

A Word to Sheepdogs

WITH SO MANY CONCERNS pressing upon us when it comes to proclaiming, teaching and defending the Christian faith in our chaotic times, artistic expression and aesthetics often falls by the wayside. David Fleming reminds us that the visual arts are not mere decoration or distraction but a vivid part of the Christian confession.

Amid all the moral and visual ugliness that seems to encroach increasingly upon our culture, the scriptural call to the beauty and splendor found in the Lord and His presence stands in vivid contrast. Pastor Fleming unpacks the meaning of “beauty” as it is found in the Bible and how careful attention to quality visual arts can appropriately accompany not only the church’s worship, but also private meditation and pastoral care. Replete with quotations from Luther and others, this essay will help you to reflect on the visual dimension of your ministry in the name and stead of Christ Jesus, who is “...the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”(Col 1:15)

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The Beauty of Holiness: Art and Aesthetics in Service of the Gospel

Pastor David C. Fleming

*“The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.”¹
Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 28.*

PONDER FOR A MOMENT the beauty of Adam and Eve before the fall. They were delightful to look at and delightful to be with. They were kind, compassionate, concerned only with their beloved and their Lord. Not the slightest worry about how they looked. Not a single ugly, angry, resentful, coveting thought or harsh word or lazy, impatient or rude act.

How disfigured and misshapen we are. Selfishness plagues our hearts daily. Arrogance ruins possible friendships or at least deeper ones. Scars from those who have sinned against us fill us with shame and anger, which leads to bitterness — a most revolting blemish. I’m not beautiful, in fact, I’m ugly: that’s what we’re confessing when we say, “I, a poor, miserable sinner” — a sinner that needs pity, help, rescue, love.

On the other hand, our Savior, Jesus Christ, he’s is eternally beautiful. There is no flaw or blemish or imperfection in him. Every thought is good, right, holy, true and loving. Every act and word is love. There’s no record of wrong in him. But when he saw the disfigurement of man turned in on himself, gross and disgusting — so far from the original beauty and lovely design, he did not look away. He fixed his loving gaze even more fully on us. He promised and kept his promise. He came not as the most beautiful of men — in

¹AE 31: 57

He said, as he pointed to a sizable projected, brutal image of Jesus dead on the cross. "Isn't it lovely?" Yes, it is. For in the full ugliness and horror of Golgotha and the dead corpse of lacerated, bloodied, stripped and contorted Jesus is the greatest love and the most beautiful thing ever.

fact, isn't it interesting there isn't a single physical description of Jesus in Holy Scripture? How tall was he? How heavy? What color eyes and hair did he have? Isaiah tells us that he wasn't particularly attractive (Isa 53:2). And in fact he becomes ugly, disfigured, and grotesque so that he might bear it all: all our selfishness, all our corruption, scars, heartbreaks, anger, hatred, brutality and vile lack of compassion. He bears it all.

I vividly remember Pastor William Cwirla's opening line of a lecture years ago. "Isn't it lovely?" He said, as he pointed to a sizable projected, brutal image of Jesus dead on the cross. "Isn't it lovely?" Yes, it is. For in the full ugliness and horror of Golgotha and the dead corpse of lacerated, bloodied, stripped and contorted Jesus is the greatest love and the most beautiful thing ever. How upside-down and inside-out the Gospel of our Jesus is! True love and true beauty are hidden behind the dreadful cross. The cross of Christ is the tree of life, of love, of true and lasting beauty. It's sprouting branches and offering cleansing, holy, forgiving, shame-destroying fruit that will never fail you — working on you from the inside out. To save his ugly, loveless bride, his love makes him ugly in her place. Jesus did not find a beautiful church and then love her; he loved his Church and made her beautiful as found in him. The image of our crucified Lord is indeed lovely in the deepest sense of the word: here is love, beautiful love.

Roger Scruton, a convert to Christianity through his careful study of art, conveys how art serves us:

Art, as we have known it, stands on the threshold of the transcendental. It points beyond this world

of accidental and disconnected things to another realm, in which human life is endowed with an emotional logic that makes suffering noble and love worthwhile. Nobody who is alert to beauty, therefore, is without the concept of redemption — of a final transcendence of mortal disorder into a 'kingdom of ends'.²

Art can compress into one image the snapshot of an entire story. A photograph of an injured girl fleeing in terror with flames behind her communicates the chaos of war in a way that pages of testimony cannot. It instantly draws the viewer into her story. Similarly, faithful art can proclaim the Gospel of Christ in concrete and helpful ways. As Martin Luther encouraged, "It was a good practice to hold a wooden crucifix before the eyes of the dying or to press it into their hands. This brought the suffering and death of Christ to mind and comforted the dying."³

Luther told stories of how a depiction of our crucified Lord destroyed idols and set in the sinner a saving reminder of the Gospel. Here is practical and powerful pastoral care through the means of faithful art. For example, Luther tells one account:

Once a monk was lying at the point of death. The other monks reminded him of his good works and merits, saying: "Bear in mind that you are a member of the Order of St. Francis, that you were a pious priest, that you diligently prayed your Psalter and read many Masses." Then he picked up a crucifix, held it aloft, and replied: "Why should I put my trust

² Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford Press, 2009, p. 188.

