

Beauty and Principles for Determining What Is Beautiful

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Ed. Note: Much of the following essay has been taken from Appendix F in the author's e-book, [Worship: A Course on Worship in the Christian Church](#). Thus, though most of the principles cited herein for discerning beauty—and their applications—apply to Christian worship, the principles themselves are generally applicable to helping us determine what is beautiful in all aspects of our lives. The worship applications are useful illustrations for discerning what is truly, universally, and lastingly considered beautiful, all of which is quite fitting, for the Bible teaches that every good and perfect gift—which includes all that is beautiful—is from God, the Father. (James 1:17)

How important this matter is for today! We see in our own country and all over the world great disharmony, ugliness, and sadness. As of this writing, careful surveys list the four top problems people face as being stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness, the latter relating to one of the top basic needs of human beings: the need to belong. Mental illnesses, including suicide, are skyrocketing and have been doing so for many years. People long to see beauty, but too many see none, and many others don't know whether beauty exists or how to discern it if it does exist.

Worship planners face the weekly challenge of including elements in the sanctuary and in the liturgy, the order of service, that are perceived as aesthetically pleasing or beautiful to the worshipers. In so doing these elements will honor God and contribute toward the dialogue between God and his people and not hinder that communication. But what is beautiful?

Introduction

In Exodus we read God telling Moses, “Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honor [rendered beauty in KJV, NASB.¹].” (28:2) In verse three, we read that God has given to the skilled men, who will be making these garments that will produce such beauty, the wisdom to do so. Later in that chapter God says, “Make tunics, sashes and headbands for Aaron's sons, to give them dignity and honor [the same Hebrew word as in verse two, rendered beauty in the KJV, NASB.].” (28:40)

We obtain a clue as to what constitutes beauty in the Bible by linking the words translated “beauty” or “beautiful.” For example, we see the following as being described as having beauty or being beautiful: baby Moses (Exodus 2:2); Aaron's garments (Exodus 28:2); priestly garments for Aaron's sons (Exodus 28:40); foliage of trees (Leviticus 23:40); Israel's tents (Numbers 24:5); a robe (Joshua 7:21); David's eyes (1 Samuel 16:12); Absalom, who was without blemish from the top of his head to the sole of his foot (2 Samuel 14:25); girls and women in many places

¹ The Hebrew word rendered beauty is תִּפְאָרֶת (*tiph'ereth*), glory, beauty, adornment, splendor, honor.

(e.g., Job 42:15); the LORD (Psalm 27:4); holiness (1 Chronicles 16:29; 2 Chronicles 20:21; Psalm 29:2).

We see in the above and elsewhere in the Biblical texts on worship that involve the arts, that God designed his worship buildings (the tabernacle and the temple) as well as the furnishings, including the vestments of the clerical personnel associated with them, to have a dignified beauty that would glorify him. Are there any guidelines as to what is beautiful in the arts, including music?

Is it true, as many say, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, that it's all subjective? Or, *are there characteristics embedded in the works of art, architecture, music, and other forms of communication that are universally and over all time considered necessary for those things to be perceived as pleasing, i.e., having beauty?*² Are there transcendent universal principles or common norms that filter such works from generation to generation and cause some to become classics, that is that they pass through time and have lasting value? Are there universal principles that guide us to provide art and music that is generally considered beautiful by most if not all people everywhere and in all times so we can give of our best to God in his worship?

I suggest that in consideration of this subject, the church will indeed find valuable principles for identifying and retaining the finest of both traditional and contemporary elements for honoring God in his worship. For example, some songs and hymns that have been written long ago, as well as some being written today, have been composed, either consciously or unconsciously, according to these universal aesthetic principles. And many have not; hence, they, unlike the classics, likely will not be used in worship 100 or more years from now. There is good and beautiful historic hymnody and that which is not so; there is also good and beautiful contemporary Christian music and that which is not so. *How do we discern the difference and select only that which is good and beautiful, that will honor and please God as well as accomplish the other objectives in corporate Christian worship that we've been studying (e.g., edify the worshippers)?*³

The main principle guiding what has been written in the e-book on Christian worship is the Biblical basis. The e-book, as indicated in the preface, is essentially a study of what the Bible says about what should be included or permitted in corporate worship. Its starting point and basis is God's special revelation, the Bible, which focuses on Jesus Christ.

In reflecting on the question before us, that main principle will be operative, but we'll also look at the other type of revelation the Bible indicates that God uses, general revelation (e.g., Psalm 19:1-6, Romans 1:20), whereby he places in the world elements that communicate information about God, his character, and what pleases him. Included within that general revelation are statements from human authors, including [careful empirical science](#) (see "Essential Christianity" PowerPoint), that are consistent with God's special revelation. Even some of those human

² Throughout this essay I'll use the word art to refer to all of these media. By art and artist I mean to refer not only to the visual arts, e.g., paintings, sculpture, and tapestry, but also music and architecture. The principles discussed herein can also apply to written as well as oral communication.

³ See especially Lesson Three, "Key General Principles for Worship Planning."

writings have been incorporated by the Holy Spirit into Scripture (e.g., Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 15:33, 2 Timothy 3:16; Titus 1:12).

We've seen that the first of the principles for planning worship is to honor God. Concerning music, what music will most honor God? Obviously, it should be the best music we can compose and include in a worship service. How then do we discern what is "best" for worship and for all else that is important? What makes music or art great music or art?

Throughout many centuries, careful thinkers have given consideration whether any universal principles could be deduced that would help identify what is beautiful. Since it is our duty to provide for God's worship that which is most beautiful and pleasing to him, and in order to discern beauty in other ways, we should give attention to this inquiry and apply the findings in our selection and planning of what we include in worship and observe and promote elsewhere in life, e.g., teaching our children, producing for others, and enjoying for ourselves.

God's revelation in Scripture is our authority and the standard for what he requires in his worship. However, since he has commissioned and commanded us to bring the Good News of his plan of redemption in Jesus Christ to the whole world, and since his public corporate worship contains an evangelistic dimension, it behooves us to understand the mentality of the target population we are trying to reach with the Gospel. What qualities are generally considered by that population to constitute the beauty which attracts and engages them? Indeed, such universal qualities will also help us engage God's people as well.

Essential Elements that Constitute Beauty

The academic discipline in which we find the most study of this question is of course philosophy, and in particular its subfield of axiology, the study of value.⁴ This subfield is divided into two branches, ethics (the study of conduct) and aesthetics (the study of what people consider beautiful).⁵ Thus, as we study God's common grace on the question before us, we'll reflect on what careful thinkers in the branch of aesthetics have observed.

Concerning the question of what constitutes beauty, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Jonathan Edwards among many others have studied the question of what it is that causes some works to be valued and therefore to last over time. They have discerned at least three essential elements, principles that recur in the art, music, and other work of people through the ages and throughout the world, that are present in something that is considered beautiful.⁶

⁴ The word axiology comes from the Greek, ἀξιος (*axios*), worth, worthy and *logos*, word. See also Van Cleve Morris, *Philosophy and the American School: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 21.

