RECLAIMING THE
CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

ART AND MUSIC

A STUDENT'S GUIDE

Paul Munson &
Joshua Farris Drake

Series Editor: David S. Dockery

"The virtues of this book are immediately evident. It asks the right questions, provides the right answers, and illustrates the claims made about art and music with analysis of examples—all within a context of the Christian faith and the Bible."

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"Drake and Munson know that our minds and imaginations require training to work as intended. They know that failure to cultivate eyes to see and ears to hear prevents us from perceiving the glory of God's creation in great works of art and music. Their book offers courageous instruction for those open to attending to beauty."

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CONTENTS

SERIES PREFACE

RECLAIMING THE CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

The Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition series is designed to provide an overview of the distinctive way the church has read the Bible, formulated doctrine, provided education, and engaged the culture. The contributors to this series all agree that personal faith and genuine Christian piety are essential for the life of Christ followers and for the church. These contributors also believe that helping others recognize the importance of serious thinking about God, Scripture, and the world needs a renewed emphasis at this time in order that the truth claims of the Christian faith can be passed along from one generation to the next. The study guides in this series will enable us to see afresh how the Christian faith shapes how we live, how we think, how we write books, how we govern society, and how we relate to one another in our churches and social structures. The richness of the Christian intellectual tradition provides guidance for the complex challenges that believers face in this world.

This series is particularly designed for Christian students and others associated with college and university campuses, including faculty, staff, trustees, and other various constituents. The contributors to the series will explore how the Bible has been interpreted in the history of the church, as well as how theology has been formulated. They will ask: How does the Christian faith influence our understanding of culture, literature, philosophy, government, beauty, art, or work? How does the Christian intellectual tradition help us understand truth? How does the Christian intellectual tradition shape our approach to education? We believe that this series is not only timely but that it meets an important need, because the

secular culture in which we now find ourselves is, at best, indifferent to the Christian faith, and the Christian world—at least in its more popular forms—tends to be confused about the beliefs, heritage, and tradition associated with the Christian faith.

At the heart of this work is the challenge to prepare a generation of Christians to think Christianly, to engage the academy and the culture, and to serve church and society. We believe that both the breadth and the depth of the Christian intellectual tradition need to be reclaimed, revitalized, renewed, and revived for us to carry forward this work. These study guides will seek to provide a framework to help introduce students to the great tradition of Christian thinking, seeking to highlight its importance for understanding the world, its significance for serving both church and society, and its application for Christian thinking and learning. The series is a starting point for exploring important ideas and issues such as truth, meaning, beauty, and justice.

We trust that the series will help introduce readers to the apostles, church fathers, Reformers, philosophers, theologians, historians, and a wide variety of other significant thinkers. In addition to well-known leaders such as Clement, Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Jonathan Edwards, readers will be pointed to William Wilberforce, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, Johann Sebastian Bach, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, George Washington Carver, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Michael Polanyi, Henry Luke Orombi, and many others. In doing so, we hope to introduce those who throughout history have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to be serious about the life of the mind while simultaneously being deeply committed Christians. These efforts to strengthen serious Christian thinking and scholarship will not be limited to the study of theology, scriptural interpretation, or philosophy, even though these areas provide the framework for understanding the Christian faith for all other areas of exploration. In order for us to reclaim and

advance the Christian intellectual tradition, we must have some understanding of the tradition itself. The volumes in this series will seek to explore this tradition and its application for our twenty-first-century world. Each volume contains a glossary, study questions, and a list of resources for further study, which we trust will provide helpful guidance for our readers.

I am deeply grateful to the series editorial committee: Timothy George, John Woodbridge, Michael Wilkins, Niel Nielson, Philip Ryken, and Hunter Baker. Each of these colleagues joins me in thanking our various contributors for their fine work. We all express our appreciation to Justin Taylor, Jill Carter, Allan Fisher, Lane Dennis, and the Crossway team for their enthusiastic support for the project. We offer the project with the hope that students will be helped, faculty and Christian leaders will be encouraged, institutions will be strengthened, churches will be built up, and, ultimately, that God will be glorified.