³ AE 23:360.

in an order? This Man did everything. I know of no work and merit other than that of this Man.”⁴

In Psalm 27 we’re taught to ask the Lord for one thing: “that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (Ps 27:4, ESV). It is this same word “beauty” *no’am* (נֹעַם) that is used by Moses in Psalm 90:17: “Let the favor *no’am* [נֹעַם beauty] of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!” (ESV)

Zechariah is directed by the LORD to shatter two staves — called beauty (נֹעַם) *no’am* and union (11:7–13). In so doing Zechariah is a picture of the coming Savior who would be rejected by people. In rejecting Christ at the price of thirty pieces of silver, as Zechariah prophesies, our incarnate LORD is both betrayed and mocked. Beauty is broken — in other words, the betrayed, suffering and crucified Savior is rejected.

What is this beauty? It appears to be his steadfast love, his grace, his friendliness.⁵ But why call it “beauty”? Evidently to draw us to meditate not just on words, but words made concrete in the God-ordained images and actions of the cultic life of Israel. The tabernacle, and later the temple, had many images designed by the Lord himself. These were not to be worshipped, but they were used with the God-given words and rituals to proclaim the Lord — particularly the beauty of the Lord’s mercy and restoration of beauty to a fallen creation. James B. Jordan in his intriguing book *Through New Eyes* ex-

plores the imagery of the tabernacle and temple and finds it replete with images of God’s creation and restoration.⁶

Dr. Scott Bruzek⁷ in his excellent congregational Bible studies on beauty helps us examine the Fall not only as the introduction of sin into the cosmos, but also ugliness, disorder and chaos. He imagines that our first glimpse in eternal life will take our breath away with its beauty as the new heavens and new earth will shine with a beauty beyond our imagination.

Perhaps because of Puritan influences inspired by Zwingli’s white-washing of churches and the removal of all images, there’s been a tendency in English Biblical translation to avoid the concreteness of some words. For example, there are two key Greek words for good: *agathos* (ἀγαθός) and *kalos* (καλός). The distinction between the two is that *agathos* is good as in morally good, right; whereas *kalos* is good as in beautiful. This opens so many passages, for example: “I am the Beautiful Shepherd,” (John 10:11); “To taste the beautiful word,” (Heb 6:5); “Provoke one another to love and beautiful works,” (Heb 10:24); and “Pray for us; for we are sure that we have a beautiful conscience to act in a beautiful way.” (Heb 13:18)

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⁴AE 22:387.

⁵Theodore Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1956, p. 472

⁶James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988. Here’s a small sample of his insights: “But most interesting is the institutionalized burning bush: the golden lampstand in the Tabernacle and Temple. 4 The lampstand was a stylized almond tree that burned with fire (Exod 25:31–40; 37:17–24). We can hardly avoid the connection with the burning bush.”

⁷ [http://www.stjohnwheaton.org/bible-studies/Beauty.](http://www.stjohnwheaton.org/bible-studies/Beauty)

Contrast this call for encouraging beautiful works and acts from Hebrews with Scruton's summary of our current time: "the most important characteristic of the postmodern culture: it is a loveless culture, determined to portray the human world as unlovable."⁸ As he also observes: "Beauty is vanishing from our world because we live as though it did not matter; and we live that way because we have lost the habit of sacrifice and are striving always to avoid it."⁹ To Scruton, sacrifice for another is true beauty and he observes that most of the time people avoid the hard work of serving another. Here we're back to the scriptural concept of beauty, especially in the saving work of Christ as he was sacrificed for us. We also observe beauty in the unrelenting love of spouses, parents, children, pastors and congregations. Serving when it's costly.

Scruton and several others have observed that as our world becomes increasingly coarse, chaotic and ugly, that beauty is particularly powerful — especially to millennials.

[H]ow do we find our way back to the thing so many people long for, which is the vision of beauty? It may sound a little sentimental to speak of a "vision of beauty." But what I mean is not some saccharine, Christmas-card image of human life but rather the elementary ways in which ideals and de-cencies enter our ordinary world and make themselves known, as love and charity make themselves known in Mozart's music. There is a great hunger for beauty in our world, a hunger that our popular

⁸ Roger Scruton, "Beauty and Desecration," *City Journal*, Spring 2009. www.city-journal.org/html/beauty-and-desecration-13172.html

⁹ Scruton, *Beauty* p 194.

art fails to recognize and our serious [that is, modern] art often defies.¹⁰

Beauty holds before a weary people — tired of shams, phoniness, chaotic and loveless ways — an image of hope, order and restoration. So the works encouraged by the author of Hebrews embody a beauty that attracts: the faithful marriage of one man and one woman; a congregation as the Body of Christ serving one another and neighbors with kindness and love; the sacrifice of a mother risking her life to save her child. Such beauty offers an icon of hope and of the coming restoration for all in Christ.

Martin Luther on Beauty

Mark Mattes' *Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* carefully examines Luther's own teaching on beauty, art, music, and its relationship to the Gospel. He observes, "For the Reformer, there is no imageless word: the word actually portrays, pictures, or images Christ as the only way in which it can give Christ."¹¹

As with other issues during the Reformation, Luther — while rejecting what is false and anti-gospel — does not discard everything. He defends the value of art in the church's life. Mattes describes how Luther landed where he did in regard to images:

Luther developed his theology of imaging in debate with two opponents: (1) iconophiles who treasured relics, images, and icons as essential features in normative spirituality and that had had a long precedent in the church, and

¹⁰ Scruton, "Beauty and Desecration".

¹¹ Mattes, Mark. *Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal*. Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Michigan. p.137.