⁵ The word aesthetics comes from the Greek, *aisthanesthanein*, to perceive; cf. (αἰσθάνομαι) *aisthanomai*, possess the power of perception and to understand. (Proverbs 17:10; 24:14; Luke 9:45) See also Morris, p. 224.

⁶ See R. C. Sproul in the CD series, *Worship*, on CD-2, Track 3, "The Sound of Worship" (Part 2) and CD-3, Track 1, "The Sound of Worship" (Part 3).

There may be other qualities inherent in phenomena that are universally associated with perceiving a given phenomenon as beautiful. The three qualities identified below are not intended to be exhaustive. Other philosophers have suggested additional elements, e.g., purpose.⁷ However, in many if not most cases these additional factors can be reduced further to the three essentials. What are these three elements of beauty or principles to discern what is beautiful that are generally considered criteria of or standards for the perception of beauty, and, specifically, how do they relate to worship?

Harmony

Dr. Steven Timmermans, then Executive Director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, wrote, “While I do appreciate a good solo performance, I have to admit that I have a special love of choral music. There is something beautiful that happens when alto, soprano, tenor, and bass voices all blend and harmonize together. The resulting sound is much fuller and greater than if you hear each voice separately.”⁸ This is one reason many lament the lack of such harmony in contemporary songs in addition to their less profound, and sometimes inaccurate, theology. This observation is generally experienced, and yet, by harmony aestheticians do not mean only music in the sense of four-part harmony or with instrumentation. Regarding music, harmony can be observed in a cappella singing with even very little movement of the melody notes, e.g., in Gregorian and other chants.

Harmony includes disassociation with disharmony or cacophony, where parts clash with each other instead of relating in a proportionate manner. Harmony also involves not including sound to a level that causes physical pain. At a certain decibel level sound waves cause discomfort in the human ear and sometimes affect other parts of the body as well. That experience is not normally considered beautiful in any culture.

I regularly attended a breakfast club for business executives in Oak Brook, Illinois, a Western suburb of Chicago, and on one occasion I sat next to the president of a company that had the contract for examining the hearing of students in the Chicago public school system. Recalling my work with young people in youth ministry and their desire to attend concerts with loud music and to listen to music with ear phones and the volume turned up very high, I said, “My guess is that you’re finding many young people whose hearing is declining.” “Oh yes!” the executive replied and continued, “By the time they’re 45 many will be legally deaf.” I recently told this story to a young man who was installing a new refrigerator in our home. He said, “That man was right. I’m only 22 and already my hearing is shot!”

Harmony occurs in association with proportionality. Musically, it is consistent with the mathematical relationship with tones on the scale.

Harmony also involves lyrical consistency with the cherished values of the listener. A lovely score that contains lyrics that contrast with the cherished values of the audience will not be

⁷ David Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), pp. 127-130.

⁸ Steven Timmermans, “The Music of Denomination,” *Ministry Report 2018: May It Be A Sweet, Sweet, Sound*, p. 2.

perceived as beautiful. Humans everywhere value ideas. Moreover, “ideas are powerful,” as a universal maxim maintains. Well-crafted music containing words in contrast to the Bible will not be perceived by most Christians as good. Even exceptionally beautiful music cannot transform concepts that are repugnant to the listeners, especially followers of Christ for whom Biblical truths have the supreme standard and eternal consequences. Recall the Biblical texts above that are associated with concepts that God’s Word calls beautiful, e.g., holiness.

One of the aspects of God’s image, rationality, involves the daily human task of making sense out of life. Thus, when a person sees that something “fits,” or is in harmony, with his or her worldview or philosophical and theological mental framework, it is not unusual to hear, “That’s beautiful!”

A Roman Catholic priest, Carlos Olivero, lives and works in a small concrete church in one of the slums of Buenos Aires, Argentina. He dwells in one of the *villas miserias* (“little cities of misery”) where many if not most people would have difficulty seeing anything they would be inclined to call beautiful. Knowing that earning the right to be heard necessarily precedes proclamation of words and the Word, he said his first focus is on helping people, not (at the beginning ostensibly) trying to convert them; nevertheless,

he believes that faith is contagious. “The best confessions I hear, I hear in the rehab center from kids who were hit men or dealers,” he said. “Kids who have been hurt a great deal, who have suffered a lot, and who have also made others suffer a lot are baptized, take their first Communion, get married, get their own children baptized. It is really, really beautiful.”⁹

For Christians maturing in progressive sanctification, lyrics powerfully affect perception of a hymn or song. With regard to lyrics, harmony includes congruency and compatibility with God’s Word. The presence or absence of lyrical harmony with Biblical theology can make a musical piece beautiful or displeasing, respectively. There are some older hymns and newer songs, the music of which I find pleasant, but in order to sing them I have to change certain words. No matter how pleasant the musical piece is, if its lyrics are contrary to, and therefore out of harmony with, the Bible, its beauty is lost.

“But not all people are Christians, so others may consider the music beautiful even if the lyrics are displeasing to you,” some may object, thinking that my principle lacks universality. They would be mistaking principle for application of principle. Would not that same person consider a tune he or she at first perceived as beautiful as distasteful, and therefore lacking in beauty, if the accompanying lyrics contradicted his or her most cherished values? Indeed, he or she would either change the words, or try to ignore them, before placing a value on the music and doing anything with it. The principle is that harmony with one’s values is an essential characteristic of what constitutes beauty. The application varies with the values of the beholder, but this principle guiding the perception of beauty is universal.

⁹ Kate Linthicum, “Helping rather than converting: Argentina’s ‘slum priests’ take an activist path to fight poverty and drugs,” McClatchy Tribune article in *Reporter-Herald*, August 23, 2013, A12.

Regarding Biblical values, a relatively simple song that is not ostensibly very complex can be a profoundly moving and beautiful musical expression with carefully crafted lyrics that express a text in God's Word or its application. Theologian R. C. Sproul cites "Jesus Loves Me this I know" as an example, especially when played by a skilled musician. German theologian, Karl Barth, controversial but widely considered to be one of the most erudite, weighty, and prolific theologians of the 20th century, whose writings, including his thirteen volume *Church Dogmatics*, are generally viewed as challenging to read, was once asked to cite the most profound concept he had ever contemplated. The questioner expected the professor to expound on a very complex doctrine and was stunned when Barth answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." While the song is simple, the profundity of the whole counsel of God underlies and is contained within it. Part of the greatness of Biblical truth is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially simple, easily understood by everyone, but at the same time a closer investigation reveals a highly complex integration of knowledge and wisdom, including God himself; skills; mysteries; and applications that challenge, yet satisfy, the greatest minds, especially those who've had the veil of unbelief covering their minds and hearts, removed by the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 3:14-18)

Visual elements are perceived as beautiful if they are in harmony with the landscape, whether one is looking at a work of art or the live out-of-doors. Even if they have individual beauty per se, for example if they have many complex parts that are all in proportion, such as a dandelion, if they are out of harmony, they're not perceived as beautiful in that setting.

