COVENANT
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Electronic Thesis & Dissertation Collection

J. Oliver Buswell Jr. Library
12330 Conway Road
Saint Louis, MO 63141

www.covenantseminary.edu/library

A Beauty That Will Save the World

Reawakening a Disenchanted Age to Transcendence Through Beauty and the Imagination

By
Corey J. Smith

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2025

A Beauty That Will Save the World

Reawakening a Disenchanted Age to Transcendence Through Beauty and the Imagination

By
Corey J. Smith

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Graduation Date May 16, 2025

Dr. Mark Meynell
Faculty Advisor _____

Dr. Mark Ryan
Second Reader _____

Dr. Joel Hathaway
Director of DMin Program _____

Mr. Steve Jamieson
Library Director _____

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel. Many in the West are no longer enchanted by the gospel but are instead jaded and ignorant about Christianity. Beauty is essential for cutting through disenchantment because it possesses a persuasive power to rend the heart. Truth is essential; however, when isolated from beauty it is stripped of its allure.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to gather data. Nine pastors from various denominations, cultural backgrounds, and artistic fields with over ten years of preaching experience were interviewed. The research focused on four questions: the priority of an apologetic understanding of beauty, awareness of the power of the arts, challenges in prioritizing beauty, and methods in their creative process.

The literature review focused on three fundamental areas: disenchantment in late modernity, a theology of beauty, and the role of the imagination in re-enchantment.

This study concluded that there are three crucial components to engaging a disenchanted age with the gospel. First, beauty is a compelling force that captivates attention, invites individuals to taste and see the goodness of Christ, and allows truth to make the final push into belief. Second, the imagination plays a critical role in conveying meaning and is necessary for reasoning. Third, the arts have immense power to reawaken a sense of transcendence. Related to these three components, this study found that experienced preachers face three significant challenges when communicating in a secular age: an overinflated sense of self, a crisis of meaning, and suspicion toward the arts. To address these challenges, this study identified several provocative methods in the creative

process aimed at awakening disenchanted individuals to a sense of transcendence. These methods include slowing down to pay attention, engaging poetry and fables, contrasting different worldviews, and inviting listeners to consider the strange new world of biblical reality.

To my wife Janet, for her love, support, and partnership in life and ministry.

Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it might be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then how that it is.

— Blaise Pascal, Pensées

Perhaps truth-oriented apologists have it backwards. Perhaps it is truth that provides the final "push" into belief once the imagination is already captivated by the goodness and beauty of the Christ.

— Justin Ariel Bailey, Reimagining Apologetics

Good stories and poetry help us to see more clearly when we close the book and re-enter ordinary life.

— Holly Ordway, Apologetics and the Christian Imagination

Contents

Illustrations

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgements

Covenant Seminary has held a special place in my heart and my family's life for many years. It is where I pursued my Master of Divinity, and I now consider it a great privilege to have received my Doctor of Ministry at this wonderful institution, where the gospel is always central, and the culture is filled with grace.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Mark Meynell for agreeing to an independent study to cultivate in me an understanding of the role of beauty in apologetics. Then, he went above and beyond as my advisor, investing in me and my research. I am thankful for all the conversations, insights, and much-needed encouragement along the way. His friendship has been as formative for me as the work itself.

I'm equally grateful to Dr. Mark Ryan, who introduced me to the role of the imagination in apologetics. His influence as my pastor during my MDiv studies, his mentorship throughout the DMin program, and his role as my second reader have significantly shaped how I engage the world as a minister of the gospel.

Many others have been instrumental in this journey. Midtown Church, the church I am privileged to pastor, graciously extended time and support to make this research possible and a fulfilling experience. I want to thank Bill Regan, a friend and elder at Midtown, for being a thoughtful conversation partner over many coffee meetings. And I am humbled by Anna Barclay's generous support in funding my doctoral work from the beginning of the program.

Lastly, I want to especially thank my wife, Janet, and our boys, who have now become young men: Tyler, Drew, and Luke. Their care and encouragement have carried

me through to the end. They are a gracious bunch who have patiently endured my excitement about new discoveries and insights as I shared them over the dinner table. It has been a joy to study alongside each of them as they have worked on their own papers and studied for their exams. I will cherish the memory of being students together as Luke navigated middle school and Ty and Drew progressed through high school. Although this season has come to an end, I pray that our family remains lifelong learners, ever captivated by the wonder and beauty of God's creation and drawn back to its ultimate source—God himself.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Throughout history, Christian apologists have sought to do more than explain the veracity of Christianity; they have also sought to show its goodness and beauty. One example is Augustine's fifth-century work, *The City of God*, which does not lead with propositional truth claims but instead unfolds the Christian story as "the best hope of establishing peace and cultivating love in the late Roman Empire."[1]