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(2) aniconocists, including iconoclasts, whether humanists, such as Erasmus, or other Reformers, such as Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt or Ulrich Zwingli, who saw such practices as idolatrous and superstitious. With respect to the first, Luther claimed that such practices led to a false trust in works since, in this view, believers received merit in exchange for their veneration of the saint or holy one represented by the icon. The second group, those opposed to icons, assumed that they were in league with Luther's own agenda of reform, which appealed to the word alone and simplified the Mass. In contrast to Luther, however, aniconocists saw icons or relics as violating the biblical prohibition against graven images because they saw them as inseparable from their traditional, superstitious use.... But with respect to iconoclasts, Luther believed that evangelical liberty was at stake. When images lose saving import, they can be permitted, even welcomed, in worship and spirituality, since they teach, illustrate and adorn the word. After all, when the word portrays Christ, it imparts Christ to believers through images, thereby regenerating believers and leading them to do the good works appropriate to their vocations.¹²

It was Karlstadt's overly zealous reforms at Wittenberg, including the destruction of art, that drew Luther out of protective custody at the Wartburg and back into the pulpit. His *Invocavit* sermons and his reverent practice of the liturgy demonstrated that Luther and Karlstadt viewed things quite differently. Karlstadt

and the radical reformers "forbad anything not authorised in Scripture, while Luther authorised everything not forbidden in Scripture. There was a world of difference between these two perspectives. The one leads toward Puritanism, the other towards a reformed Catholicism."¹³ Thus for Lutherans, liturgy, art, images and music could be creatively used as long as they did not contradict the Gospel. Whereas for those who followed Karlstadt's lead, liturgy, art, images and music were to be eliminated because they are not prescribed by the apostles.

Luther defended his position in the light of Romans 14:23 and consequently allowed all that did not undermine the true teaching of the Gospel of Christ. In fact, for Luther the arts not only didn't undermine the Gospel, but could be quite helpful in proclaiming it.

The Reformer thought that the visual arts have an important role to play in presenting the gospel, which as an image-saturated word regenerates and transforms human imaginations and so alters sinners' hearts and minds. Such images reorient and govern Christian imaginations, enlighten thought and will, secure one's identity in Christ, and thus assist one in honoring God above all things and serving neighbors as a Christ to them. For Luther, if any criterion surfaces explicitly for discerning beauty in the visual arts, it is none other than the word itself, which evaluates all human activity.¹⁴

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¹² Mattes, 135–136.

¹³ Mattes, 144. Quoting Tonkin, John. "Word and Image: Luther and the Arts." *Colloq* 17 (1985): 47.

¹⁴ Mattes, 134.

Christ is beautiful according to the Gospel because he is made ugly for sinners' salvation. He identifies with those who are not perfect, bright and proportionate. Thus Jesus himself embraces a beauty that violates Aquinas' standards.

By using Holy Scripture as a criterion for judging art, Luther departs from the evaluation of beauty that was common in his day. He knew Aquinas' teaching that

beauty thus has three criteria: (1) *integritas sive perfectio*: nothing incomplete or insufficient is regarded as beautiful; (2) *proportio sive consonantia*: orderly proportion and harmony of the parts is required; (3) *claritas*: brightness in colors is generally seen as beautiful. Defying these three criteria of beauty, Luther early and late emphasized that Christ in his earthly ministry was not physically handsome, having "no form or comeliness," and was also rejected and condemned by people.¹⁵

Luther would use Aquinas' criteria in regard to nature, but not in regard to the Gospel. The Gospel reverses things in a beauty that cannot be seen without faith.

Luther's view requires a distinction between a law perspective and a gospel perspective on beauty. So he maintained that proportion, brightness, and completeness are appropriate standards *coram mundo* by which to assess beauty. But *coram deo* these criteria of beauty do not apply. Why? Unrepentant sinners view Christ as ugly because they are offended by his association with the lowly; they do not believe that they need his mercy. However, repentant sinners glory in Christ's beauty, which is his compassion, because they are hungry, even desperate, for God's forgiveness and mercy. Repentant sinners are adorned in Christ's beauty as a gift given externally to them. Forensically

speaking, God judges the ugly to be beautiful for Jesus' sake.¹⁶

Christ is beautiful according to the Gospel because he is made ugly for sinners' salvation. He identifies with those who are not perfect, bright and proportionate. Thus Jesus himself embraces a beauty that violates Aquinas' standards. As Luther teaches from Psalm 45:2 "You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore, God has blessed you forever." (ESV)

This King is hidden under the opposite appearance: in spirit He is more beautiful than the sons of men; but in the flesh all the sons of men are more beautiful than He, and only this King is ugly, as He is described in Isaiah 53:2, 3: "He had no form or comeliness; we looked at Him, but there was no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and the most contemptible of men, full of sorrows and infirmities; He was so contemptible that we turned our eyes away from Him." Therefore we see that delightful and pleasant things are stated of this King in the psalm, but they are enveloped and overshadowed by the external form of the cross. The world does not possess or admire these gifts; rather it persecutes them because it does not believe. These things are spoken to us, however, to let us know that we have such a king. All men are damned. Their beauty is nothing in God's eyes. Their righteousness is sin. Their strength is nothing either. All we do, think, and say by ourselves is damnable and deserving of eter-

¹⁵ Mattes, 79.

