

## Formed Into the Beauty of Christ: Reflections on Aesthetics and Christian Spiritual Formation

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Beauty is a powerful force. We hike through a magical river valley only to stand, at the end of our journey, before a spectacular fall of waters and we are penetrated by feelings of awe and appreciation. King David was captivated by the beauty of Bathsheba, so captivated that he killed her husband and brought upon himself the judgment of God (see 2 Samuel 11:1-12:23). When we worship in song, the complex rhythms of the drums and the rich harmonies of the voices transport us into the presence of God. Even the brilliant colors and elaborate patterns of a creatively woven piece of fabric stimulate admiration for both the material and its maker. Our heroes and heroines are icons of a life beautifully lived, a life toward which we ourselves are moved. Indeed, wars are fought over competing visions of the beautiful society. However true or twisted our conceptions, however conscious or unconscious its hold, we are formed *by* beauty and *into* beauty.

Peter ties power, beauty, and formation together in his first epistle. He writes of God that, "his divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge, and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love" (2 Peter 1:3-7). "Divine power," "glory and goodness," "precious promises," "participation in the divine nature," "make every effort": this is the language of beauty, of power, of formation--and of their connection. What lies beneath Peter's language are a set of related convictions:

(1) that the universe of God is one of dynamic beauty (glory, goodness, power), (2) that this divine dynamic beauty shapes both the aim (participation in the divine nature) and the means (precious promises) of our formation as Christians, and (3) that our response to this wonderful state of affairs is an aggressive pursuit of God's beautiful and transformative aim, making use of God's beautiful means, in the context of God's beautiful and gracious power.

What this means is that growth in Christian maturity has a distinctly *aesthetic* dimension ("aesthetics" refers, in philosophy and theology, to the exploration of art and beauty). However, the aesthetic dimension of Christianity has, until recently, remained relatively unexplored.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the present essay is, then, to explore the aesthetic dimension of Christian spiritual life with particular attention to its role in our formation into maturity in Christ. In doing so I will describe the nature of Christian spiritual formation and review some of the issues involved in the academic study of aesthetics. Then I will offer a biblical/theological reflection on Peter's underlying convictions, suggesting that the category of "the beautiful" deserves to be a significant part of our understanding of the Christian faith, and more particularly a vital part of our approach to growth in personal maturity and corporate life. Finally, I will close with a few suggestions regarding how this aesthetic dimension may be realized in the everyday practice of Christian communities and individuals.

### **Christian Spiritual Formation**

Formation is a popular topic among Christians these days. Christian colleges are changing department titles from Christian "education" to Christian "formation." Societies and journals are being created to facilitate discussion about spiritual formation. One publisher has recently developed a new line of books--called "Formatio"--specifically to support this interest. But just what *is* spiritual formation, and what does it mean in the context of Christianity? In brief, "Christian spiritual formation refers to the processes by which individuals and communities become fully conformed and united to Christ, especially with regard to maturity of life and calling."<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul, for example, is burdened for his readers--"in the pains of childbirth" is the phrase he uses--"until Christ is formed in

you" (Galatians 4:19). Similarly, Paul speaks of our being formed into Christ, "in all things growing up into him who is the head, that is Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Peter, immediately following the passage cited above, urges his readers to possess the virtues mentioned "in increasing measure" (2 Peter 1:8). Whereas "eschatology" considers our ultimate and final salvation, *spiritual formation* explores our ongoing growth in Christ here on earth. And whereas "sanctification" refers to the overall doctrine of the Christian's growth in holiness, *spiritual formation* refers more specifically to the human means and processes by which that growth is actually experienced in communities and individuals.

A number of factors are involved in our concrete formation in Christ. Our maturation is shaped by the social, ethnic, and historical contexts in which we live. While the Holy Spirit is the chief "former" of our lives, other people contribute to our growth. Christians often employ a variety of "means of grace" or "spiritual disciplines" (such as prayer, Bible-reading, meditation, fellowship and so on) that facilitate our spiritual development. Underneath all this is our sense of the task of formation itself: an increasing re-orientation and re-habitation of every aspect of our lives. Peter speaks of "adding" virtue upon virtue. Paul speaks of "putting off" and "putting on" (see Colossians 3:9-14). What spiritual formation is about is the process of growing to think like Jesus thinks, to feel like Jesus feels, and to act like Jesus acts.