The Importance of Goodness and Beauty

Goodness and beauty are more than new tactics for apologetics in a post-Christian world. Hans Urs von Balthasar, who is considered one of the most important Catholic theologians of the 20th century, says, "In a world without beauty … the good loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out."[2] In other words, beauty is a compelling force, but without it, motivation is lost. Von Balthasar continues by explaining the necessity of goodness, "Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil."[3] Goodness is the other force that prevents corrosion and corruption. Von Balthasar is concerned that modernity relies heavily on a rationalistic process, and neglects more transformative encounters with truth

---

[1] Justin Ariel Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 74.

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, trans. Adrian J. Walker, vol. 1, Truth of the World (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2001), 20.

[3] von Balthasar, 1:20.

that inspire. He states, "Logic … is itself a mechanism that no longer captivates anyone. The very conclusions are no longer conclusive."[4] Truth, as essential as it is, disjointed from goodness and beauty, "lacks power to enthrall."[5]

Perhaps there is a better way to communicate truth than purely with reasonable claims. Justin Ariel Bailey, a professor at Dort University who works at the intersection of theology, culture, and ministry, suggests that a truth-oriented approach to apologetics could have the process "backwards."[6] Given that this secular age no longer assumes the goodness or beauty of Christianity, conceivably it is "truth that provides the final 'push' into belief once the imagination is already captivated by the goodness and beauty of the Christ."[7]

Can beauty lead skeptics from unbelief to belief? Even if beauty and goodness are not able to convert, their evangelistic value is not diminished. For example, Psalm 19 reveals that the heavens are singing the magnificent beauty of God from the work of his hands. Human failure to see God's artistic glory in creation is spiritual blindness, a product of the fall. According to Psalm 19:1, the heavens are telling humanity something profound: they "declare the glory of God … and proclaim his handiwork." The creative beauty from the work of God's hands is an apologetic for God's existence and, dramatically, his abundant goodness and beauty.

---

[4] von Balthasar, 1:20.

[5] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 75.

[6] Bailey, 75.

[7] Bailey, 75.

Gavin Ortlund, a scholar and pastor who writes about the beauty and power of the Christian story, is concerned that too often Christian apologetics assumes that "having powerful arguments [is] the main task."[8] Rather, pastors could learn from Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and Christian philosopher who famously explained a threefold strategy for communicating the truth of Christianity: "Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is."[9] Ortlund summarizes Pascal's approach: show religion to be *respectable*, then *desirable*, and then *true*.[10]

What makes this method necessary, according to Pascal, is the fact that people are not objective about religion (that is, Christianity). Ortlund adds, "Few decisions are the result of strictly rational factors. We are not robots."[11]

Goodness and beauty alone, however, are not enough to conclude that a thing is true. Wishing something to be true does not make it a reality. On the other hand, "desire is not irrelevant," argues Ortlund, "It is a piece of data that must be taken into account and interpreted alongside other data."[12] C.S. Lewis, the literary scholar and Christian apologist, makes a similar argument, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another

---

[8] Gavin Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't: The Beauty of Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 3.

[9] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 4.

[10] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't*, 3.

[11] Ortlund, 3.

[12] Ortlund, 4.

world."[13] Lewis illustrates the point by looking at the human desire for food and sex. Humans experience hunger: there is food to satisfy that desire. Humans experience sexual desire: there is sex to satisfy that desire. Lewis then applies that same logic to the spiritual realm. If there is provision for material desires, then humanity can trust there are spiritual provisions for longings beyond what this world can fulfill.

Prioritizing Beauty

The relationship between the true, good, and beautiful fascinated the ancient Greek philosophers.[14] Ortlund makes the case that the transcendentals have "a fresh relevance in our current cultural moment."[15] Western culture is an age of "disillusionment and disenchantment (and, stemming from this, a time of apathy about truth)."[16] Cultural and religious studies professor Ted Turnau also observes, "Most in the West are no longer enchanted by the gospel. They are enchanted by something—anything—else."[17] On the other hand, "Beauty," according to Ortlund, "is a powerful tool for cutting through disenchantment and apathy because it has a kind of persuasive power that reaches down to the heart."[18] Whereas truth claims are viewed with suspicion, beauty can rend the heart longing for more and create space for truth claims to emerge plausible.

---

[13] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001), 136–37.

[14] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't*, 5.

[15] Ortlund, 6.

[16] Ortlund, 6.

[17] Ted Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination: Engaging Our World Through a Better Creativity* (La Vergne, TN: InterVarsity, 2023), 3.