¹⁶ Mattes, 92.

nal death. We must be conformed to the image of this King.¹⁷

In a delightful little turn, then, confessing our sinfulness and ugliness before God, and trusting in Christ alone, we then can see the cosmos as it really is — a gift to us from our Lord. As Mattes summarizes, “Christ is goodness and beauty, and through Christ humans can understand and appreciate the world as creation, as gift and as God’s communication to us. In other words, the gospel opens creation as beautiful and confirms the human intuition of its beauty, again, not on the basis of an intellectual argument but because faith resituates humanity away from its tendency to claim some divine status for itself and toward a childlike trust that receives the goodness of creation as it comes to humanity from the Creator.”¹⁸

Luther on Art in the Church

Without a doubt Luther is more focused on the word as the key to truth and life, than art or music. But he argues that because our imagination is always producing images from what we hear or read, images are inescapable for humans. In writing against the radical reformers’ position that images have no place in the Church and must be destroyed, Luther explains that the proclaimed Gospel automatically creates pictures in our mind.

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or

not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes? This is especially true since the heart is more important than the eyes, and should be less stained by sin because it is the true abode and dwelling place of God.¹⁹

Additionally for Luther, God consistently deals with us through outward means and the word of our Lord is put in concrete, outward forms to be able to reach us and open our hearts.

Now when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him, as he says in Luke 16[:29], “Let them hear Moses and the prophets.”²⁰

Consequently, for Luther, the Christian of his day (and, no doubt, ours) actually has more concrete proof of

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¹⁷ AE 12: 208–209.

¹⁸ Mattes, 112.

¹⁹ AE 40:99–100.

²⁰ AE 40:146.

God's promises, salvation and truth than anyone in Holy Scripture.

You have no reason to complain that you have been visited less than Abraham or Isaac. You, too, have appearances, and in a way they are stronger, clearer, and more numerous than those they had, provided that you open your eyes and heart and take hold of them. You have Baptism. You have the Sacrament of the Eucharist, where bread and wine are the species, figures, and forms in which and under which God in person speaks and works into your ears, eyes, and heart. Besides, you have the ministry of the Word and teachers through whom God speaks with you. You have the ministry of the Keys, through which He absolves and comforts you.²¹

This embodied, concrete, outward word can be of great comfort to the troubled soul. Because it comes from outside of us and is tangible to our senses, it offers a stability and comfort from the turmoil and confusion that fills the thinking of a burdened soul. Even as Luther rejects the provision of images to the church as a service benefiting the sinner — as if the giver earns something for his gift — he maintains that the help some images provide for troubled souls means that they are worthy of being kept.

For whoever places an image in a church imagines he has performed a service to God and done a good work, which is downright idolatry. But this, the greatest, foremost, and highest reason for abolishing images, you have passed by, and fastened on the least important reason of all. For I suppose

there is nobody, or certainly very few, who do not understand that yonder crucifix is not my God, for my God is in heaven, but that this is simply a sign. But the world is full of that other abuse; for who would place a silver or wooden image in a church unless he thought that by so doing he was rendering God a service? Do you think that Duke Frederick, the bishop of Halle, and the others would have dragged so many silver images into the churches, if they thought it counted for nothing before God? No, they would not bother to do it. But this is not sufficient reason to abolish, destroy, and burn all images. Why? Because we must admit that there are still some people who hold no such wrong opinion of them, but to whom they may well be useful, although they are few. Nevertheless, we cannot and ought not to condemn a thing which may be any way useful to a person.²²

The Reformer urges art to be produced that will hold before the eyes of all depictions of the story of Holy Scripture.

Now there are a great many pictures in those books [Luther's German Bible], both of God, the angels, men and animals, especially in the Revelation of John and in Moses and Joshua. So now we would kindly beg them to permit us to do what they themselves do. Pictures contained in these books we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding, since they do no more harm on walls than in books. It is to be sure better to paint pictures on walls of how God created the world, how Noah

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²¹AE 5:21.

²²AE 51:84.

built the ark, and whatever other good stories there may be, than to paint shameless worldly things. Yes, would to God that I could persuade the rich and the mighty that they would permit the whole Bible to be painted on houses, on the inside and outside, so that all can see it. That would be a Christian work.²³

It's no surprise then that Luther was godfather to the artist Lucas Cranach's youngest child²⁴ and that Cranach's work in the church flourished in depicting Holy Scripture and Luther's teaching of the Gospel. "For Cranach, church art was the painter's staple, while for Luther, art gave the gospel sermon immediacy and the church a captive audience."²⁵ Art, sermon, and song were integrated together to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a newfound fullness and joy.

Between and between the sermons, hymns, and sacraments, the personal lives of the needy in the congregation were woven into the service, there to be dramatized and resolved by the new art as well. *The Wittenberg Altarpiece*, Cranach's supreme achievement in the genre after thirty years of altar building, brought together a preeminent cast of biblical visitors, who joined in with the local worthies at the Last Supper. Such homespun cameos presented real-life drams that were immediately embraced by the congregation. Assisted by these representations, the congregants took comfort from and gave thanks to

²³ AE 40:99.

²⁴ Ozment, Steven. *The Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther and the Making of the Reformation*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 2011, page 5.

²⁵ Ozment, 148.

God for the kinder moments of life.²⁶

Luther speaks of the faith as a seeing and a gazing at Christ Jesus. Here is an example from Luther's commentary on Galatians. He's commenting on Galatians 3:28 "for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Therefore faith is a constant gaze that looks at nothing except Christ, the Victor over sin and death and the Dispenser of righteousness, salvation, and eternal life. In his epistles, therefore, Paul sets forth and urges Jesus Christ in almost every verse. He sets him forth through the Word, since Christ cannot be set forth any other way than through the Word and cannot be grasped any other way than through faith.