Soli Deo Gloria
David S. Dockery
Series Editor

✚ 1

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE WORD *BEAUTY*?

It isn't the likeliest place to find art. The new ballpark is hemmed in on three sides by traffic and on the fourth by a garbage incinerator. The smells of these peripherals are driven out, it's true, by those of flat beer and roller-warmed hot dogs, but this can hardly be said to draw the art-appreciation buffs, who, we're told, prefer wine and cheese. And yet it is there that park designers put a statue of a beloved home-run hitter. No doubt he was amused. The ordinary fellow from an ordinary place, who spoke plainly and lived his life without pretention, now stands 7.5 feet tall in 750 pounds of bronze. A pigeon, unconvinced by the likeness of a batter's high-velocity swing, balances quietly on the cap, leaving an untidy mess. And the boy and his grandfather who stand there on game day know that the statue is *beautiful*—from the pivot of the ankle to the visionary, skyward glance over Sixth Street.

We begin with beauty because it is what makes art, art. When people call something "art," they're saying two things, really: first, that somebody made it (for we don't call accidents "art"), and, second, that its appearance has the potential to reward those who pay attention to it. That is, it can be appreciated for its beauty. If we put a tribal ceremonial mask or a Louis XVI secretary desk in an art museum—indeed, if we use the word *art* to describe a matching outfit and shoes or the perfect baseball swing—it's because we believe that in addition to whatever other functions these things have, they are also beautiful. They provide aesthetic delight.

When the main purpose of a made object is to reward aesthetic contemplation, we call it "high art" or "fine art." We begin with beauty, therefore, because nothing—neither art nor an approach to art—can be evaluated without a sense of what it is for. Although certain philosophers quibble over identifying beauty as the purpose of art, this is only because they fear some people's usage of the word *beauty* may be too constrictive. But ordinary people have always known that the reason we draw and sing is to please viewers with beautiful drawings and hearers with beautiful songs.

Such consensus, however, does not make the idea easy. Beauty has been a central problem in Western thought since the days of Plato and a problem that non-Christians, especially, have difficulty solving. Darwinian materialists may be satisfied that they have found a plausible explanation for the peacock's iridescent plumage. They find it somewhat harder to explain quite why the peahen finds iridescence *especially* sexy. And if her tastes pose some problems, ours pose even more. The materialist cannot explain why a human soul responds as it does to the night sky or to the sound of the sea—or, for that matter, to Rembrandt's *Denial of Peter* in the Rijksmuseum or to Bach's "Gratias agimus tibi" in the Mass in B Minor.

When the artist Makoto Fujimura began studying traditional Japanese nihonga painting as a graduate student in Tokyo during the late 1980s, he was not yet a Christian. One day an assistant professor came into his studio unannounced, looked at the painting Fujimura was working on, said its surface was so beautiful that it was almost terrifying, and walked out. Recalling the incident decades later, Fujimura asks, "Do you know what my response was? I immediately washed the painting down. I couldn't take that. I just didn't have a place for that comment, because, being honest with myself, I felt, if that's true, then I don't have a place in my own heart for beauty that's almost terrifying."[1]

[1] Makoto Fujimura, "The Calling of the Artist," talk given at Grove City College, March 18, 2009.

We begin with beauty, frankly, because it drives us to consider the Christian intellectual tradition, which alone gives real answers to the question of how beauty—the source of pleasure—can also terrify. After briefly considering the *classical* and *postmodern* views of beauty that dominate our culture, this first chapter will argue that *Christian* doctrine alone provides a satisfactory explanation of beauty and, thus, a satisfactory explanation of art.

A DESCRIPTIVE DEFINITION

Dictionaries provide descriptive, not prescriptive, definitions. We may or may not like such definitions. We may want to tweak them to conform to what we believe words ought to mean. But there's no doubt that the editors at Merriam-Webster describe rightly when they say that by *beauty*, we mean "the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit."[2] This may or may not tell us what beauty is, but it certainly tells us what people mean by the term. Whenever anyone speaks of "beauty," at the very least he is referring to the capacity of an object to please those who apprehend it.