Not long ago I was in our yard spraying a weed-killer on the dandelions. As I worked I began to think, "Why are these plants not perceived as beautiful? They have a lovely fragrance and pretty flowers that our granddaughters love to pick for bouquets, and over seventy-five years later I still remember my mother's delicious dandelion salads." Then, I recalled reading recent articles from a couple of naturalists who write weekly in our local newspaper who challenged the assumption that any plant is a weed. So why am I spending this time and money on removing the dandelions from the yard? One of the naturalists put his finger on the answer. He said that no plant is a weed, *especially if it is in its place*. The dandelions in the forest preserve are fine, because they are in concord, harmony, with the rest of the flora and fauna of God's creation. The dandelions in our yard are discordant with the design of the yard with their helter-skelter distribution within the uniform sea of green grass that is itself within carefully formed boundaries.

The principle of harmony helps explain why many men, and some women, do not like the fad of torn jeans that is currently popular among women as of this writing. The deliberate tears in the pant legs are out of harmony with the uniform color and otherwise fine (these jeans cost up to several hundred dollars each) craftsmanship of the pants. Even many, if not most, of the women who like wearing these jeans, due to their being "in style," would not call them beautiful.

Proportionality

Proportion is designed and built into our very being, and that norm shapes our perception and values. Externally, normal humans have two eyes equidistant from the nose and on the same level; the same is true for our ears. Each side has one arm attached to which is one hand with

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five fingers in a particular arrangement and one leg that has one foot with five toes in a specific order. The arms, hands, and fingers, legs, feet, and toes are all in symmetrical proportion to those on the opposite side. Male and female body parts are proportional to each other. When a human being is born with, or by accident acquires, a body part that is abnormal in its proportional form or placement with its corresponding opposite, that situation is perceived as imperfect and consideration is given to whether corrective measures are possible.

Internally, proportion in symmetry is seen in lungs, kidneys, and other organs. Physiologists refer to the phenomenon of homeostasis, the balance of components in the body's system that permits regular functioning. Educators in the developmental school of the psychology of human learning, observe equilibration, the healthy balance that occurs in mental processes.

When we look beyond ourselves we see proportion throughout nature. Animals typically have similar features in proportion, e.g., eyes, ears, legs. When an animal appears that is different, it is not unusual to hear someone say, "Oh! That's ugly!" Unless affected by environmental constraints, such as growing close to a building, one side of a tree mirrors the other; apples will not have a square side; snowflakes appear in the form of a hexagonal prism of latticework where each side is similar in shape to the other.

The musical scale is a mathematical relationship between and among the tones. Melody, harmony, and rhythm, three elements in music, are achieved by the configuration of tones in proportion with each other. Music is built upon certain tones in a scale. Scales simply measure the mathematical relationship of two or more sounds or tones to each other. Musicians try to keep their music in proportion. Music written in a certain key is played with respect to predictable parameters. In the West the basic mathematical relationship between chords is based on thirds, three steps. In the East it is based on relationships of fourths. But they are still harmonic and proportionate, just different from what we accustomed to hearing. Eastern music displays different forms and different structures but still with harmony and proportionality.

As Sproul explains, a jazz musician introduces dissonance by playing around with all three elements in music but not without respect to proportionality. Jazz music engages in delayed resolution, but it never moves away from proportionality and mathematical harmony. The harmony is still in proportion, but it isn't in the arithmetic ratio of what we commonly hear.

In classic art proportion is carefully implemented. The shadow of one building is not significantly shorter than the shadow of another the same size next to it, when the sun is shining in a direct line on both. A human figure is not taller than a mature oak tree nearby. The sides of a path in the background are narrower than those in the foreground.

Regarding architecture, consider the temple measurements in the Old Testament. Specifically for example, study Ezekiel 40-43. Notice the description of the sanctuary in 41:13-15, where we observe the 100 cubit symmetry symbolizing perfection, also proportionally positioned in relationship with the other structures in the temple complex.

Consider in addition the classic Gothic churches with their arched doorways and windows. One side of the arch is not shorter than the other. The opposite side complements the other exactly

only in reverse; neither is out of proportion with its counterpart. In those structures that are in a cruciform shape, one side is the same size as its corresponding opposite.

Those who give thought to and value how their food looks see another illustration of the link between proportionality and the beauty they desire. Culinary connoisseurs consider the importance of beauty in food presentation as being essential. An Italian chef has described the role of proportionality in developing a dish that is pleasing to the eye. In an interview in *Relish* magazine, Tuscan-born Pino Luongo, co-owner of Coco Pazzo restaurant in New York City and co-author of the book, *Two Meatballs in the Italian Kitchen* (Artisan, 2007), explained why he couldn't just plop two big juicy meatballs on top of a mound of spaghetti. "That's my problem with it—the proportions are all off. Italians like their food to make sense aesthetically, for the sauce to fit with the pasta. And there's nothing more incongruous than a big meatball with a skinny strand of spaghetti. I say serve the spaghetti as a first course and save the meatballs for a second."¹⁰

British theologian, pastor, musician, professor, and author Jeremy Begbie notes that Dutch theologians and pastors Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper view "beauty as harmony with a particular resplendence: 'Beauty exists in the agreement between content and form, idea and appearance; in harmony, proportion, unity in differentiation, organization; in splendour, glory, radiant perfection, perfection phaenomenon.'"¹¹

Complexity

A beginning piano student, who is able to play lesson three even perfectly, is not ready for Carnegie Hall. Why not? Because musical pieces that are very simple are not valued as highly as those that are much more complex and superior to what we ourselves can do, or could do if we tried. For example, music that involves the combination of many notes, instruments, and voices in harmony and proportionality, is given lasting value. We appreciate "sound that is transcendently majestic," as Sproul says. Such sound facilitates our worship of the One who himself is transcendently majestic and complex. Notice the rich complexity of the [Hallelujah Chorus](#) of Handel's *Messiah* even though lyrically containing few words. The complexity explains why Handel's *Messiah* is highly valued, and significantly more so, than many recent songs that also repeat a few words over and over again.

Complexity involves the harmonization of many elements of an artistic expression, whether it is in music, art, architecture (notice, e.g., the awe-inspiring late perpendicular gothic architecture of the Kings College Chapel at the University of Cambridge where the above performance of the [Hallelujah Chorus](#) was presented), or a well-crafted oration, such as a sermon or a lecture. *A key aspect of complexity is exquisite attention to detail.*

We also see the principle of complexity in art. There is a significant difference between a stick figure of a human being and Leonardo da Vinci's magnificent *Mona Lisa*. The attention to detail

¹⁰ "Two Meatballs," *Relish*, September 2008, p. 5.

¹¹ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 99.

in paintings attracts our attention and reflection for long periods of time and over many occasions. Stick figures do not stimulate that response.