This is beautifully shown by the story of the bronze serpent, which is a figure of Christ (John 3:14). The Jews, who were being bitten by the fiery serpents, were commanded by Moses to do nothing but look at that bronze serpent with a fixed gaze. Those who did so were healed merely by their fixed gaze at the serpent. But the others, who did not listen to Moses, looked at their wounds rather than at the serpent and died. Thus if I am to gain comfort in a struggle of conscience or in the agony of death, I must take hold of nothing except Christ alone by faith, and I must say: "I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered, was crucified, and died for me. In his wounds and death I see my sin; and in his resurrection I see victory over sin, death, and the devil, and my righteousness

²⁶ Ozment, 156.

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and life. I neither hear nor see anything but Him.”²⁷

As Mattes summarizes:

Luther constantly admonishes believers to “take hold” of this imaged Christ as they apprehend, gaze upon, and indeed know him. In this way, Christ’s favor is exchanged for our sinful liabilities, and the believer is united with Christ. Hence, such imaging is not merely didactic but also regenerative, even transformative. The preached or scriptural word hold forth images of Christ and God’s action for redemption not just for human imitation but primarily for the believer’s assurance and even identity as a new person in Christ.²⁸

The Use of Art in the Cure of Souls

It’s popular to say that you cannot “unsee” things. Sadly, there is much in life in a fallen world that it would be best to “unsee”: accidents, fights, pornography, sins, trauma and death. Since art can communicate to reframe the imagination and focus the soul, faithful art can be quite helpful in the cure and care of souls.

Recently a pastor was asked to meet with a preschool girl after an unexpected and frightening trauma. The girl had been with her grandfather at a park. Suddenly a police car was driven directly at the grandfather; evidently the grandfather looked something like an active shooter suspect. The girl was an eye witness to seeing her grandfather barely escape major injury from a police car. The pastor asked the girl to draw a picture of

what happened. At first she drew the situation that day, but without the evil that nearly severely injured her grandfather. The pastor asked her to add the evil to the picture. She did. Then, after listening to her explanation of the picture, the pastor suggested something was missing from the drawing. The angels were missing. When asked how she might picture her angel, the girl offered that her angel would have glitter and a rainbow (she is a preschool girl, after all). When the pastor later saw the girl coming to preschool, he greeted her with joy and told her, “I see the angel. Right there with you.” The girl smiled and laughed with delight.

That pastor used art to help a traumatized girl see the reality from a heavenly point of view. Perhaps a picture of Michael the Archangel guarding the faithful, a crucifix, or Jesus as the Beautiful Shepherd guarding his dear flock could be placed in the girl’s room or somewhere prominent in the house, to focus her soul on the Lord’s promises never to leave her or forsake her, his baptized child. Some beautiful reminder of the Lord’s promise to work everything together for our good as we love and trust in him could be placed in her grandfather’s car or even at the park itself. These images, like the memorial stones that the children of Israel occasionally erected, could remind the girl and her family of the Lord’s mercy.

When a parishioner experienced a humiliating sexual attack and miscarried her child, her pastor blessed the bedroom where the miscarriage took place and countless nightmares had interrupted sleep. With prayer for the Lord’s protection, thankfulness for the miscarried child, and certain hope anchored in the sacri-

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²⁷ AE 26:356–357.

²⁸ Mattes, 154.

ficial death of Christ for the mother and her child, a crucifix was blessed and hung in the bedroom. The burdened soul reported that the crucifix has been a beautiful reminder of her Lord's sacrificial love and undeniable care for her. It's been a helpful tool in sleeping well again and resting under the Lord's watchfulness.

Decades ago, Pastor Walter Otten told new pastors that using a substantial and beautiful chalice and paten with linens when communing the homebound and ill helped communicate to him and the communicant the weighty reality of this holy sacrament. The deliberate celebration of the sacrament with fitting solemnity and joy focused their attention together on the arrival of heaven on earth in such a common place. Others report that having a beautiful cloth to place beneath the sacred vessels communicates the beauty of holiness appearing in the Divine Service. Other pastors bring icons with them on such visitations.

When I recently added a crucifix to the portable communion set that I use, I was quite surprised by the response. A dear octogenarian, who has never been one to talk about our congregation's art, reported without prompting that the crucifix had been a great help to him. He reported that it focused his attention, reminded him that his Lord knew suffering, died for him out of great love and bore his temporary bedridden condition with him.

Pastor Tyler Arnold in his excellent *Seelsorger* essay on care for patients with dementia²⁹ suggests that it can be quite helpful to have the patient hold familiar objects, such

²⁹ Arnold, Tyler. "Slowly Dying Inside: Pastoral Care for Those with Dementia/Alzheimer's." *Seelsorger* 3, 2017, pp. 25-46.

as a cross. The tactile sensation of a familiar cross brings comfort.

In some cases, parents of miscarried children find comfort through a card that pictures the pierced hands of Jesus carefully cradling a miscarried baby. The image incorporates the words of Psalm 116:15, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

When a woman was plagued with anxiety in a care facility, her daughter mounted in her room a large print of Jesus having calmed the storm. The woman spent time studying the picture and focusing on Christ's outstretched arms. Some of those who visited her found the beautiful reminder of the Lord's care helpful as they helped her.