And it *is* a process. We make a commitment to live differently. We enlist our brothers and sisters in Christ to help us. We identify particular vices or virtues to address. We select those disciplines or means of grace that might best facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit. We experiment and revise our practice in light of the wisdom of careful attention and helpful advice. And over time we become more and more like Christ. At the beginning and at the end of formation there is a vision, an aim. Some speak of holiness, of sanctification, or righteousness. Others speak of living into the kingdom of God. Still others speak of perfection (see for example Matthew 5:48; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 13:9; Colossians 1:28; James 1:4). But however we describe it, the important thing is to see the connection between the various elements of the process. George Maloney makes reference to this kind of connection as he

describes the efforts of the Russian monk to grow in Christian perfection:

The Monk had to have a conscious understanding of the goal of perfection and the means most suitable to attain it, along with a willing determination to arrive at that end. Therefore, the individual monk had to understand and be convinced of the instructions given him. Then by force of conviction, he had to put them into practice in his life.<sup>3</sup>

More recently this process of formation has been summarized by American philosopher and spiritual writer Dallas Willard. He identifies three primary components of the process: *Vision, Intention, and Means* (VIM). He states frankly, that, "if we are to be formed in Christ, we must have and must implement the appropriate *vision, intention, and means*. Not just any path we take will do. If this VIM pattern is not put in place properly and held there, Christ simply will not be formed in us."<sup>4</sup> An understanding of the goal of perfection, a vision of the kingdom of God, a heart for holiness: Christian spiritual formation begins and ends with a perception of an aim. My point is that this understanding, this vision, is *aesthetic*; it is a perception of beauty.

### **Aesthetics**

Though the term "aesthetics" was not coined until 1735, people have been probing the meaning of beauty and the arts for a long time. A number of important questions have been raised in the context of these probes. What goes on inside a human being when he or she experiences something as "beautiful"? Is it the expression of the artist, the form of a product, or the experience of the one who encounters an object or event that makes something *art*? Are there different kinds of aesthetic experience; is, for example, our experience of art different than our experience of the aesthetic dimension in nature? Is beauty merely in the eye of the beholder? If so, than why do we persist in having beauty contests, in giving awards for well-written poetry, and why do we all claim to know really bad music when we hear it? Nonetheless, two questions are of special relevance to our purposes in this essay. First, there is the question of the qualities of beauty: just what is it that makes something "beautiful"? If we are to consider the aesthetic dimension of the Christian faith, it is important to be

clear about what we mean when we say that the Gospel is beautiful. Second, there is the question of the relationship between beauty and Beauty. Does our experience of beauty in art or nature point us any further? Is there a hint of Something Beyond to be found in the ordinary beauties of everyday life? If we are to develop a *theological* aesthetics, this question is of paramount importance. These two questions have received significant discussion over the centuries and it would do us well to examine each of these a little more closely here.

What qualities constitute beauty? What is it about a song, a poem, a sculpture, or a sunrise that makes it "beautiful"? The Greeks for the most part saw beauty in order. Plato (c. 428-348 BC) spoke of measure and proportion while Aristotle (384-322 BC) identified arrangement as a key element in beauty. The Stoics saw in earthly order a reflection of the rational order of the universe. Plotinus (AD 205-270), however, questioned whether symmetry or proportion could be the defining features of beauty. Some simple things (like single colors) are beautiful and they have no proportion. We can also speak of "noble conduct" but in what sense does this have symmetry? Plotinus saw beauty not in its relationship to order in general, but in its relationship to a more fundamental Ideal-Form, a matter to be explored soon. Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274) emphasized three primary qualities in his understanding of beauty: integrity or perfection (objects that are broken are not beautiful), proportion or harmony (relations of things to another), and clarity or brilliance (the symbol of light and shining was powerful in Medieval thought). Renaissance painters of the fifteenth century emphasized representation, and developed the use of perspective in order to enable more accurate representation. The Rationalist poets of the seventeenth century spoke of the need to represent the human condition, making use of "essential types" as means of generalizing characteristic features of human life.

People understood art and beauty differently. Some emphasized the creative expression of the artist. Others focused on the beautiful object or event itself. Still others explored the experience of those who encountered beauty. Some appreciated the landscapes of nature while others examined human creations. More recently philosophers have asked serious questions about the institutions that

develop art, the structures of human language and image that produce and perceive art, the distinctions between art and craft, and the passivity with which beauty had been assumed to be experienced. Yet, in spite of all the questioning, most still see a place for art (art is mentioned more than beauty). Art engages us and speaks to us of our own condition. Yet even as late as 1958, Monroe Beardsley identified three "general canons" of aesthetic value (beauty): unity, complexity, and intensity.<sup>5</sup> So then what qualities constitute beauty? What are we to look at when we consider the Gospel *aesthetically*? For our purposes I think it is fair to see beauty in an object or event that *engages* us in an *integrative union* (a form that comprehends a range of particulars) and facilitates a barely-communicable *pleasure*.