Complexity contributes positively to home ambience and visual attractiveness. Interior design experts urge homeowners to employ a strategic configuration of texture and patterns “in floors, walls, upholstery, window treatments...[and to stick] to small, neutral patterns that can be a subtle way to add visual interest and design complexity to interior spaces.”¹²

The more complex a piece of art or music is, the greater depth it has. This is not to say that the only beautiful music, or the only music that is acceptable to God, is highly complex. The key task for writers of music and worship leaders in congregational singing, as Calvin University Professor John Witvliet has written, is to become “masters of making complex ingredients come together with winsome simplicity,”¹³ and, I would add, so the people can sing the piece, and ideally to retain it for future edification, reflection, inspiration, and action.

What we have just been considering is what normally occurs in the perception of what is beautiful. These principles also apply in exceptional situations as well. Values beyond the visual, shape worth that forms beauty and is perceived as good.

A husband watching the surgeon remove the bandages from his wife’s head saw her misshapen face. One side was now out of proportion to the other. The physician explained that he could not remove a cancerous growth without severing the nerve that permitted one side of her mouth to move; she would from now on have a sagging cheek and drooping lips on that side of her face. All in the room, and especially his wife, were deeply moved when the husband bent over her, caressed her mouth in his hands, kissed her, and then said, “She will always be beautiful.” Why? How? Because the complex totality of her most cherished characteristics in harmony and proportion with her husband’s greatest values eclipsed the less important physical features of the one side of her face. The once beautiful person remained beautiful to her husband and others who knew her even after a tragic defacing of one facet of her being.¹⁴

Nature

As noted earlier in this essay, these three characteristics above are not exhaustive. In my observation of what people describe as beautiful, it can be argued that nature and what is viewed as natural is perceived as beautiful. Does that include the deserts, the treeless tundra, the barren snow-covered landscape of Antarctica, and other such places? I submit it does. Consider the similar perspective of the late 19th and early 20th century naturalist, conservationist, family man, farmer, and writer, John Muir, who said, “God never made an ugly landscape. All that the sun shines on is beautiful, so long as it is wild.”¹⁴ By “wild” I interpret that Muir means natural,

¹² “From floor to fixtures: Top spring home décor trends add style and personality,” *Reporter-Herald*, AT HOME, March 29, 2014, p. 12.

¹³ John D. Witvliet, “We Are What We Sing,” *Reformed Worship*, Volume 60, p. 9.

¹⁴ Quoted in “John Muir: Father of Our National Parks,” by Lisa Zhito, *American Profile*, August 26-September 1, 2012, p. 8.

unaltered by human activity. Recall the many picturesque scenes portrayed on TV, typically in ads, which show a lake surrounded by trees, flowers, and mountains; have you ever seen any houses or other man-made structures on those lakes? Rarely if ever; as of this writing, I can't think of one.

To the degree that something is perceived in its natural state, functioning as God intended, is it not universally seen as beautiful, even in this age? For example, Jesus referred to the lilies of the field as having a splendor that surpassed the regalia of King Solomon. (Matthew 6:29)

Pertaining to worship in the tabernacle and the temple, consider the ark of the covenant for the most holy place, the holy of holies, where the LORD would dwell with his people (though separated from sinful humans until Christ Jesus' perfect redemption for us tore open the curtain¹⁵ giving those credited by our faith with his righteousness [Romans 4] access to the presence of God [Matthew 27:51]). The ark was to be made out of acacia wood, together with the poles for carrying it. The beautiful and natural acacia wood, common in the Sinai peninsula, is a very hard wood, even harder than oak, a close-grain wood that wood-eating insects avoid. (Exodus 25:10) Added to its natural beauty, the ark was to be covered with pure gold (Exodus 25:11), not gold containing impurities. The gold was not only natural, but since it was beautiful and supremely valued, it was fitting that the ark, also called the mercy seat, be for God who is the highest and most precious of all, infinitely more so than all else, and as a daily reminder of that supreme reality. The main hall of the temple was paneled with pine and covered with fine gold. (2 Chronicles 3:5)

Pertaining to sanctuaries for worship today, wood is much warmer and more beautiful and conducive to facilitating the appreciation and worship of God for his creation and redemption than man-made concrete blocks. What we're thinking about here is facilitating worshipers' attention to, appreciation of, and glorifying God. This reality regarding wood and other natural elements does not mean that a congregation cannot or should not worship in a Quonset steel hut or a concrete block building; it is only to say that natural settings provide an ambience that significantly assists worship. Most important, of course, is the theology of the worship service. It is much better to worship in any kind of structure where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed than to worship in a beautiful place where unbiblical heresy and abomination are being espoused.

Consider also the natural color of human hair: most people would say that the natural color of a young person's hair has beauty. Even though some gentlemen may prefer blondes, would not most agree that brunettes and those with naturally red hair are attractive as well? Further, as people age, and hair turns gray, that too is valued. In Proverbs 16:31 we read, "Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life." Yet many today choose to color their hair, and when those who do so, do it with hues closest to a natural color, it is also typically considered beautiful. In fact, many would not be able to tell it is not the person's natural color. Some readers may remember the old Clairol commercial: "Does she or doesn't she [color her hair]?" On the other hand, not a few—mostly younger adults—who color their hair, choose

¹⁵ Significantly, the curtain was torn from top to bottom, [evidence of a divine intervention](#). See the discussion in "The Biblical Significance of Easter Signs and Symbols" in the Christology section of the Christian Worship page.

colors that are not natural. The former are typically considered beautiful, but many do not consider the unnatural colors beautiful.

Notice as well that throughout history, the colors of clerical, choral, and other liturgical vestments are natural and also communicate a message conducive to God's Word for his worship. Strange colors are disconcerting and distract attendees' focus on and worship of God. For much more on distractions and their interference and other counterproductive effects on worship, see Lesson One in the worship e-book.

Begbie explains that "earthly beauty participates in that higher, absolute beauty which rests in God alone. It is God's perfect beauty which sends its rays into our hearts through nature and art."¹⁶

That which is natural, what God created and called good (Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31; 2:9,12), is *ipso facto* beautiful. God did not create anything ugly. What God called good is therefore not ugly...just the opposite: beautiful. Human sin is what has corrupted God's perfect creation and turned what God created good into ugly, evil, and disharmony. Thanks be to God, he is in the process of restoring his beautiful creation by his mighty work in and through Jesus Christ. For more on this subject, see [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions](#).

Consider theologian Francis Schaeffer's observation. He quotes Sir Archibald Russell (1904—1995), the British designer for the innovative supersonic intercontinental Concorde airliner, who explains how nature not only shapes our perception of what is beautiful but requires adherence in order to produce and maximize functionality, another part of beauty.