[18] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't*, 7.

Another reason goodness and beauty are relevant is that this cultural moment is plagued with "distraction and diversion."[19] Without beauty, why would anyone, especially successful people, stop long enough to appreciate transcendent realities with no profitable significance?

The third reason for prioritizing goodness and beauty, according to Ortlund, is to provide an alternative to the endemic culture of "outrage and polarization."[20] This polarity is evident in politics, as Americans have become increasingly divided in their efforts to elect the "right" person to office instead of fostering unity.

A 2022 study published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace suggests that Americans are more divided than the rest of the world.[21] The study stated "On a five-point scale, with 0 indicating a country with very little partisan polarization and 4 indicating a country with extreme polarization, both the U.S. and the rest of the world, on average, displayed only a modest degree of polarization at the turn of the millennium. They each scored about a 2.0."[22] After 2000, the world began to change rapidly. In America, 9/11 jolted the culture and challenged the country's sense of security. About a decade later, over 50 percent of the population had a smartphone. "By 2020, the world average had increased significantly, to a score of about 2.4. But in the United States, polarization accelerated much more sharply, growing to a score of 3.8."[23]

---

[19] Ortlund, 7.

[20] Ortlund, 8.

[21] Yascha Mounk, "The Doom Spiral of Pernicious Polarization," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/us-democrat-republican-partisan-polarization/629925/.

[22] Mounk.

[23] Mounk.

The study reports, “Very few countries classified as full liberal democracies have ever reached pernicious levels. The United States stands out today as the only wealthy Western democracy with persistent levels of pernicious polarization.”[24]

How could America recover from this downward spiral of division? The research from the Carnegie study is enlightening and alarming: “About half of the time a country experienced serious polarization since 1900, mutual distrust and hatred turned into a permanent condition.”[25]

Although outrage and polarization create a “pessimism about the future,” there is an opportunity for the church. [26] Ortlund claims that as society has become “morally pluralistic” and “morally incensed,” there has developed a “deep longing for transcendent experience.”[27] Beauty meets that need. It cuts through the questions, anxieties, and confusion. It offers the skeptic or nominal Christian “a more winsome, invitational tone than is usually present amid the entrenchment and rancor that often characterize public dialogue.”[28] An appeal to goodness and beauty can persuade a contentious world to consider transcendence and can deeply bless those who listen. It provides space for dialogue and room for wrestling with the truth.

---

[24] Mounk.

[25] Mounk.

[26] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn’t*, 8.

[27] Ortlund, 8.

[28] Ortlund, 8.

Ortlund defends the apologetic value of beauty because it engages "the moral concerns of our polarized culture."[29] He reports anecdotally that a typical question thirty years ago on a college campus asked about "Christianity's truth (Does God exist? Did Jesus rise from the dead? etc.)."[30] The questions asked today doubt "Christianity's goodness (Is the church intolerant? Are Christians homophobic? etc.)."[31] Ortlund argues, "If we commend only the truth of Christianity and neglect the appeal to beauty and goodness, we are actually not hitting the central, animating concerns of our culture."[32]

Late modernity has offered a challenging critique of modernity; it has allowed people to move away from the pursuit of absolute certainty to a more faith-based claim of reality. This cultural shift puts believers and non-believers on a more level playing field. Chatraw, a scholar and cultural apologist, claims, "Neither our highest moral ideals, our vision of the good life, [nor] the resurrection … can be proven or disproven according to a universal reason."[33] For example, is it possible to scientifically prove what love or justice is? Can anyone provide enough evidence to prove the incarnation of Jesus Christ by mere facts alone and to communicate with such absolute clarity that it removes all doubt? Certainly, confidence is possible and even biblically encouraged. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." However, "what we find as reasonable, virtuous, and beautiful, no matter if someone is

---

[29] Ortlund, 8.

[30] Ortlund, 8–9.

[31] Ortlund, 9.

[32] Ortlund, 9.

[33] Josh Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk about God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 33.

an atheist or a Christian, requires faith of some kind."[34] Postmodernism is dismantling notions that transcendent beliefs and faith systems can be "held by reason alone."[35]

Therefore, to reach people in a secular age who are suspicious of exclusive claims about reality, new resources are needed to show the plausibility of biblical truth. Charles Taylor, the well-known Canadian philosopher who wrote the seminal work on the unique conditions of a secular age, argues, "Desiccant reason cannot reach the ultimate truth in any form. What is needed is a subtler language which can make manifest the higher or the divine."[36] Making reason more palatable to the listener is not Taylor's point. Rather, language that "resonates" with the reader or listener so that they can discover "a source for the internal voice" that would reach past the intellect to the soul.[37] In other words, connecting with the heart to persuade someone to consider new possibilities of faith requires more than getting the facts straight. Taylor writes, "To give [the powerful feeling of dependence on something greater] reign and voice in oneself is more crucial than getting the right formula."[38]

Likewise, Holly Ordway, a former atheist turned Christian apologist, suggests a return to "an older, more integrated approach to apologetics."[39] She argues that people need more than a defense of the truth or a rational explanation. Turnau goes further,

---

[34] Chatraw, 33.