But does beauty point beyond earthly appreciation? Many have thought so. In a well known passage in his *Symposium*, Plato shows how our attraction to a given person's body can lead us to think of the beauty of any body, and from there to consider the beauty of the soul, and then on to the beauty of institutions and sciences, and so on. Our idea of beauty keeps getting larger and larger until, finally, we find ourselves gazing at Universal Beauty itself. For Plato and his followers, particular beauties are simply a shadow of an ultimate Form of Beauty. African bishop and theologian Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) saw this Form of Beauty as the form of God. He writes,

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within, and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though, if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. . . . You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours."<sup>6</sup>

"If they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all." God's being and beauty are absolute and complete. Ours is derived from the God who created us. Consequently, medieval scholars identified an "analogy of being" whereby a knowledge of our own life and beauty here on earth offers

hints regarding the character of God, the source of all that is.

Nevertheless, as the medieval era gave way to the modern, our sense of the relationship between God's Being and our being--God's Beauty and our beauty--was largely forgotten. There were a few, like Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftsbury (1671-1713) or Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) who emphasized the aesthetic and who saw in beauty a reflection of the divine. True, some nineteenth-century German philosophers, such as Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831), Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling (1775-1854), and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) saw art and beauty as manifestations of something larger than human assessment. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that self-consciously Christian aesthetics all but disappeared from sight for nearly two hundred years. Then, in 1961 Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) published the first of his seven volume masterpiece, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*.<sup>7</sup> Since that time a distinct theological discipline has developed around aesthetics, exploring both the relationship of Christian theology to the arts and the aesthetic character of the Christian faith itself.<sup>8</sup> To quote theologian Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, "After a very long dry spell, it appears that aesthetics is about to become, once again, a companion to spirituality."<sup>9</sup> In a world suffering from both natural and human evils, perhaps the question of beauty is appropriate.

### **A Christian Aesthetical Theology**

Having summarized spiritual formation, and having clarified what we mean by beauty, and having discovered that it is philosophically appropriate--and perhaps even timely--to explore the Christian faith from the perspective of aesthetics, we are now ready to return to Peter's aesthetical assumptions. In this section I will address his first assumption, that the universe of God is one of dynamic beauty (glory, goodness, power). Ideally, this would involve the development of an "aesthetical theology," a restatement of the Christian faith with particular sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension. For reasons of space, I can only offer a sketch here of what this kind of perspective might unveil, reflecting on a few of the primary themes of the Christian faith as they are presented in

Scripture.

*Creation and Goodness* - "And God saw that it was good." "And God saw that it was good." "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (see Genesis 1:9,12,18,21,24,31) This world was created "good." The term good used here (*tov*) is also translated "beautiful" when describing the appearance of women (see 2 Samuel 11:2 and Esther 2:7). The goodness of God's creation is not simply a moral righteousness, but also a wonderful integration of life forms together. Psalm 104 beautifully expresses appreciation for this divinely-fashioned ecosystem, drawing attention to patterns in the sky (vv 2-4), in the structure of the earth's surface itself (vv. 5-9), and in plant and animal life (vv. 10-18). "How many are your works, Lord!" the psalmist proclaims, "In wisdom you made them all" (v. 24). Though creation itself has been subjected to frustration, it awaits a profound liberation into freedom and glory (Romans 8:18-21). Out of the fullness of God's own being he created the heavens and the earth. This universe is a spectacular integration of the particulars of space and time so magnificent that we have only begun to discover its mysteries. As theologian David Bentley Hart writes, "Creation, as an "aesthetic" expression of trinitarian love, is always grace in the fullest sense: it is that "gracefulness" that reveals the nature of divine "graciousness."<sup>10</sup> We marvel at the splendor of God's handiwork (Psalm 8:1-4). The angels shouted for joy at the creation (Job 38:4-7). Indeed, God himself receives pleasure from his creation (Revelation 4:11). Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) made a distinction between the perception of beauty and the perception of what he called "the sublime." When we perceive beauty (such as when we listen to a well-composed symphony), there is a play of imagination and reason as we follow the patterns before us. When we perceive the sublime (such as when we stand before a roaring ocean) we experience the limits of our reason as the object or event seems almost too much to grasp. My point is this: from a Christian perspective we find that within creation the beautiful and the sublime intersect. Within God's work there is a harmony of elements that fascinate the imagination, that stretch our reason, and that delight the senses. Until we comprehend the beauty and the power of creation we have not begun to understand Christian theology.

