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A Christian Vision of Beauty, Part Two

The Christian vision of beauty explains why the world is beautiful, but not quite. We are often struck by the beauty of the created order, and this feeling is validated for us in Genesis chapter 1, where the Creator's own verdict is that the creation is good. The goodness of creation is therefore nonnegotiable, and again the unity of the transcendentals reminds us that if it is good, then it is also necessarily true, and real, and beautiful. Thus our metaphysic and our aesthetic, our understanding of truth and our evaluation of ethics, all come together in creation. The creation as God made it was good and beautiful and true and real.

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The Christian vision of beauty opens an entirely new awareness for us. We now begin to understand that there is a moral context, a truth context, to every question about beauty. We can no longer talk about beauty as a mere matter of taste. Instantly, by affirming the unity of the transcendentals, we are required to see beauty fundamentally as a matter of truth to which taste is accountable, rather than a matter of taste to which truth is accountable.

Let me follow through with three basic implications of the Christian vision of truth and beauty. First, the Christian vision of beauty explains why the world is beautiful, but not quite. We are often struck by the beauty of the created order, and this feeling is validated for us in Genesis chapter 1, where the Creator's own verdict is that the creation is good. The goodness of creation is therefore nonnegotiable, and again the unity of the transcendentals reminds us that if it is good, then it is also necessarily true, and real, and beautiful. Thus our metaphysic and our aesthetic, our understanding of truth and our evaluation of ethics, all come together in creation. The creation as God made it was good and beautiful and true and real.

But of course, we then must proceed to Genesis chapter 3, where we learn that the disruption and confusion over beauty—the corruption of the very concept of beauty—is not derived from a mere fault in human perception; it is rather a matter of human rebellion. Genesis 3 is a picture of the beautiful denied, of the real, the good, and the true rejected in favor of mankind's desire to be as God.

The cosmic effect of Adam's fall extended even to the natural world, so that what once could tell only the truth now lies. In verse 6, we read: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and she ate, and she gave also to her husband with her and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were open, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings."

Thus we are warned that that which is a delight to the eyes may very well be unbeautiful. Our human temptation is to substitute the truly beautiful for that which is merely a delight to our senses and a delight to our eyes, and thus we also are drawn to the forbidden fruit of a corrupt and fallen culture.

Verse 7 teaches that once Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes were opened. Following the mentality of the Enlightenment, this would appear not to be a Fall at all, but a rise. After all, a human capacity that had been absent is now present. Eyes that have been able to see only the beautiful have been opened, but that opening leads not to enlightenment, but to confusion and corruption. Their eyes were opened, and the first thing they saw is that they were naked. That which had only been seen as beautiful and good and true now became a thing of embarrassment and shame. So Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

The Creator's verdict upon sin is made clear in the remainder of Genesis 3, and we see again that there are cosmic consequences. The ground itself will demonstrate the effects of the Fall. In verse 22, we find: "Then the Lord God said,

‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil. And now, he might stretch out his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live forever.’ Therefore the Lord God sent him out from the Garden of Eden to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. So He drove the man out, and at the east of the Garden of Eden, He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword, which turned every direction to guard the way to the Tree of Life.” Because of sin, the earth would now become hostile. That which had willingly yielded its fruit must now be cultivated. By the sweat of the brow, the man would have to work the field, even as the pains of childbirth would also now demonstrate the effect of the Fall in the woman herself.

So in Genesis chapter 1, we have the perfection of God’s created order—the unity of the transcendentals. Now, however, the unity of the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real has been sundered, and thus we are plunged into confusion and rebellion. Yet even still, the world is beautiful—though not quite. In other words, there is a vestigial beauty in creation that calls out to all concerning the reality of God. This is reflected, of course, throughout the Psalms, where we are reminded that the heavens tell the glories of God. The firmament, the seas, the crawling and creeping things—all of them cry forth the wonder, the reality, and the goodness of the Creator.

Despite this, however, human beings are given to corrupting even this expression of beauty. For one thing, it is all too easy to worship the creation rather than the Creator. We can very quickly look at the creation and think that it is beautiful in itself, rather than having been made beautiful by the One who alone is beautiful. We can begin to look at the human creature as beautiful in and of himself, rather than beautiful because he or she is made in the image of God. Thus we adopt and bring into the very center of our hearts a corrupted understanding of beauty that bears more signs of the Fall than of the common grace that allows us—even as fallen creatures—to see this beauty.

There is another problem, of course, with the beauty of creation: It often lies. In the oceans, there is a fish known as the lionfish. It is incredibly beautiful—and venomous. In the Amazon jungles, there are many frogs, some a beautiful verdant green, some almost unimaginably purple, some almost iridescently yellow—and all deadly, such that the aboriginal peoples in those places would often use the fluid on the skin of these animals to poison their darts. That which looks beautiful to the eyes can kill, and thus we have learned not to trust our apprehension of beauty.

All this confusion about the created world is a symptom of our fallenness, but it is not just human beings that are affected by sin, by the severing of the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real. Creation as a whole finds itself groaning because of human sin. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul speaks of God’s work of redemption in all of its comprehensive glory, including creation itself. He writes: “For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now, and not only this, but we also ourselves, having the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.”

The work of redemption has cosmic significance. That which has been corrupted by sin is to be restored, but even now in this age, we are to see it and understand it as groaning, anxiously awaiting the revelation of the sons of God.

In Revelation 21, we have the end of the story, and even as we began with a perfect creation, we have here the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will be no longer any death; there will no longer be any mourning or crying or pain; the first things have passed away.’ And He sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ And He said, ‘Write, for these words are faithful and true.’ Then He said to me, ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and He will be My son.’”

Beginning in verse 10, John writes about the new Jerusalem: “And He carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which were the names of the twelve tribes of the

sons of Israel. There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west.”

The beauty of the new Jerusalem is reflected in language about precious and semi-precious stones. The streets are said to be made of gold. All this has been turned into the stuff of gospel music, but the picture is much more of beauty than of opulence. It is meant to cause us to think about what a redeemed city would actually be, how it would appear. This is creation reset, a new heaven and a new earth, and now a new Jerusalem. Thus we have the completion of God’s redeeming work, and it comes with the revelation not only of the sons of God, but of the Son of God, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, who after all was the firstborn of all creation, the One through whom all the worlds were made, and the Logos who was the very instrument of the creation itself.

So the Christian worldview explains to us why the world is beautiful—but not quite. As the Psalmist says, the world indeed tells forth the glory of God, but it does so in fallenness. The world contains things of prettiness that are deadly, and the inclination of human beings is to worship the creature and the creation rather than the Creator. The world is now groaning under the effect of sin and the wrath and judgment of God. That explains a great deal to us, including natural evil—hurricanes and earthquakes and tsunamis, venomous fish and poisonous plants. Yet it was not always so, and it will not always be so. Scripture points us toward the restoration of all things. The Christian understanding of beauty is an eschatological view, one that looks forward to the unveiling of true beauty, which will come on the day of the Lord when the Alpha and the Omega will be seen as the beautiful One.

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