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Luther's Theology of Beauty

by MARK MATTES

Lutheran reflections on theological aesthetics, the theory of beauty in relation to God and how the senses contribute to matters of faith, have been few and far between.¹ This is not for a lack of Lutheran achievements in music, architecture, poetry, painting, and sculpture.² But rarely do thinkers connect the dots between the beautiful artifacts of Lutheran faith and Lutheranism's sturdy theology. Sadly, it is often assumed that Protestantism has little to offer aesthetics because it favors the word but not images, and that it values good preaching but not iconography. Perhaps an important exception to the dearth of aesthetic inquiry from a Lutheran perspective would be the counter-Enlightenment thinker Johann Georg Hamann's brief essay "Aesthetica in Nuce," but Hamann has sadly not been at the forefront of Lutheran theology.³

The Spirituality of the Heart

Even so, a Lutheran approach to aesthetics should not be neglected if we are to be at all true to Martin Luther himself. Luther's theology is one of "the heart." One can hardly read Luther without encountering his anchoring of theological enquiry in the heart. In the *Large Catechism* Luther most succinctly describes the rapport between God and the human heart. The Reformer ties the heart to having "a God": "To cling to him [God] with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good."⁴ This true worship is to be distinguished from idolatry which "does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils."⁵ Humans are designed to be creatures of trust, and when they entrust their lives into the care of the biblical God, they encounter not an image of their own

power or greed but instead the benevolence of Triune goodness. Such faith for Luther spontaneously generates love for God above all things, and genuine concern for neighbors, along with all “creatures.” That is, to be human is to be captivated: one’s heart is either captivated by God or instead by various idols erected by the self. Thus, humans are captivated by what they believe is trustworthy; what they believe they can trust they deem to be not only good, but also beautiful—desirable—and evoking delight. One is either beguiled by idols of one’s own making or one is enraptured into the arms of Jesus Christ, the true icon of God.

Throughout his career Luther was concerned with how hearts are made new, how sin as being turned in on oneself is overcome, and how a new person is brought forth. Even activities generally regarded as holy, such as pilgrimages and fasting, were actually quests for self-fulfillment and kept one curved-in-on-the-self. But those receiving God’s mercy find God’s love to be not only liberating but also genuinely fulfilling—a byproduct of living outside oneself in God and in the neighbor, where God intends us to be. Luther’s view of delight resonates with that of Jesus’ paradoxical admonition that whoever would save his life must lose it and whoever loses his life for Jesus’ sake will find it (Matthew 16:25).

In spite of the fact that all people are captivated by some power which claims their hearts, many contemporary people have a hard time affirming the reality and truth of beauty. They regard matters of taste as culturally conditioned; they see it as wrong to favor any one culture over another by affirming the beauty granted within one’s own culture. Better to say that nothing is truly beautiful: beauty is only an artifice or a construct, not a reality, a subjective experience in the “eye of the beholder.” After all, unlike the hard sciences, what measure exists to map beauty? It is simply a projection of the beholder—and nothing more. All we have are different cultural perceptions of beauty. There is no canon of truly beautiful things for which we ought to develop our tastes and sensibilities.

What is so obviously ignored in this elitist perspective is that beauty surely transcends both cultures and also diverse peoples since many, if not most, people are fond of acknowledging beauty in *other* cultures. Even more to the point, it is in human nature not

only to acknowledge matters of ethics but also aesthetics. We recognize beauty. To deny this is to deny our nature. As new creations in Christ, Christians have new perceptions which help them to express gratitude for beauty as well as new behaviors of reaching out to those in need. Since God has made the entire cosmos good—as the story of the beginning asserts in Genesis—we can affirm that the entire cosmos is likewise beautiful.