THE CLASSICAL VIEW OF BEAUTY

In ancient times the equivalent Greek word, *kalos,* worked the same way.[3] Since beauty is considered to be *in the thing perceived,* the classical view concludes that beauty is objective. It is an attribute of the object. Therefore it must be something that can be empirically studied and even measured, as leading Greek thinkers tried to do. The outstanding fifth-century BC sculptor Polycleitos wrote a famous book, now lost, called the *Kanon*, in which he published the numbers of perfect beauty. They were all simple ratios. The

[2] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2005), s.v. "beauty."

[3] See the colloquial definitions given throughout Plato, *Hippias Major,* and in Aristotle, *Topics,* bk. 6 (146a.21), or the more formal one in Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, bk. 1, chap. 9 (1366a).

analogy to music excited the Pythagoreans, who inferred great significance from the fact that vibrating strings produce harmonious sounds when their lengths are measured in simple proportions. Classical architects planned buildings not with blueprints or elevation drawings but with numerical formulas. All this assumed that beauty is uniform, that all beautiful things are beautiful in the same way. Aristotle taught that "the chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree."[4] Plato taught not only the uniformity of beauty but also its absolute nature: implicit in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* and explicit in the *Symposium* is a conflation of the good and the beautiful. The beautiful *is* the good. In such a worldview beauty becomes the very purpose of life, and aesthetics provides the basis for ethics.

This has been the most influential aesthetic position in Western history. Whatever we may think of it, everyone can at least agree that many beautiful things do fit Aristotle's analysis: the symmetries of the human face, for example. Moreover, one can only be thankful for the countless beauties that classicists have dreamed up over the centuries, from the formal clarity of a Botticelli mural to that of Jefferson's Monticello. If we divorce the Parthenon in Athens from its original function to house the goddess, we can treat it as an unparalleled architectural achievement, which in its own way reveals the glory of man's Creator. But make no mistake: not only were the masterpieces of classical antiquity made in the service of idols but also the classical vision itself, at its purest, is an idol. When form is made absolute, when—like the media-bewitched teen starving herself before the mirror—we devote our lives to the pursuit of some created formal standard, the result is not beautiful at all, but wicked and ugly. Hear C. S. Lewis's warning against aestheticism: "These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are

[4] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. 13 (1078b).

mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers."[5]

But this is not the only critique of classicism. The classical view of beauty may be dominant in the Western tradition, with neoclassical movements peculiar to every era, but every era also produced its own alternative to the classical vision. And it's easy to see why. Every reader, surely, can think of things he knows to be beautiful, even though they are not ordered or not symmetrical or not definite: a thunderstorm, say, or a clear, blue sky. How are we to explain the beauty of these? Nineteenth-century romantics, to cite just one alternative, saw the sublime—that which fills us with awe—as a higher aesthetic category than those of classicism. They preferred the Swiss Alps to English formal gardens. Yet neither romanticism nor any other reaction against classicism has provided a viable explanation for *all* human experiences of beauty. Can a scheme that accounts for our reaction to Victoria Falls and the Pleiades also account for the aesthetic value of something as comfortable and domestic as a lullaby or a quilt?

THE POSTMODERN VIEW OF BEAUTY

Who, then, can tell what beauty is? We've only mentioned the classical position and, in passing, the romantic critique of it, but of course every culture and every worldview has its own aesthetic values. How could any one explanation account for all instances of beauty? In the pluralistic 1980s and 90s the problems of beauty came to seem insurmountable. Indeed, the descriptive definition seems to contradict itself. Read it again. *Beauty* is "the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit." The first half locates beauty in the thing perceived, whereas the second half links it to pleasure—which is something that takes place *inside the perceiver,* not in the thing perceived. So which is it? Is beauty a quality

[5] C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 29.