[35] Chatraw, 33.

[36] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2018), 489.

[37] Taylor, 489; Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 62.

[38] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 489.

[39] Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017), 5.

saying, “The Christian church in the post-Christian West is in danger of defaulting on its aesthetic calling … a responsibility not only to proclaim truth but also to show its beauty.”[40] To answer the biblical call to repent and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, “people need a motive.”[41] Ordway explains, “This motive may be simple curiosity. … It might be the recognition of need or the awakening of a longing for the divine. … It might be respect or affection for the person who extends the invitation.”[42] Humans are complex and require multiple paths to connect to truth and believe in its claims.

Ordway explains that this renewed approach “helps to show the wholeness of the Faith.”[43] Integration of truth, goodness, and beauty—the three transcendentals—is the “only” way “our faith is deeply rooted and fully nourished.”[44] With such integration, “the coherence and soundness of Christian teaching (truth), the witness of the Faith lived out faithfully in individual lives, families, and communities (goodness), and the experience of the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual riches of the liturgy and the arts (beauty)” can be seen and believed.[45]

Otherwise, Christians miss the opportunity to display what is “most attractive, compelling, and convincing” about the gospel unless “all three” are drawn upon.[46]

---

[40] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 3.

[41] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 5.

[42] Ordway, 5.

[43] Ordway, 167.

[44] Ordway, 167.

[45] Ordway, 167.

[46] Ordway, 167–68.

Ordway explains, "Truth, for the intellect; goodness, for the moral sense and the will; beauty, for the aesthetic sense, the emotions, and the imagination."[47] This approach is not intended to pit the three transcendentals against one another or sacrifice one for the others. Rather, it is to suggest that humans are a harmonious whole, made of a mind, a heart, and a will.[48]

Giving beauty its proper weight is critical for not only unbelieving skeptics but also for deconstructing believers. Nicholas McDonald, in *The Light in Our Eyes*, experienced his own bout of deconstruction of his faith and says, "I was still searching. … I needed someone who both affirmed my critiques of … evangelicalism and offered me a beautiful, ancient vision of historic Christianity."[49] McDonald sees the responsibility of pastors to offer a compelling alternative vision: "a stirring vision of Jesus's love, beauty, and freedom that speaks to humanity's deepest dreams."[50]

Pursuing Beauty, Goodness, and Truth

Many philosophers and theologians have sought to answer the question, "What makes humanity so distinct from all other forms of life?"[51] Russ Ramsey, pastor and author, captures humanity's distinctive "properties" in its "desire for goodness, truth, and

---

[47] Ordway, 168.

[48] Ordway, 168.

[49] Nicholas McDonald, *The Light in Our Eyes: Rediscovering the Love, Beauty, and Freedom of Jesus in an Age of Disillusionment* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2025), 11.

[50] McDonald, 11.

[51] Russ Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art through the Eyes of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 5.

beauty."[52] He argues, "Scripture regards the three transcendentals as human desires that are essential for knowing God" because they are rooted in the nature of God himself.[53] Ramsey explains, "Good and evil point to the reality of undefiled holiness. Honesty and falsehood point to the existence of absolute truth. Beauty and the grotesque whisper to our souls that there is such a thing as glory."[54] Philosopher Peter Kreeft supports this point about the nature of God and humanity: "These are the only three things that we never get bored with, and never will, for all eternity, because they are three attributes of God, and therefore [attributes] of all God's creation."[55]

But they are not only essential for knowing God; they are "foundational to the health of any community,"[56] which is why goodness, truth, and beauty can be found in the very beginning of creation.[57] Ramsey makes three observations from Genesis 1-2.

First, after God completes his creation in Genesis 1:31, he reflects on his work and calls it "very good." Ramsey writes, "Goodness was a foundational part of our intended design from the beginning. To live according to the goodness inherent in our creation is a matter of both character and function: we're called to be good and to do

---

[52] Ramsey, 6.

[53] Ramsey, 6.

[54] Ramsey, 6.

[55] Peter Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty," in *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 23.

[56] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 6.