The Anti-Aesthetic Legacy of Existentialism

Crippling a Protestant view of beauty is the fact that so many pastors of a certain vintage learned to think theologically from Existentialists like Rudolf Bultmann. Such theologians are adept at “demythologizing,” seeking a deeper existential kernel of truth in scripture underneath a shell of a no-longer-believable mythology, causing people to become more self-aware. Bultmann wrote, “the idea of the beautiful is of no significance in forming the life of Christian faith, which sees in the beautiful the temptation of a false transfiguration of the world which distracts the gaze from ‘beyond.’” In Bultmann’s view, trying to find a depth dimension to life in the experience of beauty is tantamount to a thin disguise for avoiding the ugliness, pain, and suffering of life. It is this darker side of reality, not beauty, that provides the true entry into Christian faith.⁶ But Bultmann here is no disciple of Luther. He bypassed the deeply paradoxical nature of Luther’s aesthetics. In contrast, we would do well to learn from Finnish pastor Miikka E. Anttila if we want to be faithful to Luther:

In the cross of Christ there is supreme beauty concealed beneath the most abominable ugliness. Yet there is no ugliness in God. The ugliness of the cross belongs to us, whereas the beauty is God’s. God is most beautiful not only when compared to us. He proves to be most beautiful when he makes us beautiful, that is, gives his beauty to us. This is an aesthetic variation of the doctrine of justification.⁷

The knee-jerk reaction of some Lutherans to the suggestion that Luther has a theology of beauty is that this cannot be the case because any theology of beauty is tantamount to a theology

of glory. Additionally, Luther differentiated a hidden, absconded God from a revealed one. No doubt, Luther's is a stormy theology, marked as it was by anguish and assault from not only the devil but even from God himself, not akin to beauty which promotes tranquility and serenity. Luther would even seem to be the enemy of beauty since he attacked the medieval belief that human fulfillment would be achieved in the "beatific vision" in paradise. That perspective rewarded beauty to those who cultivated the theological habits of faith, hope, and love. Luther's claim that "merit" and "reward" had no place in a theology of grace seems to make Luther an enemy of beauty.

But this view is wrong. For Luther, the gospel is beautiful. The gospel shows us that in his heart God is like the waiting father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Sinners identify this God with beauty as such because nothing is quite as joyous, wondrous, or sweet as the unconditional mercy given to sinners in Jesus Christ. For believers, this forgiveness results in a renewal of the senses,⁸ allows them to lower their guards and so experience life in all its fullness, both the ups and the downs. Precisely because Luther's theology allows believers to live unguardedly and be willing to experience not only joy but also pain as encountered in the law's accusations or in God's apparent absence, it allows believers to treasure life in its fullness and as it is given daily. Thereby, Luther advocates a new aesthetic dimension to human life.

This new aesthetic is secured through Luther's sacramental theology which does not repress but instead opens up the senses: touching, and seeing, but especially hearing. After all, God's promise is embodied: it is sacramentally administered through earthly means and through a preacher's tongue. As embodied, God's word is significant for aesthetics because it acknowledges that faith takes shape in the senses.⁹ Nor can "image" be opposed to "word" for Luther, since language itself is wholly constituted metaphorically or, to use Luther's words, through images.¹⁰ Luther affirmed the value of an iconic approach to faith, not simply because icons teach the faith to the unlearned, as the medieval tradition maintained, but also because they extend Christ's incarnational embodiment at the core of how God ever works with humans.¹¹

Luther's Aesthetics in Late Medieval Context

Whether or not he was aware of it, Luther expressed attitudes about aesthetics developing in the late Middle Ages which shifted the center of aesthetics from the mind to the senses. This move represented a reaction against traditional Augustinian and Scholastic theologians for whom higher levels of beauty were to be found in the intellect beyond the senses. In the Augustinian and Scholastic approach, beauty, along with being, truth, goodness, and unity, were seen as “transcendentals,” realities which apply to all things, at least at their core. Not all medieval thinkers affirmed that beauty was one of the transcendentals, but those who did saw the entire cosmos “pancalistically” (from the Greek words “pan,” meaning everything, and “kalos,” meaning good), that is, everything is beautiful to some degree because each thing is either a vestige of the Trinity (non-humans) or an image of the Trinity (humans).

In this tradition, beauty is nothing subjective. It is not, as we say, “in the eye of the beholder.” Instead, beauty is something discernable by reason. It is reason which should be properly ordered to God, the ultimate telos of human life, and which when glorified in eternity can appreciate God’s beauty on his own terms. Unlike contemporary people, medieval people did not equate beauty with art. Beauty and art were related but art was primarily seen as craftsmanship. In contrast, beauty is able to discern the eternal in all things and so conceives earthly things to be steppingstones toward heavenly, imperishable reality.