of the perceived object or a quality of the perceiving subject? It can't be both. Something cannot be both objective and subjective, except perhaps in Hinduism. Since what pleases me may not be what pleases you, postmoderns have roundly rejected the opening phrase of the definition. To the postmodern, beauty is in fact a quality of the subject—a quality of the one looking, not of the thing being seen. It's the sensation I have whenever I perceive something I like.[6] It is just a matter of taste, which cannot be accounted for, except by sociologists who study how we are culturally conditioned to consider some things beautiful and not other things. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Let's think about that adage for a minute. It's of fairly recent origin (late nineteenth century). But we have so imbibed postmodern relativism that most people think of this adage not as a matter of worldview but as a truism. The best way to learn its meaning is to consider *when* we say it: invariably in the midst of a dispute over the aesthetic worth of something, and it has the effect of ending the dispute. For if beauty exists in the beholder—in you and me, and not in the thing under dispute—then why are we disputing? Nobody argues about subjective phenomena. We don't argue about whether you are hungry or whether I'm afraid.

The adage performs a metaphysical sleight of hand. Throughout human history cultures have felt the need for some category corresponding to this English word *beauty*. It provides the basis for all critical thinking about form and preference. How do we know that some preferences are better than others? Well, we assess the beauty of the thing preferred. Drug addicts prefer intoxication. Intoxication is manifestly not beautiful. Therefore we know something is wrong with their preference. Without a

[6] For an early formulation of this position see Curt Ducasse, "The Subjectivity of Aesthetic Value" (1929), in *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. John Hospers (New York: Free Press, 1969). For a statement of this position by a practicing artist, see Louise Bourgeois, "Sunday Afternoons: A Conversation and a Remark on Beauty," in *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics,* ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth, 2002), 331.

concept of beauty, we could still call any *action* motivated by their preference immoral (provided we still have a concept of the good), but we couldn't criticize the preference itself. In short, the idea of beauty is what allows us to call an appetite for bad things wrongheaded. But the adage (which almost everybody assumes to be true) would remind us that beauty and preference are the same thing. When we act as if beauty were an objective standard by which we can judge preferences, we are—it seems—just playing a mental game that arbitrarily privileges our preferences over other people's preferences, for any argument about the healthiness of certain preferences is circular. End of discussion. Now we can all get along.

To postmoderns, beauty is therefore no longer a matter for serious reflection and study. For the first time in history, many respectable artists cannot care less whether their work is beautiful. Yet, in Christian circles, postmoderns are frequently said to care more about aesthetics than they do about morality and the truth. When people say this, what they mean is that postmoderns are more persuaded by how attracted they are to a proposition than by how well it conforms to God's law or to the principles of logic. There are two problems with this way of speaking. First, it describes something not new to postmodernism; we human beings have always believed what we want to believe even in the face of a contrary reality (Romans 1). The second problem with this way of speaking is that it adopts the postmodern usage of these terms. If you criticize postmoderns for caring more about beauty than about goodness or truth, when you *mean* that they care more about their own preferences than they do about goodness or truth, your thinking has been colored by the postmodern take on beauty. You've made it a synonym for preference. In fact no movement in history has been more hostile to beauty than postmodernism. One of the most celebrated anthologies of postmodern cultural thought from the 1980s was entitled *The Anti-Aesthetic,* in recognition that now

politics had displaced beauty as the essence of art.[7] It turns out that what is new in postmodernism is not a prioritizing of the beautiful over the good and the true but rather a revolt against authority of any kind—a revolt as much against the beautiful as against the good and the true. A revolt against reality itself.

A corollary of this is that we are also mistaken when we talk about how visually oriented the current generation is. One frequently hears that postmoderns are more disposed to understand through images than through words and propositions. And yet this has not been borne out by our experience as teachers of art history and appreciation; we find many students to be insecure in their ability to see some of the most basic things in pictures. However prominent visual media are in our society, they do surprisingly little to hone our powers of sight. Quite the contrary. It turns out that postmoderns do not neglect words for the sake of images. Rather, they neglect all communicative forms, both verbal and visual. If you want to attract a postmodern audience, sure, use pictures. Use words. Just see to it that the pictures and words don't say very much. For we have come to distrust meaning itself. We have come to associate authenticity with an incommunicative formlessness. The less a form says, the more sincere it is.

