

---

# An Elegant Book

---

**Gregg A. Mast**

It is an honor to offer these theological reflections to Donald Bruggink in celebration of his long and faithful service as a teacher and mentor to many. In gratitude for his profound influence on the development of the worship life of the Reformed Church in America in the last three decades, I have chosen to explore the issue of beauty, an often-ignored subject of theological reflection. If one weaves together Donald's love of art, music, architecture, and the spoken word, it becomes clear that he has committed a lifetime to reminding us of the importance of beauty to faith, and faith to beauty.

## **"A Most Elegant Book"**

In September of 1998 I stood for the first time on the southern rim of the Grand Canyon. Although there were no pews, I was surrounded by those who had come to worship. With gasps and profound silence, the congregation emptied the bus and stood to pray. Reaching out to touch the beautifully sculpted hem of God's garment, I sensed that a love for beauty is intrinsic to the human soul. Indeed, in my travels I have often met people with well-worn suitcases and souls who journey from place to place to spend just a few moments in the presence of the beautiful. From lonely mountain tops to lonelier deserts, from the crash of ocean waves on a Maine coast to the deep blue lagoons of the Caribbean, we yearn to be in the presence of the gifts which remind us of the Giver. From Beethoven's symphonies to a single flute in a mountain valley, from soaring steeples to the brightly woven blanket of a Mayan woman, the eye and the ear and the heart can be finely tuned to discern the beautiful.

Creation, according to the Belgic Confession, is before our eyes as "a most elegant book." It is the theater of God's glory, said John Calvin: "Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory. You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness."<sup>1</sup> However, the Reformed tradition has been so cautious not to ascribe to this elegant book the power of salvation, that we have often put it on a shelf, not bothering to read or savor the delights of its pages.<sup>2</sup> Thus it has often been the world, rather than the church, which has stood on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the beautiful. The world has also reminded us of the elegant book as a means of God's grace. In a particularly

poetic moment, Calvin confirmed what the world sees and hears: “For the little birds that sing, sing of God; the beasts clamor for him; the elements dread him, the mountains echo him, the fountains and flowing waters cast their glances at him, and the grass and flowers laugh before him.”<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that creation, the good and the beautiful, is to invoke in humanity a cry of gratitude. The first chapters of Genesis are a hymn of praise for the Creator and a ballad of beauty God has shared. John Navone has reminded us that the Greek word for beauty and for goodness is the same (*kalon*).<sup>4</sup> And so to look at the good creation is to stand in awe of the beautiful work of God’s hands. Indeed, Navone reminds us that the Greek word for the beautiful, *to kalon*, is related to the verb *kaleō*, meaning to call or beckon. He therefore suggests that “true beauty is the attractiveness of whatever is truly good for us.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the dual meaning of *kalos* suggests that the “good shepherd” of John 10:11 can be interpreted as the shepherd who is both good *to* us and lovely *for* us.

Early Christian writers called God “Beauty,” and mystics of all ages have understood and loved God the Beautiful. Just as Jesus glowed in the presence of the beautiful One, so also in prayer, our faces and lives are transfigured by the good and the beautiful. Brooding over the chaos of our imaginations, the Spirit brings forth new creations, empowers our words and actions, and enables us to share in the continuing creation of God.

Navone contends that thirteenth-century scholastic philosophers seldom talked about “art” as such, but reflected regularly on the meaning of beauty.

Treatments of the theme all derived ultimately from a Latin version of the treatise *On the Beautiful* by the early sixth century writer, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. They are to be found in Albert the Great’s *Opusculum de Pulchro*, in the *Summa de Bono* of Ulrich of Strassbourg, and in the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas. The views of Aquinas may be taken as typical. The beauty of an object or creature is only a likeness or symbol (*similitudo*) of that divine beauty in which all things participate. Thus in one sense, the beautiful and the good and the true are one. Yet in another sense, that of logical priority, they are different, for beauty adds to the cognitive faculty by which the good is known as such. Beauty then is the means by which truth is seen to be truth, and so it is easy to assign to it a didactic role. To achieve it, three things are necessary—*integritas* (wholeness), *proportio sive consonantia* (proportion or harmony), and *claritas* (brightness or illumination).<sup>6</sup>

The elegant book, which calls us to stand in the presence of the beautiful and participate with the One who is the Creator and Sustainer of all beauty, has returned to the nightstands of secular scholars as well. *The Chronicle of Higher*

*Education* recently published an article entitled, “Wearying of Cultural Studies, Some Scholars Rediscover Beauty.” In it, the author observes:

Once a week, Harvard University’s Elaine Scarry meets with the graduate students for a course simply titled, “On Beauty.” Readings include Plato, Aquinas, Kant, and Schiller. Students review the most durable philosophical critiques of beauty, which hold it suspect on moral and political grounds. And they study how writers such as Shelley, Keats, Joyce, and Rilke describe objects of beauty, asking whether the qualities of the beautiful differ in depictions of gods, gardens, and people. ‘This is the forbidden subject,’ says Emory Elliott, a professor of English and director of the Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California at Riverside. In October, he recruited some 160 professors for a conference that aimed to get scholars talking again about the relationship between aesthetic values and cultural differences.<sup>7</sup>

How remarkable it is for the Reformed tradition, which has so resolutely affirmed not only the sovereignty of God but the goodness of creation, to sit idle as the world revels in the elegant book. While philosophers struggle with “aesthetic values,” we remain strangely silent. The elegant book, too long considered a luxury in a Reformed life of duty and obedience, continues to inspire a world as we passively wonder and watch. Although our fear of the dangers associated with the elegant book has robbed us not only of our courage but also of God’s incredible gifts, those dangers cannot be ignored.

### A Reading Problem

Before we can return to read the elegant book, to understand it as the first means of God’s grace to us, the Reformed tradition demands that we spend some time in the struggles of Genesis 3. There we begin to understand that the fall of humanity is a fall “into thankless pride that spurns God’s bounty.”<sup>8</sup> Gerrish understands the *Imago Dei* (image of God) first as an act of gratitude, and thus Genesis 3 reveals a humanity which enjoys the gifts but ignores the Giver. In the fall we lost our ability to read the elegant book as a gift of beauty. While creation should be a school of piety in which we learn about the author of the elegant book, we have progressively grown blind to God’s glory and deaf to God’s music. These failings snatch away from the workmanship of God its glory, and from its Author our praise.

Calvin’s poetry paints the scene for us: “It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can

of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered."<sup>9</sup> Because God's image has been defaced in the fall, the mind has fallen into idolatry, the will is enslaved to sin, and the supernatural gifts are destroyed. Only through the spectacles of the Word, can we again read of God's grace. Only through Jesus the Christ, the Word incarnate, can the faithful know God as Creator and Provider, as the Good and the Beautiful.

Having established the profound effects of the Fall on our reading ability, Calvin was naturally very suspicious of those who attempted to represent the glory of God in and through the arts. Calvin observes that God's majesty is sullied "when the incorporeal is made to resemble corporeal matter, the invisible a visible likeness, the spirit an inanimate object, the immeasurable a puny bit of wood, stone, or gold."<sup>10</sup> The key of course is not that we attempt to create statues of God but that we create a god from our statues. Consequently, liturgical art was almost totally banished from Reformed churches to preserve the transcendence of God. The tragic consequence of its banishment is that we seldom reflect on the role of the beautiful in our faith.

In the Reformation diatribes, idolatry and blasphemy are the most frequent charges against Rome. Refusing to countenance a faith that had turned mystery into magic, the reformers drove a clear and decisive wedge between the world of spirit and the world of matter. The Westminster Directory declared that "no place is capable of holiness." Holy places, holy objects, and even holy people, were simply wilderness temptations in the journey of faith. God was a jealous God and would brook no rivals.

From such a theology of profound suspicion concerning the pages of the elegant book, it is little wonder that Calvin developed a very creative and "earth shattering" view of the sacraments. For him and his followers, sacraments were ultimately found in holy actions rather than holy objects. The worshiping community was called to wash and eat and drink. As the faithful act together, the Holy Spirit, the Word in action, is released. Railroad tracks may serve as the sacramental paradigm. One track represents the church and its ministry of sacrament; the other track, the Spirit, and her ministry of grace. As we physically eat and drink together, the Spirit feeds our souls. The Holy Spirit provides the inner grace to the outward ministry of the sacraments. Without the Holy Spirit, a single track sacrament would be like "the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears."<sup>11</sup>

Within the ecumenical community, Calvin and the Reformed tradition have a great deal to contribute when conversation turns to the sacraments. We have anticipated the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in both the mystery and the dynamic dimension of sacramental action. At the same time, we are heirs to a theological puzzle which has left the elegant book of creation on the shelf collecting dust.