Quite differently, early modern thinkers appreciated the senses and even wanted them to be pleased. In this view, reason is related to the senses by gratefully approving the beauty discovered by the senses. Luther participated in this trend, particularly in his appreciation for music. To be sure, this does not mean that Luther honored a subjective approach to beauty. Naturally, unlike Aquinas, Luther does not favor metaphysics as the tried and true path to knowledge about God. But that does not translate into a subjective view of God. In contrast to the likes of Aquinas, Luther believed that philosophical truths must first be “bathed,” baptized shall we say, before they can be employed for theology. In a nutshell, for Luther, it is not

philosophy but the scriptures which show us what is truly beautiful and what is not.

Luther idealized Renaissance approaches to elegant style and formal rhetoric. When he was young, Luther compared his own work to that of Lorenzo Valla and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.¹² Luther's own literary craftsmanship is to be found in the various linguistic expressions he used in his treatises, letters, devotional works, and, above all, his translation of the Bible, which is his most important aesthetic achievement. Like classical Greek and Roman authors, Renaissance Humanists sought to evoke emotions by means of erudition and ornamentation. This was not beauty for its own sake, but instead one whose aim was to sway readers. Their goal was neither creativity per se nor self-expression but instead a re-modeling of ancient or classical perspectives.

Neither of the two important intellectual traditions which shaped Luther, Nominalism (taught at the Erfurt University), and late-medieval mysticism (encouraged among observant Augustinians in Erfurt), theorized about beauty. But for many thinkers in the High Middle Ages, such as Thomas Aquinas, thinking about beauty was an important objective. Aquinas identified three factors as the chief criteria of beauty: proportion, clarity, and integrity (or perfection). Luther would offer a very different approach, a reworking of Bernard of Clairvaux's bridal mysticism, which sees Christ, even as "despised and rejected," as beauty, and who adorns sinners by clothing them (the bride) in his righteousness. But that means that Luther, unlike Aquinas, sees aesthetics not primarily through the prism of analogy but instead through paradox.

Aesthetics thus is at the core of Reformation theology: it is a facet of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Paralleling Luther's conviction that Christians are simultaneously righteous and sinful, the aesthetic implication of justification by faith is that Christians are simultaneously ugly (in their empirical reality as sinners) but also beautiful (as forensically regarded as clothed in Christ's righteousness). Christ himself bearing our sins is, as Isaiah put it, "without form or comeliness." There is no beauty in God's alien work of rejecting and grinding into nothing the smug self-security of sinners. In fact, it is terrifying. But the liberation of sinners from

their many defense structures and the re-creation of a new person of faith is a beautiful outcome of justification. Likewise, the strengthening of God's new creation in Christ reveals God's beauty. The gospel expresses reassurance that humans are indeed "at home in the world,"¹³ which allows them to delight in God's ways and wonder at the resplendent goodness surrounding them.

Luther grounded his paradoxical approach to aesthetics in his Christology. In the incarnation, the immortal God becomes mortal, the infinite is borne by the finite, and the holy one bears the sins of the world. For his aesthetics, Luther found the work of Bernard of Clairvaux to be most helpful. Bernard's spiritual writings were valued by the observant Augustinian community in Erfurt. In *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), Luther built on Bernard's "bridal mysticism" where the believer's soul is seen as married to Jesus Christ. This marriage between the soul and Christ allows the bride to share in Christ's properties, such as his righteousness, while Christ as the bridegroom absorbs the deficiencies of the bride, such as sin. In his influential *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Bernard develops this "bridal mysticism" and so offers a paradoxical approach to beauty. Commenting on the "blackness" of the bride ("I am dark but comely"), applying it to the alleged ugliness of the Apostle Paul, Bernard notes:

O soul of surpassing beauty, even though dwelling in a sickly little body, heaven's own loveliness had not scorned your company, the angels on high did not cast you out, God's brightness did not repudiate you! Is this soul to be called black? It is black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem. Black in your estimation, but beautiful in the eyes of God and the angels. The blackness you observe is merely external.¹⁴

For Bernard, the paradox of the physically ugly but spiritually beautiful Apostle Paul is made possible by the prior paradox of the incarnation, Christ's willingness as the Lord to become a servant: "He [Christ] even brought this blackness on himself by assuming the condition of slave, and becoming as men are, he was seen as a man."¹⁵ It is because the true beauty of God, of Christ, and even of humans is not transparent to our understanding but is only revealed by God and grasped by faith that Luther would see such matters of Aquinas'

standards of proportion, color, and integrity as sorely inadequate for conveying God's eternal beauty. As will be seen, through the prism of God's paradoxical beauty in Christ, these standards may well find their place in human appreciation for the temporal creation. Apart from his background in monastic spirituality, it is hard to see how Luther would have had any sense for beauty. But precisely because of that background, the theme of beauty arises regularly in his writings.