[57] Ramsey, 6.

good."[58] Because goodness is inherent to the nature of God, it is embedded in creation itself.

Second, Genesis Chapter 2 teaches that humans are to know and "live according to God's truth, which is absolute truth with a clear divide between what is evil and what is good."[59] The fall of mankind in the garden in Genesis 3 describes the scene: the serpent "deceived," and Adam and Eve "lied" to God and to themselves.[60] The nature of human rebellion is a "rejection of the truth."[61] He claims that ever since the fall, humanity has been "longing to reclaim some sense of what is true and good."[62]

Third, Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis reveal that humanity was made in God's image, which means, according to Ramsey, that people were "created to be creative."[63] The example given is the naming of God's creatures. Maria Popova, an essayist, author, and poet writing about the search for meaning, says, "To name a thing is to acknowledge its existence as separate from everything else that has a name; to confer upon it the dignity of autonomy while at the same time affirming its belonging with the rest of the namable world; to transform its strangeness into familiarity, which is the root of empathy."[64] The act of naming is a creative work of love. To love anything requires

---

[58] Ramsey, 6.

[59] Ramsey, 7.

[60] Ramsey, 7.

[61] Ramsey, 7.

[62] Ramsey, 7.

[63] Ramsey, 7.

[64] Maria Popova, "How Naming Confers Dignity Upon Life and Gives Meaning to Existence," *The Marginalian* (blog), July 23, 2015, https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/07/23/robin-wall-kimmerer-gathering-moss-naming/.

"pay[ing] attention" to that someone or something, or it can't be called empathy or care.[65] Popova gives a few meaningful examples: "Parents name their babies as a first nonbiological marker of individuality amid the human lot; lovers give each other private nicknames that sanctify their intimacy; it is only when we began naming domesticated animals that they stopped being animals and became pets."[66] To be given a name is to ascribe "dignity" and to declare "truth," another way of displaying beauty.[67]

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in Tension

Holding truth, goodness, and beauty in proper tension is "intended to aid in the work of building community,"[68] according to Ramsey. Humans "struggle" to give the transcendentals "equal weight." They may value truth over beauty or beauty over goodness.[69] The broken nature of the world prevents harmony between the three. C.S. Lewis, the literary scholar and intellectual, captures the internal conflict in himself: "The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow 'rationalism.' Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim

---

[65] Popova.

[66] Popova.

[67] Popova.

[68] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 8.

[69] Ramsey, 8.

and meaningless."[70] The breakdown in community begins as an unnecessary struggle with the interplay between goodness, beauty, and truth.

Often, truth and goodness are treated as though they are the more serious of the three, and beauty is relegated to "a plaything, a hobby, even an obstacle to efficient, important work."[71] The poet and Anglican priest Malcolm Guite affirms that beauty and the arts have been reduced "to something purely subjective, a matter of individual taste, a decorative version of 'what's true for me,' a private aesthetic thrill to compensate for the grimness of what is actually out there."[72] But Guite, gleaning from the Romantic poet and theologian Samuel Taylor Coleridge, points out the apologetic import of the arts was always "to *awaken the mind's attention*, to help us, just as much as science might help us, to look out and see what is really there and to discover that reality is itself numinous, translucent with glimmerings of the supernatural, of something holy shining through it."[73] The loss of an appreciation of beauty obscures a foundational quality of God.

Goodness and truth should not be reduced to "personal conduct" and "intellectual assent."[74] It would be an unwarranted reduction of Christian character to pursue goodness and truth in isolation from beauty. Ramsey states examples of "establishing certain codes to live by" that can reduce goodness to "conduct."[75] The same can be done by focusing

---

[70] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1984), 170.

[71] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 8.

[72] Malcolm Guite, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God* (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo, 2021), 11.

[73] Guite, 11.

[74] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 9.

[75] Ramsey, 9.

on “cerebral matters” that relegate truth to “possession of knowledge.”[76] When goodness and truth are isolated from beauty, a spiritual void emerges—often manifesting as legalism.[77]

The solution to isolation and reductionism “requires the application of goodness and truth for the benefit of others.” [78] Goodness and truth are more fully realized in their interconnectedness to beauty, which, according to Ramsey, is seen and experienced in relationships. “Beauty takes the pursuit of goodness past mere personal ethical conduct,” argues Ramsey, “to the work of intentionally doing good to and for others.”[79] And truth in connection to beauty prevents the mere pursuit of knowledge by the “proclamation and application of truth in the name of caring for others.”[80]

The pursuit of beauty is not a matter of personality or preference but is a “theological responsibility.”[81] God is “inherently beautiful,” according to Ramsey.[82] Both Exodus 33 and Psalm 27 reveal God’s nature as beautiful. When Moses prays in Exodus 33:18, “Please show me your glory,” it was a “hunger” to look upon beauty.[83] The same desire is shared in Psalm 27: “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the

---

[76] Ramsey, 9.