Now, in these matters, is the church different from the world? American evangelicals in the twentieth century were pretty faithful in asserting the importance of truth and goodness. Most grew up knowing that it was not up to them to define what these things were. Truth and goodness were part of an external reality to which one had to submit, if one wasn't going to go about constantly bruising one's shins in a self-inflicted psychosis. So what about beauty? Early on, we Christians bought into postmodernity's aesthetic relativism hook, line, and sinker. Some still fight for goodness and truth; we know that the goodness of God's will and the

[7] Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983).

truth of his Word are absolute, but the forms they take are said to be culturally determined and morally neutral.[8] Wasn't it the Pharisees who cared about form? As long as we get the substance of the gospel right, it does not matter how we proclaim it, or so we think. But we're inconsistent. For all our aesthetic relativism, we fight over forms today as much as ever. It's just that now we have a guilty conscience about it, because deep inside we have come to think that forms have little to do with the "big" issues.

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF BEAUTY

It has not always been this way. In Mark 14:3–8, Jesus assumed that beauty is more than preference but something objective and important—so much so that it ought to play a role in the disciples' ethical decision making:

> And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial."

The word *kalos*, translated in verse 6 as "beautiful" by the ESV and NIV, literally means that. Elsewhere, New Testament authors frequently employ the word in its secondary or figurative sense of "good," which is how the KJV and NASB translate it here. Even then the focus is on goodness of use or goodness of appearance,

[8] See, e.g., Harold M. Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 42–47.

the word for intrinsic goodness being *agathos*. But we need not speculate here, for Jesus explained himself. He did not commend the woman merely for the goodness of her deed. It wasn't just that she worshiped him or that she worshiped him sincerely. Jesus commended her for the way (or form) in which she worshiped him. "She has anointed my body beforehand for burial." That is, she worshiped him in a way that acknowledged what everyone else still seemed to be in denial about: that the Son of Man came to give his life, and the hour was now at hand. Does it seem strange that the Lord would commend someone specifically for the *beauty* of her deed?

It did not seem strange to Christians in ages gone by. Until recently, it was taken for granted that form matters to God. Psalm 27:4 calls God himself beautiful. His glory is one of the most important themes in the Bible, and any Bible dictionary will tell you that God's glory—*kabod* in the Old Testament and *doxa* in the New—is his perfections put on display. (Is God really beautiful? Don't be shocked by the question. Many thoughtful evangelicals today, when pressed, will deny that God is beautiful in order to be consistent in their aesthetic relativism. When the Bible speaks this way, they reason, it's just using a figure of speech to describe the pleasure Christians happen to experience in him. Theirs is a radically new way to think about the attributes of God.)

The Bible also asserts that God's creation is beautiful. "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (Eccles. 3:11). It is only our sin that brought ugliness into the world and blinds us to the beauty all around. Why did God make all things beautiful? Psalms 8 and 19, Acts 14, and Romans 1 teach us that he did so to reflect his own beauty. And if God is beautiful, and if his creation is beautiful, then there is an objective measure for beauty, and we can think critically about it.

Here we have what can be called the historic Christian view of beauty. We do not hesitate to call it *the* Christian view because it's

obviously that of all our best thinkers, from Augustine to Aquinas to Calvin to Edwards.[9] If we may be so bold as to put the Christian definition of beauty in our own words, it is *the forms through which we recognize the nature and ways of God*. Whereas the classical view equates beauty with goodness and truth, and the postmodern view separates beauty from goodness and truth, the Christian view asserts that they always go together, even as it draws an important distinction between them. Thus the common word *beauty* is very closely related to the theological idea of *revelation*, both general and special. Just as revelation communicates to man the truth concerning God and his will, so beauty is the form of that communication. For example, when we study the heavens and discover their beauty, essentially what has happened is that we have perceived in their form a kind of speech that declares the glory of God. Similarly, the Christian doctrine of beauty is implicit in the very first chapter of Genesis. When God made the world, he "saw" that it was good. Creation had a form that made goodness visible.