Early Luther on Aesthetics

For some, Luther's important text, the "Heidelberg Disputation" (1518), ought to make us skeptical that Luther would have any aesthetics. That prejudice shows us how much an Existentialist reading of Luther inhibits us from receiving Luther on his own terms. Consider, for instance, thesis 28: "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."¹⁶ This sentence should silence our objections to Luther's theology of beauty. After all, we discover something to be pleasing or attractive, precisely because it is beautiful. That means that one goal of the Heidelberg Disputation is to deal with beauty.

This thesis demonstrates that God and humans approach beauty differently. Unlike humans who need an object of their desire to be first of all beautiful in order for desire to be activated, God does not find sinners to be beautiful. Instead, as the one who creates out of nothing, God *makes* them to be beautiful. He is motivated to do this solely due to his generous self-donation. The second sentence of the thesis shows how the philosopher Aristotle got this wrong and so should not be put on a pedestal in theology. "Thus it is also demonstrated that Aristotle's philosophy is contrary to theology since in all things it seeks those things which are its own and receives rather than gives something good."¹⁷ Desiring self-fulfillment alone and egocentrically giving rather than altruistically giving are both expressions of eros, namely, self-gratifying love. Such desire is grounded in Greek philosophy that disparages the senses and favors contemplation over physical matters. Luther's argument is epitomized in two sentences of Thesis 28:

. . . the love of God which lives in man loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.¹⁸

Thereby, Luther highlights God's goodness as inherently creative, not needing reciprocation. God needs nothing from us to be loving. That is good since we have no merit, nothing "beautiful" as the Greek philosophical tradition would see it, to exchange for God's love. Instead, God embraces those who "are nothing" (1 Cor. 1:28) precisely because God's love is overflowing and regenerating goodness.

Unlike human love, God's love does not recognize anything attractive in the object of his love. But God regards those who would be judged to be nothing by the standards of this world (and, in fact, are nothing apart from God's love) as the raw material he can shape into something beautiful. The idea that from the divine vantage point God regards those who are nothing to be something we can identify as "forensic justification." The idea that God shapes such nothings into masterpieces we can identify as "effective justification." God's love need not receive anything in order to sustain or generate it. For Jesus' sake, God regards what is ugly as something beautiful, loves the unlovely, regards the ordinary as holy, and sees sinners as righteous. Counter to many medieval theologians, or thinkers today for that matter, Luther highlights a monergistic (one-sided) approach to grace.

The view of beauty present in the Heidelberg Disputation already echoes Luther's work in his first series of lectures on the Psalms (1513–15) just a few years earlier. Drawing on Augustinian spirituality, these early Psalms lectures see humans as drawing nearer to God the more they humble themselves or when they are humbled by God through experiencing some suffering. Uniquely, in response to his reading of Johannes Tauler, Luther increasingly set divine and human roles in opposition one to the other. He advocated a passive role for humans and an active role for God as the one who exposes sin and gives mercy.¹⁹ Especially in his Lectures on Hebrews

(1517) and in several sermons, Luther began to speak of an “alien work” of God which reduces pride-filled sinners to nothing and a “proper work” that elevates repentant sinners to be new creations through the forgiveness of their sins and a new identity in Christ. In spite of the differences between these emphases in the Psalms and in the Romans trajectory of thinking, and in the Hebrews trajectory (as well as the later constructions of *solus Christus* and *sola fide*), we here encounter the initial phases of Luther’s mature theology: the theology of the cross, the distinction of law and gospel, and God’s alien and proper works. But this early work on the Psalter has important consequences for a theological aesthetic, for in it Luther brings to the fore his paradoxical approach to theological aesthetics. The “ugliest,” namely, those who are most adept at self-accusation and therefore are the humblest, are paradoxically the most beautiful. Because God has illumined their spiritual darkness, sinners are able to acknowledge their sins, and thereby concur with God’s judgment.