While deeply suspicious of turning mystery into magic, of attributing too much power or authority to the created order, the Reformed tradition struggles to maintain a biblical unity of matter and spirit. The Zwinglian sacramental view and, to a lesser extent, the Calvinist perspective both suffer from a profound appreciation of the work of the Spirit and an anemic view of the role of creation as a means of grace. The Hebrew vision of *nephesh* (the body is soul), rather than the Greek duality (the body has a soul), hounds our sacramental paradigm.

Thus, a biblical unity of matter and spirit confronts the Reformed handling of the sacraments. While protecting the absolute sovereignty of God, the goodness of creation is ignored. While immersing ourselves in the Word, the Scripture which bears witness to the life, death, and resurrection of the Christ, the elegant book has been relegated to an obscure corner of our theology. Calvin himself stated the problem most clearly: “The only question here is whether God acts by his own intrinsic power (as they say) or resigns his office to outward symbols. But we contend that, whatever instruments he uses, these detract nothing from his original activity.”<sup>12</sup>

No Christian theological tradition would argue with Calvin’s point. Of course it is God who remains the source of all goodness and grace. But, is there no middle ground between God resigning “his office to outward symbols” or God keeping all power? How does God use outward symbols? What symbols has God chosen to use? What power may they have in a secondary role rather than an originating one? What is the relationship between spirit and matter? What role can the elegant book, the book of God’s creation and providence and of our creations of beauty as well, play in our faith?

### A Question of Perception

Garrison Keillor’s description of the “non-existence” of Lake Wobegon on Minnesota maps can be a parable for the disappearance of beauty from our theological topography. Keillor explains that in the Coleman Survey of 1866 the state legislators hired a team of Irish surveyors to draw up the official map of Minnesota. The team divided itself into four groups and surveyed from each of the four corners of the state toward the middle. Because two of the groups moved more quickly than the other two, they did not meet in the middle of the state and ended up with more territory than could be adequately squeezed into the state’s parameters. This forced them to leave out some of the places in the middle, and that is what happened to Lake Wobegon. . . .<sup>13</sup>

The Reformed tradition has noted the issue of beauty (indeed, some have even suggested it is at the center of our spirituality), but it has often been “non-existent” in the official map of the state of our faith. Our suspicion and fear of holy places, people, and objects have blinded us to creation’s beauty and goodness as the first means of grace. Our fear that the church could turn God’s mysterious

transcendence into a magical, localized deity has often led us to turn God into an absentee landlord of the beautiful garden in which we walk. According to John's Gospel, Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, turned water into wine (John 2). Upon tasting it, the steward observed to the bridegroom that he had served the good (*kalos*) wine last. The good and the beautiful found their way into the wine at a wedding feast in Cana.

I have often wondered why Jesus did not begin his ministry with a more useful display of his power. A healing, an exorcism, or even a resurrection, would have gotten him off to a rip-roaring start. Instead, he added joy to a wedding feast. He turned tasteless water into a rich and beautiful wine. Perhaps Jesus began his ministry as God had begun creation—by turning the formless void into a world that was *kala lian*—very good and beautiful. *Kalon* is also used when Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John. As they stood together on the mountain Peter exclaimed, "Rabbi, it is good (*kalon*) for us to be here" (Mark 9:5). The goodness and beauty of God glowed from the person of Jesus. In response to this presence of the beautiful, Peter embraced the moment as good and beautiful and wanted to build a community at the sacred pinnacle.

The time is long overdue for the Reformed tradition to return to the drawing board and rediscover the centrality of the good and the beautiful, *to kalon*, in our life together. That rediscovery will require us to struggle again with the relationship between spirit and matter. It will mean our affirmation of the goodness and beauty of the created order. It will call us to commit ourselves to both the holy work and the holy person of Jesus, for with the incarnation, God revealed again how creation can be the first means of grace. Finally, we are called to revisit our understanding of the church, the community of flesh and blood which has been reinvigorated by the Spirit and inflamed with God's love. An ecclesiology which joyfully celebrates the incredible marriage of flesh and spirit, calls us to affirm that we too share in the beautiful.

In order to nurture a new perspective regarding beauty, we must confront the Zwinglian theology which undergirds much of our worship. Decades ago, Howard Hageman observed that although Calvin has been our theological mentor, Zwingli has directed much of our liturgical life.<sup>14</sup> Zwingli was clear that such sensible things as the sacraments are incapable of bearing the Spirit with them. In worship, Zwingli argued, the Spirit needs no assistance other than the word preached and received. While affirming the call to meditate upon the One who is high and lifted up, we cannot help but yearn for the more earth-affirming faith offered by Calvin.