[77] Ramsey, 9.

[78] Ramsey, 9.

[79] Ramsey, 9.

[80] Ramsey, 9.

[81] Ramsey, 10.

[82] Ramsey, 10.

[83] Ramsey, 10.

beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.[84] Moses and David were not merely looking for beauty but the source of beauty. They longed for God because "no greater beauty" could be experienced.[85]

A second theological reason for the pursuit of beauty is that God's creation is beautiful.[86] After God finishes his work of creation, he rests and calls it "very good."[87] The permanence of beauty is evident in that even the fall could not "erase the beauty of creation."[88] The heavens and sky display the glory of God according to Psalm 19:1. Therefore, to live in this world is to be constantly surrounded by beauty, and to see it is to behold the "Author of beauty."[89]

Rebecca McLaughlin, author and cultural apologist, illustrates this point in telling of an Iranian science professor from a world-class university who converted to Christianity "through the ministry of J.S. Bach!"[90] This professor was a semiprofessional classical musician, but "classical music was banned by the new government, so music lovers crowded into private houses to savor illicit sonatas."[91] He testifies that he began to see the "Christian fabric" that shaped Bach's music, and "when he first walked into a

---

[84] Ps. 27:4.

[85] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 10.

[86] Ramsey, 10.

[87] Gen. 1:31.

[88] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 10.

[89] Ramsey, 10.

[90] Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 47.

[91] McLaughlin, 47.

church a few years later, he sensed the same reality."[92] Kreeft gives a similar testimony of a transcendent experience from the same composer: "There is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Therefore, there must be a God. You either see this or you don't."[93]

A third theological reason is that beauty is an eternal feature of glory—believers will be "adorned in beauty."[94] The church, all those redeemed by faith in Jesus Christ, will be "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."[95] Psalm 149:4 describes salvation as an act of God "adorn[ing] the humble"; the Bible describes "the clothes we will walk around in" in the new heaven and new earth will be beautiful forever.[96]

God's purpose and power of beauty is to "arrest his people by their senses to awaken us from the slumbering economy of pragmatism."[97] Life is about more than function. It is just as much about enjoying the superabundant gifts of creation. Moreover, beauty awakes people to the chief artist, God himself—a "vital" purpose of beauty.[98] This is why artists of various kinds and communicators who craft words to provoke belief in transcendence are critical to their community—"to awaken our senses to the world as God made it and to awaken our senses to God himself."[99]

---

[92] McLaughlin, 47.

[93] Peter Kreeft, "Twenty Arguments God's Existence," 1994, https://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20_arguments-gods-existence.htm#17.

[94] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 10.

[95] Revelation 21:2.

[96] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, 11.

[97] Ramsey, 14.

[98] Ramsey, 14.

[99] Ramsey, 14.

Purpose Statement

The literature addresses the nature of the transcendentals (i.e., truth, goodness, and beauty) and their interconnectedness. An interplay between the three seems apparent, but the literature does not adequately address the apologetic importance of the order in different cultural periods. Given the conditions of late modernity in the West, the order of the transcendentals may more fully present Christian doctrine in its intended context and be believed in a secular age. Alan Noble, a respected writer and the editor-in-chief of the website "Christ and Pop Culture," defines secularism as "a state in which theism is seen as one of many viable choices for human fullness and satisfaction, and in which the transcendent feels less and less plausible."[100] Such secularism significantly shapes how the gospel is heard. "One result of these trends is that, as evangelicals, when we speak of Christianity," Noble continues, "we cannot assume that our hearers understand the faith as anything other than another personal preference in an ocean of cultural preferences."[101] Because of this cultural change, the "work of witnessing and defending the faith must involve rethinking how we communicate."[102] Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

---

[100] Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 2.

[101] Noble, 2.

[102] Noble, 2.

1. How do pastors describe the priority of an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
2. To what extent are pastors aware of the power of the arts in prioritizing beauty to communicate the gospel in a disenchanted world?
3. How do pastors describe the challenges they encounter in prioritizing beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
    a. What are some cultural challenges?
    b. What are some theological challenges?
4. What methods do pastors use in the creative process to engage a disenchanted world with the beauty of the gospel?
    a. What goals do the pastors have at the start of the creative process?
    b. How do pastors incorporate the arts in communication?
    c. How do pastors incorporate the arts outside of the Christian community?