Whoever is most beautiful in the sight of God is the most ugly, and, vice versa, whoever is the ugliest is the most beautiful . . . Therefore the one who is most attractive in the sight of God is not the one who seems most humble to himself, but the one who sees himself as most filthy and depraved. The reason is that he would never see his own filthiness, unless he had been enlightened in his inmost being with a holy light. But when he has such a light, he is attractive, and the brighter the light, the more attractive he is. And the more brightly he has the light, the more he sees himself as ugly and unworthy. Therefore it is true: The one who is most depraved in his own eyes is the most handsome before God and, on the contrary, the one who sees himself as handsome is thoroughly ugly before God, because he lacks the light with which to see himself.²⁰

The aesthetic category of light (that is, brightness and clarity, which Aquinas acknowledged) influenced Luther here: the enlightenment of God makes ugliness into beauty. The corollary is also true: the more beauty sinners claim to have, the more beauty before God they thereby lose.

In a nutshell, Luther argues, “whoever makes himself beautiful, is made ugly. On the contrary, he who makes himself ugly, is made beautiful.”²¹ There are precedents in the theological tradition for

these kinds of paradoxical affirmations, and not only in Bernard of Clairvaux. In spite of his reservations about Augustine, Luther's paradoxical approach echoes Augustine: "Let that fairest one [Christ] alone, who loved the foul to make them fair, be all our desire."²² Luther may not have been consciously continuing the Augustinian line of thinking here, but he certainly took a Christological approach to aesthetics as well as a two-fold approach to the hiddenness of God. God is hidden as the *deus absconditus* to those who vainly search for his inner nature when he shows only his backside (*posteriora dei*), but God is also hidden as mercy in the preaching and ministry of Jesus Christ.²³

The early Luther, in his own way, affirmed pancalism. But, he did not do so on the basis of a metaphysics where beauty is ontologically equivalent to goodness. In contrast to the heritage from Plato and Augustine, creatures are not first of all beautiful in the degree to which they participate in beauty; instead, Christ alone is beauty, and Christ makes sinners to be beautiful. Christ does so by swallowing their sin and validating them as claimed by God. Of course, the former approach to beauty is named a "theology of glory" in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, and Luther rejects such presumptuousness. Even metaphysical thinkers must be confronted by their own ugliness due to their sin. To claim for oneself a divine trait such as goodness, freedom, or beauty is to take from God what properly belongs to God alone. If Christ alone is beauty, then sinners who are ugly before God must be given beauty in faith, where they are sustained by God.²⁴

Most importantly, what matters for the Reformer is not our self-aggrandizing pride, but our humanity, our standing as *creatures* before God. "When you call God good, you must deny that you are good and confess that you are altogether evil. He will not suffer Himself and you to be called good together at the same time, for He wants to be regarded as God, but He wants you to be regarded as a *creature*."²⁵

In focusing on a forensic approach to God's justification, Luther altered Bernard's "bridal mysticism." Bernard had strongly affirmed that the soul desired a beautiful Christ as much as Christ desired the

beautiful soul. The forensic character of Luther's theology colored his appropriation of aesthetics. Jesus Christ, the eager lover, desires not the beautiful soul but instead the debtor laden with liabilities, "sins, death and damnation."²⁶ Christ the bridegroom "must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his?"²⁷ Accordingly, Luther said, "here we have a most pleasing vision not only of communion but of a blessed struggle and victory and salvation and redemption."²⁸ Like the prophet Hosea marrying Gomer, Jesus Christ assumes these debts from his "wicked harlot."²⁹ Likewise, the bride has a right to claim, and in fact *can* claim, his treasures and status just as he takes on her debts. Forensic beauty goes both directions. The "divine bridegroom Christ marries the poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her [makes her beautiful] with all his goodness."³⁰