In a *Newsweek: European Edition* interview (February 15, 1975) [Russell] was asked: "Many people find that the Concorde is a work of art in its design. Did you consider its esthetic appearance when you were designing it?" His answer was, "When one designs an airplane, he must stay as close as possible to the laws of nature. You are really playing with the laws of nature and trying not to offend them. It so happens that our ideas of beauty are those of nature. Every shape and curve of the Concorde is arranged so it will conform with the natural flow as conditioned by the laws of nature."¹⁷

And we know Who made nature. In the beginning the things and people God made were "good" (Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25, and "very good" (1:31), including beautiful (Ecclesiastes 3:11). However, since the fall of Adam and Eve and the sin that introduced corruption, disharmony and distortion into God's creation (Romans 8:22), some of the inherent beauty has been lost. Thus, in this age not all that is natural is beautiful, such as a grove of trees where a tornado has just torn through it. Not beautiful in form, but it still has an element of beauty in content—harmony with God's Word in which that aspect of nature in this age is seen in its groaning that will continue until the fullness of redemption occurs. (Romans 8:22 ff.) God created the daylight, which was

¹⁶ Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976), p. 196.

good (Genesis 1:3-5,14-19), including the beauty of [the moon, which is a miracle in itself](#) (see [“Essential Christianity”](#) and the essay, [“Who is God, and what is he like? Part 8: Creator,”](#)) and the stars. It was only after sin entered the world that the darkness of evening became a synonym for disharmony, evil, and fear. Even now, though, viewing the nighttime sky, it is easy, especially through the eyes of a believer in Christ, to see its beauty.

Dutch theologian, professor, and author, Abraham Kuyper, who was also prime minister of The Netherlands, explains how and when that aspect of nature will become beautiful again. Jeremy Begbie interprets Kuyper at this point.

In its original state, Kuyper believes, the world possessed a perfect beauty. But through human sin, disfigurement and ugliness marred the world, and, despite the restraining influence of common grace, it remains spoiled. In Jesus Christ, however, we see our human nature climb “from the depths of scorn to the most beautiful harmony of glory. Christ...is the canon and ideal of all beauty.” ...Beauty therefore must now be understood in the light of Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16), and in whom creation is restored to its intended beauty. In his earthly life, the beauty of Jesus was inward and hidden, but in his risen life, it is displayed in all its splendour, and is now revealed through those who follow him.

“Our being cannot be satisfied unless the thirst for beauty is quenched. That is why the child of God fights for beauty and holiness, because at the creation man was absolutely beautiful. The beautiful and the good for which Plato was searching will come when the Lord returns.”¹⁸

Transcendence

A fifth universal characteristic of beauty, especially for all in Christ, is what I call transcendence. This characteristic, the artistic quality, while embracing, or does not despise, the physical, causes the viewer/listener to experience a sense of rising to surpassing spiritual excellence, ultimately the peace of God in Christ that passes all understanding (cf. Philippians 4:7-10), which is a dimension of beauty. Jeremy Begbie describes this characteristic:

In short, God is steadfastly committed to the flourishing of the world, and this is itself an expression of his steadfast love displayed in the crucified and risen Messiah.

This is a commitment with a *future*. The world is made to go somewhere, to prosper toward its end. It has a destiny, promised and embodied in Christ. Its present beauty and glory are not to be worshiped but to be valued as foretastes of the coming glory of God. Indeed, the poignancy of nature’s beauty, the fact that its glory is so

¹⁸ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 97. Begbie here quotes Kuyper as translated by Hans R. Rookmaaker in *Art and the Public Today*, Huemoz-sur-Ollon, Switzerland: L’Abri Fellowship Foundation, 1969, p. 51. Cp. DGG, III, 546-557. In the previous paragraph Begbie references Kuyper in *Het Calvinisme*, pp. 12 and 13.

interlaced with transience (how we long to say to the sunset, “Hold it right there!”) can serve to remind us of just this. Creation awaits an end not yet given. Its present beauty is wonderful but not final.¹⁹

One could argue that this transcendence is a dimension of harmony, the characteristic something has that makes it in harmony with God and a foretaste of the future for all eternity with God. Yet, I see the characteristic of transcendence as not only a component but a process, which gives it a related, even integral, but distinct quality of its own, even as proportion and complexity can overlap somewhat with harmony; for example the elements that are in proportion with each other frequently demonstrate a dimension of harmony, as do complex components. Further, emphasizing the distinction of transcendence preserves its crucial connection in the cosmos and beyond, since in Biblical theology, God transcends the universe. (Cf., e.g., Psalm 113:4-6).

In this view of transcendence, our Biblical roots will also not let us spurn the physical; no place exists in Scripture for a Gnostic view of the cosmos. Something is beautiful not because it has separated from its physical or material origin. Its beauty emerges as one observes its connection with God in his making of it and its intended purpose within his creation; it points not to itself but beyond itself to its Creator. (Cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11) With Begbie I like Carol Harrison’s explanation of this reality:

As with all temporal manifestations of music (as harmony, unity, order...) in the created realm, therefore, whilst appreciating the beauty of music as it is sung in Church, Augustine never ceases to emphasize the need to move beyond and through it: beyond and through the temporal, mutable and bodily towards the eternal, immutable and spiritual. For as long as he is caught up in the sheer beauty, delight and pleasure of the temporal manifestations of music, for that moment he knows that he is distracted from God and risks taking it as an end in itself.²⁰

However, some may object, is this a characteristic of something that is universally viewed by people throughout the world as being beautiful? What about people who are not Christians? And what about atheists?

We read in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God “has set eternity in the hearts of men;” and Romans 2:14 and 15 refer to inherent qualities built into human beings with the clear implication that this reality has been from creation:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts their

¹⁹ Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 196. On this page Begbie also comments on complexity.

²⁰ Carol Harrison, “Augustine and the Art of music” in *Musical Theology*, ed. Jeremy Begbie and Steven Guthrie quoted in Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 86.

consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

As Augustine prayed, “[man] cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”²¹ While it does exist and has for millennia,²² atheism is relatively rare throughout time and across the globe. Though hyperbole, the often-repeated maxim, most recently recited by a barber who is a veteran, “There are no atheists in foxholes,” contains much truth. Notice also how in the aftermath of the tragic death of teenagers who attended a large public high school, people, not just Christians, in that district flock to the auditorium to hear a Christian youth worker explain the teaching of the Bible on death and the afterlife, which many admit offers by far the most reasonable explanation and the greatest hope.

A colleague on the staff of a large church in suburban Chicago, was previously the area director of the highly effective parachurch ministry, Young Life. He told me one day, that whenever a high school student lost his or her life, especially through suicide or a tragic accident, the whole school was traumatized and devastated. My colleague was well-known by the young people, and so he would be called to speak in a school-wide assembly to the whole student body. The superintendent would tell him, “These students are so distraught, that they need help and hope to cope. You tell them whatever you want to tell them.” So with no restrictions my friend brought a strong message, including telling them of their greatest help and hope: the Good News of the Lord Jesus Christ and the future with the Triune God. No non-Christian could offer such powerful and transcendent help and hope.

Humans long for a connection with the divine (cf., Ecclesiastes 3:11), and view that which facilitates our connection with God as beauty in the utmost. For those of us who have the new nature, being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, we value that which draws us to God as having ultimate beauty. Not long ago, as I was driving in my car, I tuned into the Roman Catholic global network, EWTN, in time to hear the end of a program wherein the interviewee said, “Holiness is attractive; beauty is seen in purity.” She is right!