BACK TO THE DESCRIPTIVE DEFINITION

In contrast to the postmodern, then, the Christian sees no contradiction at all in the descriptive definition of "beauty," because he believes humans were made to take pleasure in certain things, namely, in God's goodness. You may think something is pleasant, and I may think something else is pleasant, but one or both of us may not know what true pleasure is. In fact, we may be drawn to that which will make us miserable. It's precisely because we are so prone to deceive ourselves about pleasure that we need the concept of beauty. It enables us to think critically about pleasure, which, by the way, is why postmoderns hate beauty so much and want to

[9] Augustine, Letter 166 (to Jerome, on the origin of the soul), chap. 5; and *De Vera Religione* 32. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Divine Names* 4.5; and *Summa Theologica* 1.39.8 reply. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.5.1–19 and 3.10.1–6. Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections,* pt. 3, sec. 4; and *A Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue,* chap. 3.

conflate it with preference. They don't want to have to think critically about pleasure. They don't want any reminders that their joys aren't solid, that their treasures won't last.

POSTMODERN OBJECTIONS TO THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

Furthermore, postmoderns see critical thought as a threat to human diversity. If beauty is objective, they wonder, what ought we to make of differing preferences? If Tim likes something and Sally doesn't, is one of them wrong? If beauty is objective, would this not produce a cookie-cutter approach, in which everybody is supposed to like the same things? Did not God make us uniquely in his image, so we can each glorify him in our own way? Yes, he did. Many who still claim truth to be objective do not wrestle with similar questions regarding truth; after all, what could be more diverse or more objective than the truths "two plus two is four" and "strawberries are sweet"? These fears are based on a fallacious (or should we say classical?) assumption that objectivity means uniformity.

In the Christian view, beauty is endlessly diverse because it manifests an infinite glory. Moreover, everybody's approach to this endless diversity is different, because God endows each with a unique constitution and background. It's only to be expected—and, indeed, it's good—that we have different preferences. The reason individuals and cultures differ in their notions of beauty is not that its essence is up for grabs but that no finite (not to mention fallen) mind can comprehend it in its fullness. The historic Christian understanding of beauty acknowledges not just that beauty is objective but that it is *transcendentally* objective. It is an object bigger than we—infinitely bigger than we—so we all see different aspects of it. And, as we do so, more of God's glory is beheld than if we all saw the same things. As it turns out, the Christian doctrine of beauty provides the only true basis for diversity.

Many today embrace aesthetic relativism as a way to foster tolerance and respect, but what relativism really fosters is indifference. If no form is better than any other, then the beauties I already know suffice, and I don't need to learn from anyone else. If I am an aesthetic relativist—consistent in my relativism—and you come to me this afternoon and say, "Oh, you've got to come outside and see the sky—it's beautiful," my response will be, "Who do you think you are, to think you have seen something that I would be better off for seeing, too?" The Christian view, by contrast, humbles us. It teaches us that we need one another. If we are going to see as much of God's glory as possible, we have to learn to see through others' eyes.