The Mature Luther and Aesthetics

Luther's mature theology advances his early approach to beauty.³¹ For instance, Luther's commentary on Psalm 45 in 1532 insists that Christ's beauty is attributable to Jesus' spiritual traits, not his physical ones. If beauty is properly a spiritual characteristic, then it is an aspect of God's faithfulness even to sinners, and not as an Aristotelian golden mean of proper proportion. It is rather found in God's self-donation, in Christ's kenosis, and in human trust in God's promise. Repeating his disdain for humans' attempts at self-justification, Luther reminds us that sinners who claim beauty for themselves overlook their ugliness before God. Beauty threatens social and individual well-being when it boastfully claims recognition from God. This threat is ubiquitous to the sinful person. The danger is worsened when it blinds sinners not only to their own ugliness, but also to Christ's unsurpassable and generous beauty. Sinners need God not only to become beautiful, but even to see their own nothingness before God; such an understanding is also a result of the Holy Spirit's enlightenment. Christ alone is truly beautiful. Interpreting Psalm 45, Luther writes,

It could perhaps be that some were fairer in form than Christ, for we do not read that the Jews especially admired His form. We are not concerned here with His natural and essential form, but with His spiritual form. That is such that He is simply the fairest in form among the sons of men, so that finally He alone is finely formed and beautiful. All the rest are disfigured, defiled, and corrupted by an evil will, by weakness in their resistance to sin, and by other vices that cling to us by nature. This ugliness of man is not apparent to the eyes; it makes no impression on the eyes, just as spiritual beauty makes no visual impression. Since we are flesh and blood, we are moved only by the substantial form and beauty that the eyes see. If we had spiritual eyes, we could see what a great disgrace it is that man's will should be turned from God . . .³²

Can we become more specific about what it is for Luther that makes Christ beautiful? Does Christ's beauty consist in the fact that he was righteous by the standard of the law? Luther did not indicate this. In contrast, it appears that he thinks that Christ's beauty consists in his identification with and participation in sinful humanity. In immersing himself with sinners, rescuing and saving them (though he is not a sinner himself, of course), Christ becomes beauty. Christ "did not keep company with the holy, powerful, and wise, but with despicable and miserable sinners, with those ruined by misfortune, with men weighed down by painful and incurable diseases; these He healed, comforted, raised up, helped. And at last he even died for sinners."³³ What makes Christ beautiful, then, defies the standard medieval criteria of proportion, clarity and perfection. In identifying with sinners, Christ mingles with the disproportionate, the stained, and the imperfect, and Aristotle's standards are upended. In fact, he takes on *this ugliness*. Christ's beauty, then, is "hidden under the opposite appearance."³⁴ He who knew no ugly sin became sinful ugliness for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

Luther's criterion for beauty is not the standard or Thomistic threefold schema of proportion, clarity, and wholeness or perfection, but rather is Christ's compassionate, self-originating love which reaches out to sinners, the outcast and forsaken, all in order to swallow or absorb their sin. These beloved of Christ do not score high marks according to the world's metrics of law or power. In fact, the powerful (those scoring high in terms of clarity, perfection, and proportion) are thus threatened or endangered by Christ's compassion.

In response, they defensively reject Christ, deem him ugly, and seek to eliminate his threat. Thus, we can conclude that for Luther the medieval criteria for beauty are devised under the rubric of law, not gospel. Luther's aim was to reconceive beauty as a gospel concept, not a law one. Because the beauty that counts is beauty before God, those who are enforcers of beauty in the public realm, such as, in Luther's view, the self-righteous Pharisees and priests, are threatened by the gospel and seek retaliation against Christ.

[The Pharisees and priests] were so inflamed with hatred for Christ that they could not even bear to look at Him. While He was present and speaking among them, there still proceeded from His mouth rays—in fact, suns—of wisdom, and from His hands beams of divine power, and from his entire body suns of love and every virtue. But whatever of His beauty He showed them was nauseating and an abomination to them, not through Christ's fault but through their own.³⁵

God gives his beauty as compassion in Jesus Christ. His compassion goes to those oppressed by law. But this kind of gift undermines the underlying foundations that prop up human self-justification.

Given sin's distortion of nature, causing nature to be "turned in on itself," only as something different from nature can grace allow nature to be nature. "Then you are beautiful not by your own beauty, but by the beauty of the King, who has adorned you with His Word, who has granted you His righteousness, His holiness, truth, strength, and all gifts of the Holy Spirit."³⁶ Beauty before God is thus rather like righteousness before God, and vice versa. But this allows our usual understanding of justification by faith alone to be expanded: God gives beauty to sinners, clothing them in his beauty. In a word, "to be justified by faith" and "to be made beautiful" are synonymous. Humans whose life is hid in Christ are made not only "acceptable to God" but also, and strikingly, "lovely" by means of trusting Christ.