Holiness and beauty are linked in the Bible especially in the transcendent character of God and in our relationship with, especially our worship of, him. As the Scriptures say,

Give unto the LORD the glory *due* unto his name: bring an offering, and come before him: worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness. (1 Chronicles 16:29 [KJV])

And when he [King Jehoshaphat] had consulted with the people, he appointed singers unto the LORD, and that should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Cox and Wyman Ltd., 1961), p. 21.

²² Cf. Psalm 14:1, “The fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God.’”

out before the army, and to say, Praise the LORD; for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
(2 Chronicles 20:21 [KJV])

Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty
of holiness. (Psalm 29:2 [KJV])

O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth.
(Psalm 96:9 [KJV])

All human beings are aware of the possibility, even the existence, of God, whether they
acknowledge his reality or not,

because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it
unto them. For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are
clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, *even* his
everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse... (Romans 1:19-
20 [ASV])

Due to sin, the veil of which distorts reality and is especially operative in those who have not
been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, much confusion exists as to who God is, what he is like, and
how he functions throughout the world. Nevertheless, as people perceive the invisible things of
God through the things that he has made, which point to him, e.g., the [sun and the moon](#), those
things are viewed as having beauty, even though the human beings perceiving them do not
confess God's existence as he has revealed himself in his Word.

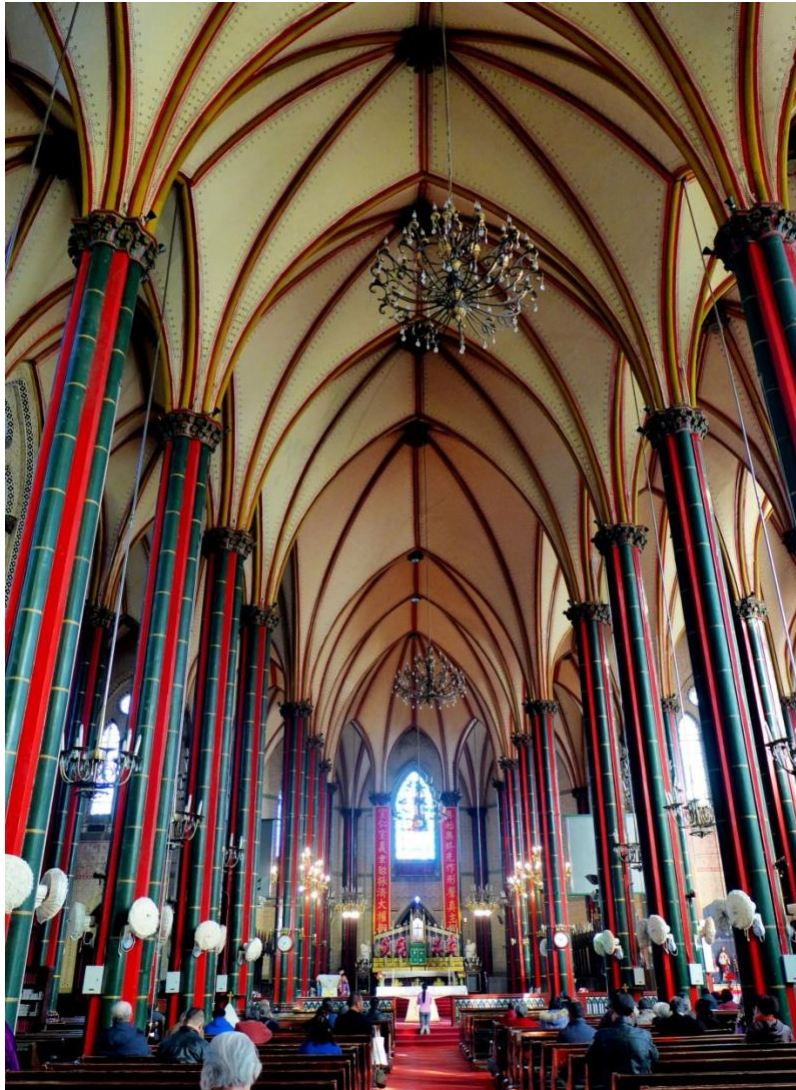
Moreover, the naysayers are not the norm, nor is their negativism attractive. Most people believe
in God or a higher being whom they consider as existing above, transcending, them. They also
see him as having created the world. Thus, when they perceive things as having a connection
with their Creator, whose character has imprinted those things with value, they are also perceived
as having beauty.

Internationally regarded sculptor, Lynn Aldrich, also links beauty with the transcendent by
observing that

The concept of 'the sublime' in aesthetic philosophy might be described as the
overwhelming presence of beauty, tinged with terror, in nature's sweeping vistas
or in large-scale works of art. The viewer is reminded of her human frailty, the
insignificance of her life-span in the vastness of space and the antiquity of time.
Yet there is exaltation. We can sense a similar experience in biblical descriptions
of the Israelites as they followed Yahweh across the empty desert, erecting piles
of stones to mark where he spoke or to commemorate great events of his
deliverance. This impulse to make sculpture when in awe of the transcendent was
shared by most ancient peoples, though usually the carved or stacked stone was
formed into idols, altars, or grave markers. Rather than making God into a thing,
the Jews uniquely insisted that sculpture could refer to him or remind us of our
need of him while still remaining a mound of material. Understanding God to be
wholly spirit yet capable of and desiring relationship with human beings in bodies

of flesh, in a world of matter, is one of their foundational contributions to western culture with far-reaching ramifications. This can perhaps also be understood as a foreshadowing of the coming of the Messiah, the incarnation.²³

Transcendence also has personal dimensions. They are readily noticed and experienced.



Inspiring worship occurs inside the magnificently beautiful Gothic churches, as pictured here in the historic Roman Catholic North Church in Beijing, China. The light and magnificent vertical lines point to heaven, support the liturgy, and facilitate worshipers' engagement with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Bible, God reveals himself as both transcendent (e.g., Job 38-39; Psalm 113:4-6; James 1:17) and immanent (e.g., Psalm 46:1-2; 113:7-9; Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5). As we worship, we experience both his transcendence and his immanence. Both dimensions of his

²³ Lynn Aldrich, "Through Sculpture: What's the Matter with Matter?" in Jeremy Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 106.

being meet our greatest needs. As our attention is drawn to his transcendence, and with the help of such physical features in worship, especially in Gothic cathedrals but also in other church buildings throughout the world that employ similar architectural principles, as towering vertical lines pointing to heaven, light (Genesis 1:3; Psalm 18:28; Isaiah 60:19; John 8:12 [“Jesus...said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’”]; 2 Corinthians 4:6 [“For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”]; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:5; Revelation 21:23; 22:5), and colorful stained glass visually depicting the events recorded in the Bible, awesome serenity, tranquility, and calmness facilitate understanding some aspects of the peace of God in Christ that passes all understanding, all of which is an exquisite way to experience beauty.