*Community and Glory* -But as we know, creation was subject to frustration. To Adam God said, "cursed is the ground because of you." And what was created good was not destroyed, but distorted nonetheless. And the human beings which God made "very good," in his own image, were cursed. God's intention was to have a community of partners in his image that would rule over creation in a spirit of care and harmony. Instead human beings separated themselves from God through disobedience, and in doing so, separated themselves from one another and from creation itself. More particularly with regard to the former, we hear of the first murder in Genesis 4. And the book of Genesis goes on to recount both the consistent unfaithfulness of humankind toward God and each other and the consistent faithfulness of God in raising up a people to display his name (his character, values, beauty). This "raising up" is most clearly displayed in the story of the Exodus, documented in the books of Exodus - Deuteronomy. And it is in these books that another aesthetic term is introduced: "glory." As the people of Israel cross the Red Sea and make their way to the promised land, they complain about their provision. God tells them that he will supply their needs and that in doing so "you will see the glory of the Lord" (Exodus 16:7). The term "glory" (*kabod*) is a rich word, speaking of honor, splendor, and radiance. The glory of the Lord appeared to the people of Israel habitually in their journeys. This was not merely an experience of provision, but rather a perception of the sublime manifestation of God (at times through a cloud or fire). Moses begged for--and received--a taste of this glory (see Exodus 33:21-23), an experience explicitly associated with Moses' perception of God's presence. The tabernacle--described as a work of art--was also a place where the glory of God resided. David draws upon this background of appreciation for light and glory as he offers his last words, inspired by the Lord, saying that "when one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after the rain that brings grass from the earth" (2 Samuel 23:3-4). Glory is not just a visible show of fireworks or marvelous deeds (though it certainly includes these); it is a display of God's character. And this is manifest through a community who lives according to the law of God. When one reads through

the regulations of Leviticus or Deuteronomy, one does not readily think of aesthetic categories. And yet hear David's description of the law:

The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. . .

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:8,10)

God is full of glory. God's works in creation and in the calling out of a people are a magnificent and powerful display of an integrative plan. And the law itself--living out the details of relationships with others and with the land--displays this integrative beauty. In the obedience to the law, in the righteous rule of the king, there is a taste of God's original beauty, a community who harmonizes worship and labor and love in the spirit of God's own heart. Consequently, we must see the call of the law--and the cries of the prophets--not simply as legal statements, but as aesthetic language, as a call of the heart, urging God's people to be gripped by a vision of beauty and to become a community of beauty.<sup>11</sup>

### *Salvation and the Beautiful Story -*

We all like a good story. We especially enjoy those stories that weave a number of characters and concerns together into an interesting conclusion. The stories in which the bad guys get their justice and there is happiness at the end are especially popular. We appreciate character development in a story, where someone experiences real change over the course of the narrative. Hero stories are common, as are stories of quests, revenge, and love. We share in the joys and the tragedies of a good story.

The Gospel is a story, a *true* story. It is good news. It is a story of salvation. We read in Psalm 85 that "surely God's salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land" (Psalm 85:9). Here we find the rich concept of glory connected with the idea of "salvation." So just what is salvation and how is glory (or beauty) connected, particularly for Christians?

The story of God's salvation is rooted in the Israelite experience of redemption from Egyptian slavery. God's people were powerless to obtain their own freedom, and yet God acted on their behalf. God acted

*powerfully* on their behalf. The story of the Exodus was a wonderful story: how the plagues came and finally God's people were released, and then chased, and then trapped, and then the waters parted at the last moment and the threat of disaster was turned into the hope of a new life. Again and again God protected his people, guided them, gave them victories, in spite of their rebellion. The Passover celebration was instituted to preserve the memory of that story of salvation as God's people settled into the promised land.