Beauty and Creation

It is clear that Luther's aesthetic is profoundly Christological. But how does it bear on creation? That question is important if we

want to situate our own appreciation for nature as well as see how Luther's aesthetic impacts art. To cut to the chase, Luther did not restrict his understanding of beauty solely to matters of redemption. His doctrine of creation, especially his discussion of Adam and Eve's "original righteousness," is laden with the language of beauty. Here the medieval standards of clarity, proportion, and integrity which Luther took away or significantly revised in his attempt to understand Christ's beauty reappear when he speaks of the creation of Adam, although Adam's perfections actually exceed these criteria.

Given that Luther associated law with creation as providing boundaries designed to sustain healthy community, we can distinguish a beauty of the law, a "creation beauty," from the beauty of the gospel, a "redemption beauty." Not surprisingly, sinners use these standards in a perverse attempt at self-justification. But that was not the case prior to the Fall. Adam's pre-fall mental and physical traits, interpreted by means of the Augustinian trio of will, intellect, and memory, are described like this by Luther:

Both his inner and his outer sensations were all of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquility of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety. To these inner qualities came also those most beautiful and superb qualities of body and of all the limbs, qualities in which he surpassed all the remaining living creatures.³⁷

Due to sin, Luther here holds that human memory, intellect, and will are presently "utterly leprous and unclean."³⁸ While suffering the effects of Adam's sin, the creation currently in "travail," there is no reason to believe in a post-fall state that all beauty has been erased from creation. After all, Luther even called reason "something divine."³⁹

Luther not only counted perfection as attributable to Adam; he also attributed proportion to him as well. Luther agreed with Peter Lombard that humankind was "created for a better life in the future than this physical life would have been even if our nature had remained unimpaired." So he repeatedly insisted that "at a pre-determined time, after the number of saints had become full, these physical activities would have come to an end; and Adam, together

with his descendants, would have been translated to the eternal and spiritual life.”⁴⁰ Here Luther, like Peter Lombard before him, drew upon the Pythagorean tradition which so highly valued mathematics as the key to unlock the meaning of the cosmos.

Finally, the pre-fallen humanity's original righteousness was beautiful because nature and grace were not separate and external to each other, but instead interpenetrated each other. Adam's nature was graced in such a way that he lived in perfect harmony with God, with his wife, given as his companion, and with all other creatures. Adam loved God innately, naturally. Drawing on the metaphor of “intoxication,” favored by many mystics as an apt way to describe spiritual union with God, Adam was “intoxicated with rejoicing toward God . . .”⁴¹ To anticipate creation's fulfillment, God's renewal of the sinful world, Luther claims in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15 that the resurrection body will be beautiful.⁴² He noted, “in this life we lay hold of this goal [the likeness of God] in ever so weak a manner; but in the future life we shall attain it fully.”⁴³

Conclusion

For Luther it is clear that much of what God does is not beautiful. For instance, God's alien work of breaking down hardened self-righteous people is not pretty, but he does it for the sake of his proper work of giving favor to the broken-hearted and repentant, which indeed is beautiful and reveals the core of God's heart to be sheer mercy. As regenerative, the gospel rejuvenates human desire such that it no longer goes against nature by being self-serving but instead induces us to desire “what God desires.”⁴⁴ Luther's Reformation disdained the iconoclasm of other Protestants—both of his Wittenberg colleague Carlstadt and the Anabaptists and Swiss reformers who disdained images—not just because images teach, as medieval theologians claimed, but also because the human mind thinks only through the medium of images. Even more importantly, the gospel comes tangibly, in a graspable way, through visible signs. In this way, humans are granted physical means to help them hold onto God's promise. As we see in Luther's teaching about Christ's presence in the physical elements at the Lord's Table, there is no

“kernel” (promise) without the physical “shell.”⁴⁵ Indeed, God only ever presents himself to humans as “covered,” and so all physical things present God, but not always clearly or mercifully. Hence, we ought to challenge the specious charge that Luther’s theology leads to a “disenchantment” with the natural world, as Charles Taylor, following Max Weber, claims,⁴⁶ a stance perpetuated by secular critiques of the Christian faith.⁴⁷ Gospel beauty, paradoxically granted in the ugliness of Jesus Christ who bears human sin, re-orders humans as creatures beautified by God through faith. As re-ordered to God through faith, believers not only live as Christs for the wellbeing of their neighbors and this good earth, but also enjoy the beauty that God has fashioned in creation.