Several pastors have arranged their studies in such a way that a crucifix, beautiful images of our Lord and his teaching, icons, and pictures of the beauty of creation are aids in studying, praying and receiving souls in need of pastoral care. These lend a calm, settled, and hopeful welcome to those who enter. As will be mentioned below under the uses of faithful art, these images in the pastor's study can be useful tools for looking together at something and talking about it, rather than talking directly. Such indirect speech can allow a soul to see or hear something without undue anxiety or defensiveness.

Some pastors have had first-rate art professionally printed on large cards and have added a meditation on an appropriate Scripture printed on the back side. These had been well received by hospitalized, homebound and burdened members. Occasionally these remain visible for years.

For conscience-crushed souls, the gift of a crucifix, a picture of the

When a woman was plagued with anxiety in a care facility, her daughter mounted in her room a large print of Jesus having calmed the storm. The woman spent time studying the picture and focusing on Christ's outstretched arms.

prodigal son being welcomed home or a framed copy of their baptismal certificate may assist Absolution, Scripture and the blessed sacrament in holding before their eyes the Lord's unrelenting mercy.

Beautiful, faithful art can be creatively and wisely employed in assisting the traumatized, burdened and shamed soul to let Christ's sacrificial love linger in the eye and mind. It allows the mind to be occupied as Saint Paul encourages in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (ESV)

The Benefits of Faithful Art

Faithful art accomplishes several things: it draws people into the story; it is an embodied word; it serves as a lively teaching tool; it continually confesses the truth; it teaches the relationship between redemption and the redemption of creation; it is an aid to visual meditation; it helps transform imagination and creativity; and it provides an opportunity to speak the Gospel in a "distant" or "indirect" way.³⁰

First, faithful art draws people into the story of our Lord's salvific work. Just as Luther encouraged holding a crucifix before the sick and dying to point them to Christ's salvation, so faithful art invites the viewer in. Edward Riojas, a Lutheran and an artist, has since 1989 crafted sev-

³⁰A helpful introduction to indirect speech or "distant" preaching is Michael Brothers, *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014.

eral major installations at Lutheran churches — five of which will be referenced in this essay. He writes this about his painting of the Prodigal Son and how it brings the viewer into Jesus' narrative:

We are witnesses of the miraculous, unfathomable moment when, led by the Holy Spirit, this wasted hulk of a human is drawn to his Father. The play of darkness against light is only a hint of what greater contrasts exist. In this split-second moment, justice is traded for grace, death is traded for life, and eternal condemnation is traded for eternal life. His feet are cut and bruised and dirty and smeared with the unspeakable places that he's been, but those feet are pointed toward heaven. Here the words of Holy Scripture *must* be allowed free course.... "But when he was yet a great way off, his Father saw him, and had compassion." This is echoed in St. Paul's letter to the Romans 5:8 "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us." Yes, he was a great way off. We all are. We will be until our dying day. We may take pride that we go to the Father, but at best, we shuffle and slip and backslide. Instead, the Father runs to us. He *runs!*

Riojas calls the viewer's attention to the placement of the returning son: he's in the center to highlight that his place is ours. The Father runs to the viewer!

Second, faithful art is an embodied word. Luther taught that images come to our minds as we hear the Holy Scriptures, so faithful art makes these images concrete, embodied and available to us. Scruton,

Riojas calls the viewer's attention to the placement of the returning son: he's in the center to highlight that his place is ours. The Father runs to the viewer!

who was converted during his study of Christian art, writes, “Even for the unbeliever, therefore the ‘real presence’ of the sacred is now one of the highest gifts of art.”³¹ If a white-washed Zwinglian cathedral is the ideal, then the word appears disembodied. To be sure, art is not equal to the embodiment of our Lord in the blessed sacrament of the altar, but it can be a concrete expression of the Gospel.

Third, faithful art serves as a lively teaching tool. Every sighted person gathered in the pews at Our Savior Lutheran Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, is surrounded by a nearly 160-foot depiction of the *Te Deum Laudamus*. Everyone in this multi-paneled painting either faces the central image of Christ Jesus at the Tree of Life or is a pastor standing in the stead of Christ enacting Jesus’ word of forgiveness. In this one simple aspect of the work it teaches the pastor’s calling: to teach, preach, absolve, baptize and celebrate for the benefit of Christ’s holy people by Christ’s charge.

Fittingly, for Redemption Lutheran Church in Battle Creek, Rioja’s sizeable painting “The Redemption” is mounted on the north wall. Pastor Karl Strenge observed that “redemption, as a concept, is more complicated to express.” He wrote, “The name, Redemption, as used in the New Testament, gives us an understanding of freedom. The word we translate to ‘redemption,’ might also be translated to liberation, buying back (as in buying one out of slavery), or as a release from pain or from captivity. This defines us as a congregation. We have been redeemed out of sin, death, and the power of the devil. Our redemption

has come to us, the prison walls have fallen, and the chains of death are loosed, because our Redeemer has paid for our liberation. Redemption then is what is depicted in the painting which fills our north wall.”

Pastor Joshua Haller claims the Riojas’ *Resurrection* Polyptych, installed at Grace Lutheran Church in Fairgrove, Michigan, “makes my preaching that much easier for me. So many times I’ve referenced this piece; especially I love the picture of Christ as he points to the marks in his hands, and as he is pointing to those marks, it’s almost as if he is saying, ‘Right here. This is it. This is where I save you. This is where I died for you that you might live.’ And where do we receive those marks but here at this altar.”