Consider the following illustration. Five-year-old Billy carefully draws a picture for his mother. When he brings it to her, what will she say? "Oh, Billy, it's beautiful." But if the curator of an art museum walks by, he will take no notice of Billy's drawing. Since you and I would condone both of these responses, the postmodern says, "Aha, gotcha. If the drawing is beautiful to Billy's mom and ugly to the curator, its beauty depends on who's perceiving it." But let's consider what it would look like to apply consistently each of the main doctrines of beauty in this situation. To the classicist, either the mother is being dishonest with Billy or she is deluding herself. The postmodern, meanwhile, will commend both the mother and the curator for being true to themselves and for finding beauty and ugliness wherever they are so inclined. However, on the same grounds, the postmodern would also have to commend the mother if she had said, "Billy, this is the ugliest thing I've ever seen." Likewise the postmodern would have to commend the curator if he had chosen to discard a Rembrandt to make room for the "Billy." Only the Christian view accords with what we know to be right. The mother is right to see how the form of Billy's drawing reveals objectively good things: his love for her, his imagination, and the development of his fine motor skills. If any of us made the

effort to look—really look—at Billy's drawing, we would see these things, too. The mother does not project beauty onto the drawing. It's there. But the curator has a different purpose for drawings. His job is to find and to display those images that will most reward aesthetic contemplation, a purpose for which Billy's drawing is ill-suited. So both are right, without making the beauty and the ugliness which they saw subjective.

Remember, the beauty of any object is its capacity to proclaim truth and to realize goodness. The ugliness of any object is the sum of all the ways in which it obscures truth and impedes goodness, which means that everything in this cursed world is both beautiful and ugly. Some things will be mostly beautiful, and some will be mostly ugly, but everything will be a mix, because there are multiple purposes—both good purposes and evil purposes—to which any object can be put. This means, for example, that something ugly can be depicted beautifully—say, in a movie about the Holocaust—if the ugliness and the evil are depicted accurately. If we learn from it anew how vile sin is, how real judgment is, and how near grace is, then a depiction of ugliness can be very beautiful indeed. And only the Christian view of beauty can account for this.

CONCLUSION

So Christian doctrine provides the only satisfactory explanation of beauty. It tells us what beauty is and why we respond emotionally to beauty, even as it prevents us from making an idol of beauty. The Christian view provides the only true basis for aesthetic diversity and humility. It provides the only satisfactory explanation of ugliness. And it also provides a way to resolve aesthetic disputes. Here, the first step is to agree on what the disputed object is *for*. When we argue over form, we sometimes talk past each other, assuming our disagreement to be aesthetic in nature when often it's really ethical. Once we have agreed on a common purpose, however, it should be a fairly straightforward—even scientific—process to determine

what form can most effectively realize that purpose. If both parties do in fact share a common purpose but cannot resolve their conflict, it can only be that one or both lack aesthetic discernment. We are not born aesthetically wise. It is something we must learn through diligent study and repentance.

The postmodern, however, sees no need for repentance, for if beauty is what I make of it rather than an external reality, then beauty demands nothing of me. The end of aesthetic relativism is aesthetic immaturity. Mind you, this describes more than nonbelievers. It also describes Bible-believing Christians who have adopted the world's aesthetic relativism, which is in fact aesthetic rebellion. Compared to our forebears in the faith we are aesthetically immature. Consider clothing, for example. Historically Christians have understood that clothing speaks (just as the heavens do) and that our main consideration in choosing clothes should be the well-being of those who have to look at us. Today, however, we regularly show up in public dressed as if we're going to garden or change the oil in our car. Male students in our classrooms intentionally comb their hair to make it look like they didn't comb it. Their studied carelessness sends an unintended message. It says: "I don't want you to think that I love you enough to try to bless you with a pleasant appearance." We can observe the same pattern in all the great social endeavors of commerce, governance, education, worship, and family life.

But don't stop there. It's not just human communication that falters. We grow insensitive to the forms through which God himself communicates. The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar described the tragedy most clearly:

> Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. . . . In a world without beauty—even if

> people cannot dispense with the word and constantly have it on the tip of their tongues in order to abuse it—in a world which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it: in such a world the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil. For this, too, is a possibility, and even the more exciting one: Why not investigate Satan's depths? In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of truth have lost their cogency. In other words, syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses or computers which infallibly spew out an exact number of answers by the minute. But the logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone. The very conclusions are no longer conclusive.[10]

Aesthetic relativism is an attack on revelation resulting in moral and epistemological relativism.