NOTES

1. For a compelling recent statement, see Charles P. Arand and Erik Herrmann, “Attending to the Beauty of the Creation and the New Creation,” *Concordia Journal* 44:3 (Summer 2018), 5–18.

2. See the list of musicians, artists, poets, and architects in Mark Mattes, *Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 6. To be cited as Mattes, *Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty*. For one example dealing with architecture, see Bridget Heal, *A Magnificent Faith: Art and Identity in Lutheran Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3. See Johann Georg Hamann, “Aesthetica in Nuce (1762)” in *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60–95. See also Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy Harrisville and Mark Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 67–86.

4. The Large Catechism, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 388:15 (hereafter, BC); *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 934:25 (hereafter, BELK).

5. The Large Catechism, in BC 388:21; BELK 936:20.

6. *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975), 2:137, cited in David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 23.

7. Miiikka E. Anttila, “Music,” in *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment*, ed. Olli-Pekka Vainio (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2010), 218. To be cited as Anttila, “Music.”

8. *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1955–86) 27:140 (hereafter cited as LW); *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883ff.), 40II:178 (hereafter cited as WA).

9. Anttila, “Music,” 219.

10. Preface to the Psalter, LW 35:256 (WA DB 10I, 103, 16–18): “So, too, when they [the Psalms] speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for you fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator so portray them.”
11. For more on this aspect, see chapter 7 of Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*.
12. Erika Rummel, *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 4.
13. With reservations about both the Platonism and Kantianism in Roger Scruton's work, I find his metaphor of “at home” as a way to describe the benefit that beauty gives us. See his *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 174–75.
14. “Blackness” here carries no racial overtones for Bernard. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1976), Sermon 25:4–5, 53.
15. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 28:1–2, 89.
16. LW 31:57; WA 1:354.35.
17. LW 31:57; WA 1:365.5–7.
18. LW 31:57; WA 1:365.8–12.
19. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 43.
20. LW 31:57; WA 1:365.8–12.
21. LW 11:263; WA 4:111.7, 15.
22. Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, Vol. VII (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), tractate 10:13, 74.
23. See Brian Gerrish, “‘To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 131–149.
24. LW 11:387; WA 4:252.10–14.
25. LW 11:411; WA 4:278.37–279.2.
26. LW 31:351; WA 7:55.1.
27. LW 31:351; WA 7:55.5–6.
28. LW 31:351; WA 7:55.7–8.
29. LW 31:352; WA 7:55.26.
30. LW 31:352; WA 7:55.26–27.
31. For further development of this aspect, see chapter 5 in Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*.
32. “Commentary on Psalm 45,” in LW 12:207; WA 40II:485.5–11.
33. “Commentary on Psalm 45,” in LW 12:208; WA 40II:486.11–12.
34. “Commentary on Psalm 45,” in LW 12:208; WA 40II:487.26.
35. “Commentary on Psalm 45,” in LW 12:208; WA 40II:487.26.
36. “Commentary on Psalm 45,” in LW 12:278; WA 40II:580.28–30.
37. “Lectures on Genesis,” in LW 1:62; WA 42:46.18–27.
38. “Lectures on Genesis,” in LW 1:61; WA 42:46.7.
39. “The Disputation Concerning Man,” in LW 34:137, thesis 4; WA 39I.175.
40. “Lectures on Genesis,” in LW 1:56; WA 42:42.24–27.
41. “Lectures on Genesis,” in LW 1:94; WA 42:71.31.
42. “This will make the whole body so beautiful, vigorous, and healthy, indeed, so light and agile, that we will soar along like a little spark, yes, just like the sun which runs

its course in the heavens.” See “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14,” in LW 28:143; WA 36:494.40–495.1.

43. “Lectures on Genesis,” in LW 1:131; WA 42:98.22–24.

44. LW 1:337; WA 42:248.12–13.

45. “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528) in LW 37:219; WA 26:333.17.

46. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 25–27, 29–43, and other places.

47. Ronald Thiemann, “Sacramental Realism: Martin Luther at the Dawn of Modernity,” *Lutherrenaissance Past and Present*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 165–173.