Fourth, faithful art continually confesses the truth. Pastor Jonathon Krenz served at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Dorr, Michigan. In the narthex stands a nearly life-sized mosaic of the Baptism of our Lord crafted by Mr. Riojas. Pastor Krenz writes:

In my ministry at Epiphany, I looked at that mosaic every day. It is in just the right spot. You can’t avoid it. It leads you to meditation upon it. It helped me to see myself in the water with Jesus, and to see my precious sheep in the water with Jesus. It has often been a source of reflection for my preaching and teaching, whether implicitly (in my own meditation) or explicitly (drawing attention to the mosaic as an illustration).

What was surprising to many in the congregation is the confession of Christ the artwork made to others in the community. Whenever we would have a community activity in the church building, I would often see people stopping by to

What was surprising to many in the congregation is the confession of Christ the artwork made to others in the community.

³¹Scruton, *Beauty*, p. 188

Such a joyful image allows the viewer to meditate on the saving work of Christ, the eternal hope we have, the comfort of being gathered with all the souls made perfect as the church is gathered by Christ around his Body and Blood, and the resurrection of the body at Christ's final return.

look at the mosaic. Some even asked questions about it. The most touching example for me is a woman who used to walk laps around our parking lot every afternoon. On her last lap she would stop at our front doors and peer in at the mosaic. I asked her about it one time, and she said she was stopping to reflect on the artwork and say a prayer.

Every pastor whose Michigan congregation has a Riojas' work has observed people examining the work of art even when there isn't a Divine Service or a teaching opportunity. When there's no pastor around, the art is confessing. This is why clarity is such an important characteristic of faithful art; the more the art is able to speak for itself, the more continual the confession by that piece. One pastor even quipped that he tells his congregation, "Don't listen to me, just look."

Fifth, faithful art teaches the relationship between redemption and the redemption of creation, for in its elements of the creation are arranged to proclaim Christ's work of the new creation. Not only can this be seen in Mr. Riojas' incorporation of all sorts of animals, plants, insects and molecular structure into the *Te Deum* Polyptych, but also, the fact that wood, paint, metal, and stone are used in the work of many faithful artists to display the Gospel shows that even these elements are redeemed.

Sixth, faithful art is an aid in visual meditation and contemplation. At Grace Lutheran Church in Fairgrove, the *Resurrection* Polyptych — a depiction of the third stanza of "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" — catches the eye of nearly every visitor and pulls them forward with the

resurrected saints toward the image of Christ Jesus pointing at the nail wound in his hand. The viewer is called to look forward to the day of Christ's return and the resurrection of all, including the viewer, who is propelled toward the Spirit, the Father and the crucified and risen Son. Such a joyful image allows the viewer to meditate on the saving work of Christ, the eternal hope we have, the comfort of being gathered with all the souls made perfect as the church is gathered by Christ around his Body and Blood, and the resurrection of the body at Christ's final return. In such meditation is comfort for everyone who mourns a Christian's death and who faces his own.

Seventh, faithful art helps transform imagination and creativity. A visual representation of our Lord's word and work creatively stirs up connections and ideas that are fully Biblical, but never considered before. For example, in the *Te Deum* Polyptych, a preschool student noted that a demon — overwhelmed by an army of angels — is attempting to attack a Christian with a bone as his only weapon. The preschooler asked why a bone? And offered his own answer: the fear of death, a surprising reference to Hebrews 2:14–15.

Finally, faithful art also provides a place for indirect proclamation of the Gospel. Why would an indirect proclamation of the Gospel be helpful? Consider the wise Spirit-inspired strategy that Nathan employed when confronting King David indirectly through a story of a stolen ewe lamb. It enabled him to then turn to make a direct call for repentance and directly enact forgiveness. Art provides the preacher with a place for the hearers to look so that he can address them indirectly. ("Let's look over there and

let me tell you about that.”) It’s a joy to lead all sorts of people through the *Te Deum* Polyptych at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is confessed in many different ways by a simple presentation of the art. The rich depiction of Jesus’ birth, suffering, death, burial and resurrection — all directly behind the baptismal font — give an opportunity to proclaim Jesus’ saving work and our inclusion into it by Holy Baptism. The vibrant expression of Christ’s return in judgment offers warning and comfort. The creative display of the resurrection of the dead — as Jesus yanks the dead out of their graves — offers a ready hope to mourners.

Some Concerns

There are limitations to art in the Church as well. Poorly executed work or work that is theologically shallow or incorrect can be a hindrance. While the childish art of a preschooler brings joy to parents and grandparents, church art needs to be of high quality and integrity so as not to distract from the message it is designed to display. Work that has no depth or creative appreciation of the reality of our Lord’s incarnate saving work also may be speaking against the clear and faithful teaching of the Office of the Holy Ministry. Faithful pastors and congregations will want to be intentional and careful in their selection of artists and work for display in the Lord’s house.

We’re used to multiple images flashed at us on screens of every variety at home, at work, at school, at the movies and at sporting events. So often these images are trying to manipulate the viewer to buy a product or think a certain way about a political issue. The flashing of multi-

ple images communicates abstract, transient ideas. In the church and her gathering around the means of grace, concrete, permanent images are to be preferred as they express the unchanging nature of our Lord and his sacred gifts. If, however, projected images are used, some might consider showing several images during a service or sermon, but one of the goals of art is to slow things down, to hold a single still image before the viewer. Consequently, a single image and perhaps a single Biblical text held still throughout the service (or at least throughout the sermon) would be best. Ideally it’s better if that image isn’t a photograph, but is of art.