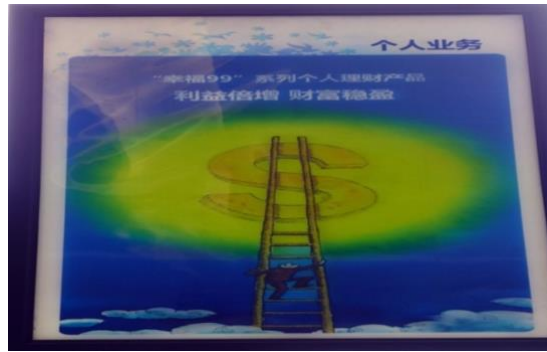
Another aspect of transcendence is apparent with some reflection. As the late Dr. Arthur DeKruyter, Founder and Senior Pastor of the more than 5,000 member Christ Church of Oak Brook in suburban Chicago, maintained, anthropologically there exists within each normal healthy human being the desire to better him or herself in all ways, including ontologically, socially, relationally, materially, and spiritually. DeKruyter said, “People are looking for ways to transcend what they are now. They look for models on the social scale above them; they don’t strive to be like those who have less than they do or who are viewed by society as on a ‘lower rung of the social ladder’ than they are. They look for people who can help them improve, and those to whom they look for such help are ones with a consistent track record of producing such fruit.”²⁴

Human beings look for ways to transcend what they are now. While pride generally stalls or retards the public, and sometimes even the private, admission of any inadequacy or insufficiency, people nevertheless strive to be and have more than they do now. Whatever is perceived as helping achieve that transcendence of the status quo, is valued and considered beautiful. Do we not hear people enthusiastically upon the accomplishment of a high goal exclaim with much satisfaction, “Beautiful!”?

I was in a bank in Nanjing, China, and as I was looking at the well-appointed interior design, I noticed this poster below on the wall of the bank.²⁵ As a graphic illustration of the universal Biblical anthropology, especially for most of mankind who are unregenerate (Matthew 6:24; 7:13-14), it is quite accurate. For God’s people, who are on the same ladder but who have the new nature (John 3:5) and are growing in sanctification (e.g., Ephesians 4:11-16), the graphic should have God at the top—never meaning that humans can ever become God or divine in any way—but that we try every day, with the help of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, to become more and more Christlike in our daily lives.

²⁴ Dr. DeKruyter and I, who served with him for 19 years as Minister of Education and as a friend for those and many years afterward, had countless conversations that contained philosophical and theological dimensions, and in a number of which he mentioned these unrecorded but memorable observations.

²⁵ Photo by Amy Lay, November 11, 2013, Nanjing, China.



Believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, who are maturing in him (Ephesians 4:12-24), eagerly desire to relate to God in worship that continues beyond the sanctuary and throughout all of life. When that transcendence of the status quo involves the decision and accompanying actions of no longer conforming to the ways of the world and transforming by renewing our minds, we worship God in so doing.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)²⁶

Teaching the Appreciation of Beauty

Throughout the Bible we see God teaching his people and in the process using a principle that educators refer to as *integrative reconciliation*, relating new ideas to previous understanding. It is relating the unknown to the known, beginning where people are and leading them to the next level of understanding. Singing “Jesus Loves Me” in the same corporate worship service that also includes the Hallelujah Chorus (especially when standing to sing it with the choral and instrumental ministry),²⁷ not only engages the children and others who are oriented to that which is simple, but also exposes them to the rich detail and awesomely thrilling affective experience which stimulates further understanding of and love for God and what he has done, and which evokes worship and steps toward commitment.

A blending of the traditional hymns and newer songs that are beautiful serves to engage all worshippers. In this way each person can connect with what he or she values, enjoys, and perceives as good.²⁸

²⁶ See also my essay, “*Who is God, and what is he like? Part 24: What is meant by God's Providence?*” and also my PowerPoint program, [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology](#), both resources on the Christian Theology page of my Website, [From Acorn to Oak](#). Everything on my Website is free and may be used with my permission for church education worldwide.

²⁷ For those churches that are smaller and unable to have the trained voices and instrumentalists who are able to sing and play for the Hallelujah Chorus, if projection technology is available, that portion of Handel's *Messiah* could be portrayed on the screen at that point in the worship service.

²⁸ Research in the field of communication, the subfield called diffusion of innovations, has identified five key attributes of an innovation that are critical to their adoption and diffusion through a social system (including a Copyright © 2011, 2015, 2020-2023, 2025 by Edward D. Seely. Permission is granted to use without charge for Christian education and other educational purposes worldwide.

The essential message of the Bible, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ in particular, is simple. Several texts contain the essence of the Gospel in one verse, e.g., John 3:16; 14:6; Romans 10:9. Other passages have the essence of the Gospel in just a few verses, e.g., Ephesians 2:8-10; Galatians 3:26-29; Matthew 28:18-20; Revelation 3:20-22. Yet for those whose minds raise questions about what they have heard, when they look more closely, they see a profound understanding and wisdom that enables them to make sense out of life and find greater joy. The same is true for the elements in worship that facilitate the response of God's people to worship him.

Recall the careful and exquisite attention to detail that God commanded in the complex construction of the tabernacle and the temple. Accordingly remember the precise specifications he required in the dress of the priests. (Exodus 28) These texts clearly communicate God's value on beauty, reflecting the beauty of his creation in its original state, that which still remains, and that which he is in the process of restoring. That he has called us to participate in that process as his agents is the broader framework of our mission.

Higher levels of beauty do exist, and it is our duty as Christians to employ these higher levels of beauty in the worship of God and to help others to do so. A bud is beautiful—indeed, it is perfect—but who wants it to stay that way? Is not the flower it is becoming a higher level of beauty? Should we not nurture the bud so that it can blossom into what God designed it to be and contribute to the enhancement of his creation? Is this not part of our calling and commission in Christ?

As Sproul observes, some music is infantile, therefore lacks beauty, and does not honor God as he deserves in his worship. Moreover, the use of some music has been used counterproductively in corporate worship, as noted in Lesson Three, Key General Biblical Principles for Worship Planning, in [Worship: A Course on Worship in the Christian Church](#). In this connection see also the other principles studied in Lesson Three.

We need to help people acquire and develop a sense of recognition and taste for the richness and depth of meaning of music and art that has complexity. These competencies can be learned. To do so is not to be confused with condoning elitism and snobbery; these are ungodly motivations. The motivation we're considering here is offering our best to God in worship. Expose worshipers to what Sproul refers to as "the majestic measure of beauty." Good, i.e., aesthetically beautiful, music tends to last, inspire, and motivate, corporately and personally.

Can we acquire and develop a deeper taste for music? We can. It is a matter of edification, beginning with helping people develop the skill of listening. In accord with the principle of integrative reconciliation, we need to keep the best of the simple to include, attract, retain, and engage those for whom the simple is valued while at the same time facilitating their understanding of, appreciation for, and movement toward the more complex, to deeper levels of

church; see Lesson Nine, Helpful Steps for Trying Something New). The five attributes include compatibility with one's personal values and beliefs as well as with previously introduced ideas (cf. integrative reconciliation). Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, Fourth Edition (New York: The Free Press, 1995), pp. 224-228.

beauty, and to offer such for those already oriented toward appreciation for the more detailed, nuanced, and advanced understanding.

