our present experience of the world. However, within this aesthetic sensibility also lurks a certain impulse towards idolatry. For example, amongst Michelangelo's extravagantly beautiful paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is a Zeus-like depiction of the Creator, which projects typical Renaissance ideals of masculine power and beauty on a great demiurge in the sky. By subjecting the divine essence to human canons of beauty, Michelangelo ended up painting a god who is simultaneously too big to be known and too small to be worshipped.<sup>28</sup> It goes without saying that such a portrayal of divine glory is unworthy of the triune God in whom all time and space have their being and who (in Augustine's phrase) is closer to each of us than we are to ourselves. We can also note how similar Michelangelo's Creator is to the countless Renaissance paintings of Greek and Roman gods as well as myriad portraits of godlike kings, queens, and other wealthy patrons. The move to carve God down to human size is mirrored by the move to make gods of those humans among society's upper echelon, and the exaggerated beauty of the human elite approaches that of the divine even as it contrasts the squalor of the lower classes. As usual, idolatry and injustice are inextricably intertwined.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder represents a counter-current within the stream of high Renaissance painting. In an era during which artists often made a substantial portion of their living by painting portraits of wealthy patrons, Bruegel's only portrait is his unconventional 'Portrait of an Old Woman'. By placing an ugly, open-mouthed peasant woman in a frame usually reserved for exaggerating the beauty of the social

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<sup>28</sup> A. W. Tozer makes a similar statement about Michelangelo's portrait of God in *The Attributes of God: Volume 2: Deeper Into the Father's Heart* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015) 114.

elite, Bruegel effectively dares us to see the beauty hidden in those who are generally excluded from the picture altogether. This sensibility recurs throughout his work, in which the daily details of peasant life often occupy the foreground. His famous ‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus’ relegates the protagonist of this mythological story about the danger of hubristic ambition to the background while placing at the centre of our attention a peasant farmer and his plough horse. The painting suggests that the fall of the mighty is inconsequential compared to the daily work of those ordinary labouring persons who comprise the majority of humanity and who are generally excluded from our stories of history and mythology alike. Bruegel’s aesthetic sensibility is perhaps most poignantly demonstrated by viewing his whole *oeuvre* through the lens of his ‘Procession to Calvary’. In this painting, Jesus is wearing his crown of thorns, and he has fallen under the weight of the cross. Though Christ is in the centre of the painting, he is so small that the details of his person can barely be seen. He is surrounded by a multitude of soldiers, spectators who have come to watch the execution, thieves who have come to pick the pockets of these spectators, and various indifferent passers-by. Everyone but Christ is wearing the contemporary garb of Flanders, and the scene resembles the carnival-like atmosphere of public executions in this region in the midst of its political upheavals during Bruegel’s time. The painting invites its onlookers — both among Bruegel’s contemporaries and in our own time — to see themselves in the crowd’s cruel indifference to the Son of God whose suffering is the centre of human existence whether we ignore him, mock him, or worship him. In summary, Bruegel’s aesthetic sensibility trains us to see the world in the light of the cross, which is the beauty of divine love hidden within the ugliness of a humanity that suffers under the burden of the world’s violence and injustice. Consequently, his work counterbalances the prevailing current of his time, in which a multitude of masterpieces run the risk of minimising the world’s brokenness and making too much of the beauties that the world typically celebrates.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For a similar perspective, see E. John Walford’s contrast between the works of Michelangelo with those of Raphael in his chapter ‘The Case for a Broken Beauty: An Art Historical Perspective’, in Treier, Husbands, and Lundin, *Beauty of God*, 87-109. For high quality, full-colour prints of all Bruegel’s works with helpful commentary, see Manfred Sellink, *Bruegel: The Complete Drawings, Paintings, and Prints* (Ghent: Ludion, 2007). Sellink’s comments have undoubtedly influenced my understanding of Bruegel’s work, though I draw some different conclusions.