Criteria for Choosing Art for a Church

In choosing art for a congregation’s use in its sanctuary or nave, consider these five criteria:

First, it must be Christ-centered. That is, the point of the work is to direct the viewer to Christ Jesus. Of course depictions of the Father and the Holy Spirit function this way, for you cannot have the one without the other. But this is the criterion that caused Luther to reject the use of images that would point away from Christ.

Second, it will ultimately tell the Gospel of the crucified Savior and his people. Since this is the theological point of a well-crafted church — drawing one to the Altar where the holiness of the Lord Jesus Christ is distributed under bread and wine, to the font where the Holy Spirit connects a person to Jesus’ saving death and resurrection, to the places where the Holy Scriptures that all proclaim Christ is read and preached

The flashing of multiple images communicates abstract, transient ideas. In the church and her gathering around the means of grace, concrete, permanent images are to be preferred as they express the unchanging nature of our Lord and his sacred gifts.

While faithful art is not necessary, like the anointing of Jesus' feet it is a beautiful way to confess the Christ whom we love much because he has forgiven us much.

— it seems wise that church art would function in harmony with this.

Third, art serves best that fits with the space in which it is displayed. Consequently, art that just reprints work from somewhere else might not be the best choice. Its original intent was for another place.

Fourth, for original work to be commissioned, be careful to select a trusted artist. This would be an artist that has a proven ability or provides a complete model of what will be made so that it can be carefully examined before being accepted.

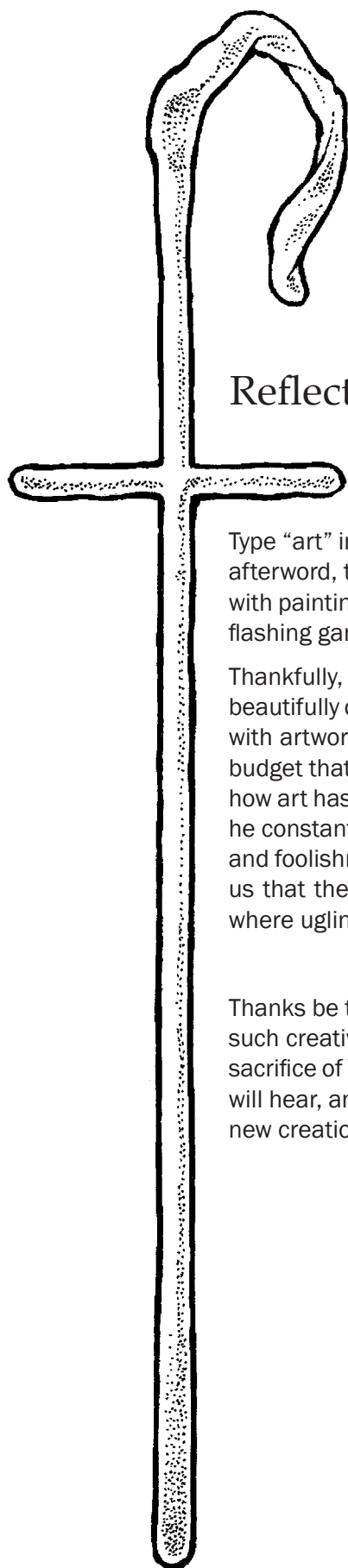
Fifth, for the work to best proclaim what is believed, taught and confessed, it is wise that the work be grounded in a careful study of Holy Scripture and the confessions of the church — at least the Small Catechism.

While faithful art is not necessary, like the anointing of Jesus' feet it is a beautiful way to confess the Christ whom we love much because he has forgiven us much. Artistic beauty is employed to show the ever-beautiful love of our Lord for his church and indeed for all. In the crucifixion of Christ he becomes ugly so that by reception through faith of his baptismal cleansing we may be his beautiful bride without stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish. ■■

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Reflection

Type “art” into Google image search, and you get quite a variety. As of the writing of this afterword, the first rows feature Van Gogh’s “Starry Night,” lots of abstract work, along with paintings of rainbow-colored unicorns, a cigar-smoking gorilla and Wonder Woman flashing gang signs. As they say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Thankfully, it is God who first beholds us and looks upon us with favor, who sees us beautifully clothed in Christ’s righteousness; and it is only fitting that Christians respond with artwork that proclaims His marvelous deeds. While not every congregation has a budget that allows for original commissioned works, Pastor Fleming has demonstrated how art has an important role in daily pastoral care in the parish. Throughout the essay, he constantly returns to the beauty of the crucified Christ — certainly a stumbling-block and foolishness to many, but perhaps the beautiful portrayals of that ugly death remind us that the cross is a portal and its Victim is now enthroned and exalted in heaven, where ugliness will be no more.



Thanks be to You, Almighty God, for the beauty of the earth, which You have made with such creativity; and thank You all the more for the beauty of Your love embodied in the sacrifice of Your Son. Grant to Your servants beautiful feet to bring Good News to all who will hear, and sustain Your people by Your grace until that day when we are revealed as new creations in Christ, Your workmanship clothed in Your Son’s glory forever. Amen.

Pastor Timothy J. Pauls