As worship leaders, church educators, pastors, teachers, and elders, part of our calling is to include higher levels of harmony, proportionality and complexity in all aspects of the life and work of the church. Sproul says, “It is our duty as Christians to seek a deeper understanding of beauty, as it is our duty to seek a deeper understanding of goodness and of truth. Some of our music is infantile, and we ought not to be willing to stay at that level. We must give of our best to God in our singing.” Reformation leader, Martin Luther, would agree. He emphasized that people learn—and remember—their theology more from the music they sing than sermons they hear. That reality is a great concern today with the proliferation of songs that contain weak and even unbiblical theological content.

Abraham Kuyper said that

when musicians aim at less than God’s glory, they cheapen what they do. Cacophony, often enough, results. Music has a higher aim than simply pleasing the ear or creating misguided emotion; the purpose of the human voice, of vibrating strings, of brass and cymbal, is to witness to God’s goodness. Where the purpose is less than that, God’s people sense something wrong. Music has tremendous influence for good and evil. Bad music counts its victims by thousands. We should be wary.²⁹

When we consider giving our best to God in his worship, that would seem, in the light of the above, to include all three criteria of beauty: harmony, proportionality, and complexity and also unblemished nature and transcendence. If my musical skills do not produce a presentation with those criteria, does that mean that I shouldn’t play a particular instrument or write or sing songs? Not at all. However, it does mean that I should keep striving for the accomplishment of such a standard and that I shouldn’t make presentations in God’s corporate worship, or elsewhere in public, until they do meet such criteria, lest my presentation distract from the worshipers’ dialogue with God, the nurture of believers’ faith and development in Christ, and attracting nonbelievers to the Lord.

How do we help people perceive what is beautiful and good, what does contain the three main criteria? Research on teaching suggests that modeling is a powerful instructional tool. As you include in your worship a balanced selection of high quality music that engages all worshipers, the congregation will grow in its appreciation for such different genres and be inspired as well as edified by them. The same is true for the other ministries the church offers.

John Witvliet has identified other ways to teach appreciation of musical beauty. In a section entitled “On Cultivating Taste” in his essay “We Are What We Sing,” he urges church musicians to “not only choose and play music creatively [but also] to teach people the skills to appreciate and receive these gifts.” For example, for one hymn per week he advocates putting instruction in the weekly bulletin regarding the singing of that selection. Such instruction could be with one word (he suggests an adverb, e.g., meditatively or boldly) or with a term, phrase, or one or more

²⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *Near Unto God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997), p. 137.

sentences. I would add encouraging people to think about what they are singing, relate the message of the music in their own life, and sing each part with personal emotive engagement. Witvliet offers this example pertaining to psalms of lament: “Sense the hope amid sadness as you sing this lament (that includes a skillful mix of minor chords but ends with a hopeful change of mode and rhythm).”

He also advocates hosting a living room sing-along for church members where they sing old favorites and are introduced to the best of fresh new songs and hymns; listing fine recordings of Christmas music in the December issue of the church newsletter; bimonthly brief commentaries about the musical selections of the day’s service in the Sunday bulletin; providing the church’s children who are studying piano with simplified accompaniments to excellent hymns and songs so that they can learn them in their youth.³⁰ See also Lesson Seven, Intergenerational Worship, for other ideas.

³⁰ Witvliet, p. 8.

For Further Reflection, Discussion, and Action

1. As a group or individually, read Ezekiel 40-43. If time is limited, focus on 41:13-15. Ask the question, “As described in this text, does the temple look beautiful?” Then ask, “Why would you say the temple is beautiful?” What elements in this essay inform your decision?
2. Match the statements in the following feature story, that appeared on pages one and two of the local newspaper in Loveland, Colorado, with the characteristics of what constitutes beauty described in the above essay.³¹

STAINED-GLASS PORTAL INTO BIBLE STORIES

Mount Olive Lutheran Church installs final sets of windows depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments

Church members chose the theme and layout of the windows and stained-glass artist Ron Rayer...did the artwork and installation....

Rayer installed the last four sets...on the building’s south side that depict New Testament events, opposite the windows on the north side focused on the Old Testament.
[Proportionality]

“We put a stone border around each window,” Rayer said. “It’s like you’re looking through a portal into each time frame of the Bible—the Old Testament and the New Testament.” [Proportionality]

[C]hurch members voted on a theme.... The windows are co-themed based on the church’s name of Mount Olive, incorporating the symbolism of the olive tree flowing forth from the Creation, and the mountains, where biblical events occurred. The Old Testament windows depict events where God spoke to the Israelites, while those representing the New Testament show the birth and life of Christ. [Harmony, Creation, Transcendence]

“We chose Old Testament events that occurred on mountaintops,” said [church member Kathryn] Paulson, who worked with [Pastor Mark] Nierman to design the windows. “The olive branch, mountains and water run through all the windows.” [Harmony, Creation/Nature]

Rayer...cut out tens of thousands of pieces of glass, cutting 3,600 just for the tree of life.
[Complexity]

Nierman plans to hold a blessing of the stained glass during a Sunday morning worship service...He will explain the symbolism of each window and discuss how they point to Christ.... “It adds a beauty to our worship space. The congregation responded really well to it and really loved it,” the pastor said. [Transcendence]

³¹ Shelley Widhalm, “Stained-Glass Portal into Bible Stories,” *Reporter-Herald*, November 22, 2014, 1A and 2A.

3. Identify at least one component in current worship, in your church congregation or that is commonly being done today in church worship services, where people differ as to its beauty, or that cannot even be described as beautiful.
 - a. Which of the criteria of beauty mentioned in this essay does the identified subject lack? Can it be improved sufficiently to be beautiful? If so, how?
 - b. List at least three steps that can be taken to help resolve the conflict that the above practice and/or other differences are causing in the church. Which of the above steps will you commit to doing?
4. What can you say to someone who accuses you of “not being ‘with it,’” of “being behind the times,” of being “an old fuddy-duddy,” of “having to accommodate to the new ways of looking at things,” just because you don’t see them as beautiful when he or she does? In addition to explaining the points made in the above essay, you can also explain that such accusations of “being behind the times” commit what in the field of logic is called a logical fallacy, the one in this accusation being the naturalistic fallacy. The naturalistic fallacy is the attempt to reason from is to ought, which is illogical; just because something “is,” does not mean that it “ought to be.” For more on this and other logical fallacies, see my paper, [“Logic: A Primer on Common Logical Fallacies,”](#) which is available free on both of my safe and secure Websites, as are the other documents mentioned in this essay.

For the reasons cited in this paper, just because someone else says something is beautiful, that does not make it so. Now you have solid principles, objective reasons for explaining why something is lacking beauty, or lacking sufficient beauty, why beauty is not “just in the eye of the beholder,” and how you can help others to learn what is truly beautiful, and not only to humans but, most importantly, to God. May he bless you in accord with all you need as you seek to help implement the necessary changes to make his worship, and the rest of the life and work of his church, more beautiful and as you urge and teach others to do so as well.