In time, however, it became clear that the story was not over. Israel would forget--and forsake--their God, and trouble would come. Then they would cry out to God and the Lord would send a judge who would rescue them from their enemies. They would keep their faith (their memory) for a time, and then slip away from God, and the cycle would repeat. They elected to have kings and some of these were faithful to God. Many were not. Rather than becoming a beautiful community, a light shining before the nations of the glory of God, Israel became a stench in the nostrils of God. In the end they were taken away, captive and exiled. And as the centuries passed, the story developed. Israel realized that the bad guys were not other nations but themselves. This was not just a story of revenge, but of love, a story of God's persistent love for his beloved. It was not only a story of Israel's quest for freedom and identity, it was also a story of God's quest for a people, a bride. This story involved heaven and earth, creation and judgment, individuals and nations. It was also a story desperately in need of a new kind of hero.

The apostle John begins his Gospel account by speaking about a special person. John identifies him as "the Word." John says of this person, that "In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:4-5, 14). Of course, we know that this person is Jesus. And that is the point. In Jesus, in this one person, in this one human being born in time and space, the story of all stories finds its center point. As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, Jesus is "not only

one who is wholly adequate," "he is the measure itself."<sup>12</sup> [Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Vol. 1: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 472] In the person of Jesus the mystery of God and the visibility of humanness are united. Through Christ, the evil of sin and the glory of God are reconfigured. Those who encountered the person of Jesus were struck with the sublimity of his power. Those who wrote of the work of Jesus were entranced by the integrative beauty of his reconciliation (see, for example, Ephesians 1-3). Through the resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit the "good/beautiful" news spreads even further. In the end, humanity gets what they want: life, eternal life. God gets what he wants: a community of partners to rule the earth in harmony with his will (see Revelation 22:5). And they all live happily ever after.

My point is not that the Christian message makes a nice story, or simply that it can be viewed aesthetically (although I *do* believe these). It is rather this: that the Christian Gospel is the pattern of Beauty itself. The Christian message is not just the greatest story ever told; it is *the* story, the measure of all stories. Jesus is not just a great hero, he is *the* hero, the model of human life itself. Christ's death was not just a good rescue; it is *the* rescue, the saving of humanity from ultimate danger. In this story creation is restored to the fullness of its goodness, the people of God emerge as a glorious bride, and God's good news is appreciated (praised) by the whole earth. In Christianity we find the widest integration possible, the most diverse elements are unified in a single vision. Christ's redemption secures the reconciliation of heaven and earth, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free (Galatians 3:28). Time and space are combined in a spectacular drama. Themes and counter-themes weave in and out, only to be fully reconciled at the climax. And we are engaged in the Beauty of it all: not only aesthetically, but also existentially. Our very lives depend on our engagement with this compelling story of hope. The Christian message is not just beautiful; it is Beauty itself.

### **Formation: The Practice of an Aesthetically-Informed Christian Vision**

But what does all of this have to do with spiritual formation, with our growth in Christian

maturity? Much, indeed. And it is time to return to Peter's second and third assumptions: (2) that divine beauty shapes both the aim and the means of our formation, and (3) that our response is an aggressive pursuit of God's beautiful and transformative aim, making use of God's beautiful means, in the context of God's beautiful and gracious power.

*The Aims of Formation* - As we have learned above, the Christian message is a story with a happy ending, an ending in which all areas of life are harmoniously conformed to the will of the beautiful God. Yet the ending of this story is not realized all at once, on the last page so to speak. Rather it grows in the lives of followers of Jesus, much as a tiny mustard seed grows into a large tree (Matthew 13:31-32). The Christian hope is realized right here and now in part, just as it is realized in the end in its fullness. Only whereas our final salvation rests in the cosmic plan of the Almighty, our ongoing salvation requires a cooperation with God. "Continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," Paul urges his Philippian readers, "for it is God who works in you" (Philippians 2:13). And how is this cooperation in God's aims accomplished? In part, by maintaining a clear and focused view of God's aims.

This is the step of Vision, as mentioned above. Yet our very sense of the object of our Vision must now be adjusted in light of our aesthetic perspective. For Christian formation is not simply the application of principles to our lives, it is rather the ever-increasing embodiment of Beauty. Hence we must learn to see the aims of our growth in Christ not simply as responsibilities or commands but also as experiments in a beautiful life. Peter speaks of "participation in the divine nature." Others speak of "perfection," "maturity," "righteousness," the "kingdom of God," or "holiness." These are not to be seen as rigid prescriptions of thought and behavior, but rather as the beautiful integration of every aspect of life in union with the Spirit of the Living God. Listen to how Jonathan Edwards described holiness in his miscellaneous notes:

Holiness is a most beautiful and lovely thing. We drink in strange notions of holiness from our childhood, as if it were a melancholy, morose, sour and unpleasant thing; but there is nothing in

it but what is sweet and ravishingly lovely. 'Tis the highest beauty and amiableness, vastly above other beauties. 'Tis a divine beauty, makes the soul heavenly and far purer than anything here on earth; this world is like mire and filth and defilement to that soul which is sanctified. 'Tis of a sweet, pleasant, charming, lovely, amiable delightful, serene, calm and still nature. 'Tis almost too high a beauty for any creatures to be adorned with; it makes the soul a little, sweet and delightful image of the blessed Jehovah."<sup>13</sup>

We must learn to see the proximate aims of our formation as Scripture does: as the realization on earth of the compelling, attractive, harmonious life of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator God, and life-giving Spirit, and as the enjoyment of the rich and full salvation offered us now only to be completed at the end of the age. When we allow ourselves to approach growth in maturity from this perspective, we become gripped by the Beauty of holiness and we are softened to God's work and to our means of grace.

### *The Means of Formation*

An aesthetic perspective shapes not only our understanding of the *aims* of formation, it also shapes our approach to the *means* of formation. Peter claims that it is through those "precious promises" that we enter into participation with the divine nature. Just how does this work? First, we realize that these precious promises are summaries of the Beautiful Gospel, particularly with regard to our inheritance in that story here and now. So the first thing is to truly see the promises of Scripture as *precious*.

Next, we must understand something of the functions of aesthetic experience. Remember, beauty is a powerful force. Aesthetic experience is unique in that it draws us "outside ourselves" into the object or event of our interest. Whereas fear, pleasure and other basic emotions are generally governed by appraisals related to our own concerns, aesthetic emotions appear to be governed by the character of the object or event of interest itself. Of course, all aesthetic experiences are not identical. We can distinguish subtle differences within human aesthetic experience: the delicate beauty of a faun,

the complex beauty of an intricately woven fabric, the majesty of a sunrise, the appreciation of a life well-lived. Each has its own feel. Similarly, different aspects of the Beauty of the Christian faith--the grace of humility, the harmony of the body of Christ, the majesty of the glorious resurrection, and so on--will each have their own feel. Furthermore, aesthetic experience *moves* us toward the object of interest. We are fascinated by a painting. We are attracted to a beautiful person, or a beautiful community. We find ourselves imitating the beautiful, trying out a musical idea, repeating and reworking a poetic phrase, re-embodiment of a beautiful pattern of life. Beauty also motivates us. We reach for beauty even when it gives us no obvious benefit. People sing in prison camps. We write, we paint, we dream, simply because we must. And in this aesthetic pursuit we are driven to something greater than ourselves.

This, then, takes us to the value of the practice of meditation, in particular meditation on the Scriptures and on the great themes of the Christian faith. "Oh, how I love your law!" the psalmist proclaims, "I meditate on it all day long" (Psalm 119:97). I listen to my favorite songs again and again. Their melodies and their perspectives find their way into my soul. I have been enriched by reading a few great pieces of literature and finding myself in their stories. How much greater when we allow ourselves to spend time with *the* story, when we sit with the Gospel long enough to be fascinated by an idea, to be attracted to a virtue, to be gripped--to the point of imitation--by a vision of holiness! If we are to catch the aesthetic vision of the Christian faith, we must become those who meditate on the Scriptures. We must *see* the Beauty. We must *live* the Beauty. Then we must *speak* the Beauty.

Beauty is a powerful force. And the Christian message is a message of Beauty. The Christian Gospel is a beautiful story--*the* Beautiful story--a compelling integration of the diversity of the entire universe. We as Christians can, through seeing reality aesthetically, come to realize the truth of the beautiful Trinity who made us, of the beautiful creation in which we live, of the beautiful nature of humanity that has been marred by sin, and of the beautiful salvation offered us through Christ. This is an image worthy of fascination, of attraction, of imitation. And beauty can become a powerful

motivation, inspiring us to be formed into the beauty of Christ.

- 1 See, for example, Alejandro Garcia-Rivera's survey of theological aesthetics in Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, "Aesthetics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)., 345-62.
- 2 Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008)., 268. My treatment of spiritual formation here draws from pages 268-97 of this book.
- 3 George A. Maloney, "Introduction," in *Nils Sorsky: The Complete Writings*, ed. George A. Maloney, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003)., 19.
- 4 Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002)., 85.
- 5 Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd edition ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1981). For a general survey of the history of philosophical aesthetics see Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1966).
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