Significance of the Study

The gospel is true, but it is more than just being not false. No one is really drawn to the person of Christ by sheer facts. "We are drawn to Christianity's truth by its goodness, and to its goodness by its beauty. Indeed, it is not enough to assent to Christianity's truth; we must love the truth (2 Thess. 2:10) who comes to us in grace and glory as a person (Jn. 1:14)," argues Bailey.[103] Humanity was made for beauty as well as truth. People need beauty to live, to enjoy life, to endure.

---

[103] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 72.

This study is significant for those who communicate the gospel as pastors, teachers, or in everyday encounters. A greater understanding of the apologetic importance of beauty can renew the possibility of faith to capture the imagination and take root in the hearts of late modern people. Because "Christianity is merely one of hundreds of options (and to many minds, it is no longer a plausible one), the church is relegated to a corner of a bookshop's lifestyle shelves."[104] Therefore, merely presenting another option of the truth without first expressing why it is morally good and aesthetically beautiful no longer has the same effect. Thus, the purpose of this study is to offer not merely a new strategy but also a certain posture. Makoto Fujimura, a Japanese-American artist and author on the arts and faith, points out that the Christian posture is not only a pursuit of knowledge; it also calls Christians to slow down to notice details in creation that ultimately show the kind of creator who not only "clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven," but, "will … clothe you" (Mat. 6:30).[105]

By exploring how professional Christian communicators have prioritized beauty to uncover what is ultimately true will hopefully encourage pastors in the apologetic task of the church. The findings could help preachers and communicators with innovative methods and frameworks to enrich their ability to convey gospel truths in ways that resonate more deeply with listeners. Also, the church might grow in its appreciation of

---

[104] Mark Meynell, "A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise: Harnessing the Arts to Restore the Plausibility of Transcendence within the Immanent Frame" (DMin diss., St. Louis, MO, Covenant Theological Seminary, 2022), 22, https://www.covenantlibrary.org/etd/2022/Meynell_Mark_DMin_2022.pdf.

[105] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, xv.

the fullness of the gospel and avoid a kind of reductionism that falls short of displaying truth's created and relational beauty. Finally, for those engaged with secular neighbors and friends, this study could offer critical resources to make biblical truth more plausible in a disenchanted, distracted, and divided world.

Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

Arts – encompasses various forms, including literary (fiction, poetry), visual (painting), aural (music), and dramatic (cinema) arts.

Beauty – one of the three transcendentals, related to goodness and truth, emphasizing the aesthetic sense, the imagination, and the emotions.

Buffered self – the modern self that is insulated and isolated from the transcendent realm, in contrast with the porous self.

Cultural apologetics – the work of establishing the Christian imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as beautiful, good, and true.

Disenchantment – a key concept in secularization theory that modernity removes the sense of wonder from the world by eliminating spirits and various supernatural entities.

Goodness – one of the three transcendentals, related to beauty and truth, emphasizing the moral sense and the will.

Imagination – the human mental faculty that synthesizes concrete sensory data into images and assigns meaning, allowing reason to act.

Immanent Frame – a social imaginary that perceives reality entirely within the context of the natural order, envisioning human flourishing as occurring solely within this world with no supernatural intervention.

Late modernity – a reaction to modernism but maintaining a commitment to the individual self.

Re-enchantment – a reawakened sense of wonder and meaning, revealing that the real world has always been enchanted. Conditions of modernity have disenchanted how Westerners perceive the world.

Secularism – a state in which theism is one of many viable choices for human fullness and satisfaction, and in which the transcendent feels less and less plausible.

Social Imaginary – how stories, narratives, myths, and images capture human hearts and imaginations, shaping one's worldview in ways often taken for granted.

Subtraction stories – cultural narratives that take a disenchanted world as the default setting and the diminishing of religious belief as the restoration of factory settings.

Transcendence – a consciousness of reality that extends beyond the material world, remaining open to the divine and the spiritual realms.

Truth – one of the three transcendentals, related to beauty and goodness, emphasizing Christian doctrine for the intellect.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel. In a culture that often views Christianity as either optional or dangerous, this study seeks to explore how Christians can communicate the beauty of the gospel, which resonates with human longing and offers a fuller understanding of biblical truth.

The literature review begins with research regarding the conditions of disenchantment in late modernity. Then, two other relevant areas of literature were reviewed to provide a foundation for the qualitative research. These areas of focus are a theology of beauty and the role of the imagination in re-enchantment.