It was Calvin who tied the external to the internal through the work of the Spirit. It was he who reminded us that God accommodated our flesh and blood through using holy symbols and holier actions. But it was also Calvin who described a God who "stooped" to our humanness, who condescended to our place

in the universe. It seems to me, therefore, that if we are to move forward in our quest to worship God with our souls and minds and bodies—our whole being—there needs to be more affirmation of the first means of grace, the elegant book which contains the goodness and beauty of creation. If the beautiful is to be a window into God's presence rather than a wall to block it, we need a new perspective.

This perspective will not only affirm that God is the source of the beauty and goodness of creation, but also that God can be seen and experienced in the good and the beautiful. Although such an experience can offer us a glimpse of the Creator (and at its most elegant moments, even invite us to come near), it remains the role of the Word to bring us into a saving knowledge of God's grace. This acknowledgment of the Word's crucial role, however, should not cause us to ignore the elegant book before us.

### A New Paradigm

In *Real Presences*, George Steiner concludes his profound discussion of the transcendence, immanence, and non-existence of God with moving paragraphs that speak to the mind as well as the heart:

There is one particular day in Western history about which neither historical record nor myth nor Scripture make report. It is a Saturday. And it has become the longest of days. We know of that Good Friday which Christianity holds to have been that of the Cross. But the non-Christian, the atheist, knows of it as well. This is to say that he knows of the injustice, of the interminable suffering, of the waste, of the brute enigma of ending, which so largely make up not only the historical dimension of the human condition, but the everyday fabric of our personal lives. We know, ineluctably, of the pain, of the failure of love, of the solitude which are our history and private fate. We also know about Sunday. To the Christian, that day signifies an intimation, both assured and precarious, both evident and beyond comprehension, of resurrection, of a justice and a love that have conquered death. If we are non-Christians or non-believers, we know of that Sunday in precisely analogous terms. We conceive of it as the day of liberation from inhumanity and servitude. We look to resolutions, be they therapeutic or political, be they social or messianic. The lineaments of that Sunday carry the name of hope (there is no word less deconstructible).

But ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the

dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other. In the face of the torture of a child, of the death of love which is Friday, even the greatest art and poetry are almost helpless. In the Utopia of the Sunday, the aesthetic will, presumably, no longer have logic or necessity. The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and of hope, of the flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man. Without them, how could we be patient?<sup>15</sup>

The paradigm takes seriously the belief that we are Saturday people—suffering and hoping between the cross and the empty tomb. And the presence of beauty and goodness, which rubs against the pain of Friday and whispers about the joy of Sunday, keeps us going on our journey.

Authentic beauty is honest about our pain. The cross is stark and our suffering unspeakable. Authentic beauty is also honest about our hope. It sprinkles dew on our days which glistens with the colors of grace. Our existence as Saturday people makes our art and music (although “almost helpless,” says Steiner), very important to keep us human. It acknowledges the worst we can do and the best to which we can aspire. When it is honest, it touches our souls. When it is genuine and authentic, it reminds us of the One who stands beyond us and lives within us.

Shallow art and music offer no gift to God and reflect little of the human spirit. When we bring to God less than our best, Friday wins and Sunday disappears into the mist. In some remarkable ways, the Reformed tradition can embrace both spirit and creation. We can celebrate holy and sacramental actions of eating and drinking and washing which remind us of our hunger and draw us toward the well which never runs dry. We can celebrate the good and beautiful as signs and seals of God’s gracious presence which holds us with Sunday love in a Friday-scarred world.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. (The Library of Christian Classics, XX) (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press), 1.5.1.

<sup>2</sup> This observation has been inspired in part by Donald Cronkite’s brief article, “The Book Seminarians Never Read,” *Perspectives* (June/July 1998), 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Calvin: Commentaries*, trans. & ed. Joseph Haroutunian. (The Library of Christian Classics) (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press), 60.

<sup>4</sup> John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press), 1996, ix.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Heller, "Wearying of Cultural Studies, Some Scholars Rediscover Beauty", *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 4, 1998), A15.

<sup>8</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude, The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 46.

<sup>9</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. (The Library of Christian Classics, XXI) (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press), 1.5.14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.11.2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.14.9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.14.17.

<sup>13</sup> Garrison Keillor, *The Prairie Home Companion*, National Public Radio, August 4, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> Howard G. Hageman, *Pulpit and Table* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press) 1962.

<sup>15</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press), 1989, 231-232.