Where does it come from? Sins like sloth, lust, and pride may play a part, but most fundamentally our attraction to aesthetic relativism suggests an aversion to God's glory. Could it be that we hate beauty because we hate God? That we hate real pleasure?[11] This is where the Christian view of beauty proves to be not just philosophically satisfying but evangelistically necessary, for the gospel applies to all of life, including aesthetics. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul defends the high view he takes of his ministry by comparing it to the ministry of Moses. In verse 7 he begins specifically to compare the way the glory of God was perceived in the old covenant with the way it is perceived in the new. Picking up in verse 12:

> Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze

[10] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 18–19.
[11] The English philosopher Roger Scruton asks this question with startling honesty but no Christian answers in "The Flight from Beauty," the eighth chapter of his book *Beauty* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

> at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.[12] But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Paul refers to Exodus 34. What happened to those who, in the old covenant, encountered the glory of God? They became conscious of their doom and their need for a mediator. Without Christ, they needed a veil to obstruct their view of the glory because they *could not* look at its outcome: death for sinners (v. 7). Every generation has its own favorite way of avoiding glory; the Pharisees had their legalism, moderns had their materialism, and postmoderns have their relativism. But it's a temporary fix. Only in Christ is the moth not crushed. He took upon himself the outcome of sin's encounter with glory so that we can behold it without being damned. No longer needing a veil, we are free to enjoy him. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

[12] The NIV's paraphrase of v. 13 misleads: "We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away." This reading in English implies that what Moses was covering up was the *fading away* rather than the *glory*. Did Moses try to conceal the fact that the glory was impermanent? This implication is made explicit in the *NIV Study Bible* ([Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002] note for 3:13). Yet this reading is not required by the Greek, finds no support in pre-modern commentaries, and would be irrelevant to Paul's argument at this point. Ex. 34:30 and 2 Cor. 3:7 indicate that Moses was covering the glory, because the outcome (*telos*) of that glory was death. The fact that the glory was coming to an end (in contrast to the permanence of glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ) is just another point of comparison between Moses's and Paul's ministries.

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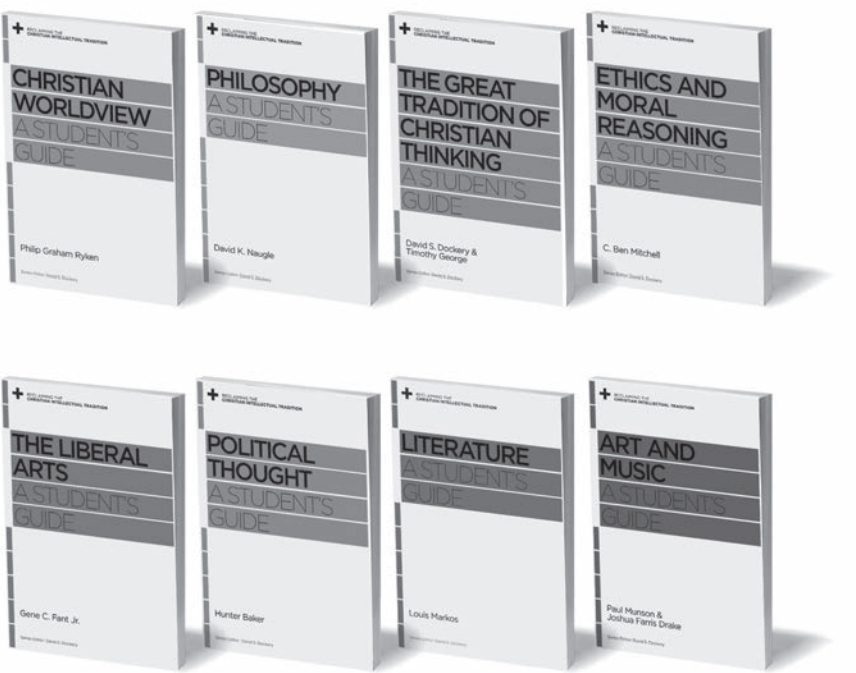

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