Of course, it is quite possible for an aesthetic sensibility to emphasise the brokenness or meaninglessness of the world to an excessive degree that neither acknowledges the beauty remaining in the created order nor maintains any transcendent hope. Modern and postmodern aesthetic movements have often tended in this direction. At its best, art that emphasises the world's brokenness can be thought of as a kind of lament that carries within it the seed of eschatological hope. For example, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* exposes the despair and violence lurking beneath the sensual hedonism of its main characters in a way that ruthlessly exposes the banality that characterises much of human life east of Eden. In this respect, the novel shares certain spiritual undertones with the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, from which its title and epigraph are taken. However, much contemporary art revels in this meaninglessness of life rather than lamenting it. From the benign banality of *Seinfeld* to the overt celebration of brutal violence and sexual exploitation that runs throughout the majority of American cinematic productions, contemporary pop culture gives ample evidence in support of David Bentley Hart's observation that in the West 'our religion is one of very comfortable nihilism'.<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Katongole has written that the same 'playful nihilism' of the postmodern West is beginning to sweep across Africa and warns that this cultural movement threatens to destroy relationships, disintegrate communities, diminish the dignity of human persons, and deter African movements for justice and spiritual renewal.<sup>31</sup> In short, the despair that has characterised much of Western culture after the nineteenth century's 'death of God' and the twentieth century's subsequent bloodbaths is becoming a global phenomenon. Unlike the Renaissance era, the dominant aesthetic sensibilities of our own time seem to be starved of any meaningful celebration of the latent beauties of the world or any hope that a better world is possible.

We may extract a few principles from these brief reflections. A Christian theological aesthetic will be open to manifold (perhaps infinite) forms of artistic expression, but these forms need to be attuned both to the way things are and the way things ought to be. This is to

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<sup>30</sup> David Bentley Hart, 'Christ and Nothing', *First Things*, October 2003, paragraph 1, accessed 12 December 2014, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing>.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel M. Katongole. 'Postmodern Illusions and the Challenges of African Theology: The Ecclesial Tactics of Resistance', *Modern Theology*, 16.2 (200): 237-54.

say, all human art between Adam's fall and Christ's second advent must be shaped at some level by mourning for the world's brokenness and hope for the world's healing. Art that is not attuned to the ugliness and brokenness of much in the present world order will generally either fail to speak to us in any meaningful way or somehow mask the world's brokenness by portraying it as good. Conversely, art that neither sees any value in the world nor evokes any vision of truth, beauty, and goodness that transcend the world in its present state will generally cultivate despair (which can be expressed in sensual hedonism, escapism, triviality, violence, self-destruction, and a host of other forms). But great art shapes us in manifold ways to live beautifully in the world as it is while maintaining our awareness that a better world is possible. For the Christian, this awareness of a better world takes the form of deep assurance that God will unite all things in Christ and fill the new earth with the glory of his eternal truth, beauty, and goodness. Creating and enjoying such art is an expression of authentic human vocation and an important part of the church's participation in the beauty of God that is being disclosed in his redemption of the world.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to sketch out some contours of a Christian theological aesthetic. It is my conviction that here, as in all theology, the cross is the centre. The Father's eternal love for and delight in the Son in the fellowship of the Spirit is the perfection of all beauty, and this divine love has been made known to the world pre-eminently in the vicarious death of Jesus for the redemption of sinners. The church's witness to Christ calls the world to receive and participate in the beauty of God's love even as the church's good deeds of love bear witness to Christ. At present, this witness takes place within a created order that remains subjected to futility until the second coming of Christ, but the Spirit's presence in the church is the in-breaking of God's eschatological beauty within this fallen order. The Spirit draws our hearts to delight in the glory of God and to reflect this glory in a life of faith, hope, and love that is ordered towards the truth, beauty, and goodness of God. Our new life-in-the-Spirit involves learning the discernment to turn from the false allure of corrupted beauties and to

delight in true beauty as we receive it from God and from one another. As we learn to live this life of discerning discipleship, the Spirit renews in us the image of the beautiful Creator, which is, after all, what it means to be human.