Disenchantment in Late Modernity

The world today is not what it was 500 years ago. According to Justin Ariel Bailey, a professor at Dort University who works at the intersection of theology, culture, and ministry, if Christians are ever going to understand how the church got into the situation it is in as Westerners, "We have to understand what has changed in the way we imagine the world."[106] James K.A. Smith, a Canadian-American philosopher, asks a similar question as he reflected on Charles Taylor's overarching question in *A Secular Age*: "How did we get from a time (in, say, 1500) in which atheism was virtually

[106] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 23-24.

unthinkable to a time (in 2000) when theism is almost unbelievable?"[107] To be an atheist in the pre-modern world would be seen as "akin to belief in unicorns today."[108]

Smith, along with Taylor, concludes, "We also have to consider the change in conditions that made it possible for the West to be able to imagine exclusive humanism as a viable vision of significance."[109]

The Felt Absence of God

Paul Gould, a professor of philosophy of religion and cultural apologist, describes a key characteristic of disenchantment in the West as "the felt absence of God."[110] Five centuries ago, the assumption that there was no God involved in creation was unthinkable. When the Westminster Divines wrote about divine providence in 1646, they described God as "the great Creator of all" who works actively to "uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence" (WCF 5.1). This portrays not a distant God but one intimately involved in his creation's lives.

---

[107] James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 26.

[108] Derek Rishmawy, "Millennial Belief in the Super-Nova," in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*, ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 49.

[109] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 26.

[110] Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 52.

An Immanent Frame

Ancient people lived in a world "populated with gods and goddesses, nymphs and dryads, monsters and spirits, heroes and lawgivers."[111] An encounter with the divine or sacred was always a possibility. Gould explains that life was "one of mystery, enchantment, and sacredness."[112] Throughout history, almost everyone has assumed a posture of belief in a "sacred order—a transcendent, supernatural dimension of reality that was the ground of moral absolutes and promised life after death," says Timothy Keller, a well-known cultural apologist and global thinker.[113]

What people take for granted in the post-Christian West has changed significantly. In the modern world, the divine and sacred dimensions are often absent. As a result, Bailey explains, "Explicit faith commitments are now considered private preferences rather than fundamental frameworks."[114] This change has altered the human experience in the world to the point that beliefs and values, which were once considered the fundamental elements of our collective existence, "now only exist in the realm of the human mind."[115]

Disenchantment frames existence in an "entirely natural, materialistic, explicable, measurable, and comprehensible world."[116] As a consequence, people are more likely to

---

[111] Gould, 46.

[112] Gould, 46.

[113] Timothy Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter* (New York, NY: Redeemer City to City, 2020), 6.

[114] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 25.

[115] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 47.

[116] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 55.

believe that the universe is a closed, immanent frame, "which means there is no higher, transcendent reality."[117] In other words, existence is limited to what is seen or felt.

Noble describes what it feels like to live inside the immanent frame while still maintaining a genuine Christian faith. The use of ubiquitous smartphones and modern ingenuity in clothing, buildings, and vehicles screams "human achievement."[118] The Christian practice of singing about God's provision and the wonders of his creation becomes easier to doubt. The power of disenchantment conditions society to "look to this world and its physical laws" and human progress. Even for religious people, "It all makes sense as a self-sufficient, immanent world," according to Noble, "even though you know that Jesus is our Creator and Sustainer."[119] Religious Westerners open to the reality of transcendence still experience life in the immanent frame. Since the immanent world is "tangible, visible, and perceptible," according to Mark Meynell, "immanence easily eclipses [transcendence]."[120]

But the effects of transcendence and immanence are both at work. If a person believes in God, that person will "still feel the draw of immanence—as you sit in your room, watching the latest Netflix documentary about the cosmos, [because] belief in a godless universe is imaginable at an intellectual and existential level."[121] But if someone is skeptical of the supernatural, transcendence signals that there is more. "Every hike you

---

[117] Noble, 56.

[118] Noble, 56.

[119] Noble, 57.

[120] Meynell, "A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise," 27.

[121] Rishmawy, "Millennial Belief in the Super-Nova," 50.

take on the local trail, God keeps haunting you with blades of sunlight filtering through the trees."[122] As an immanent frame seeks to dominate the modern mind, a haunting suspicion that there is something more refuses to vanish, even if ever so faintly.

A Godless World

When transcendence is lost, significant biblical concepts such as "meaning, purpose, and value" evaporate with it.[123] Gould argues, "Merely adding God back … is insufficient" because of being in the dark for so long, "we can no longer see what's lost and therefore can't recognize our own lostness."[124]

Disenchantment results in "a failure to see reality in its proper light."[125] The Apostle Paul describes those who have experienced this type of blindness: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Taylor describes the modern feel of the secular age as the "malaise of immanence" because the world has been emptied of an overarching story to supply meaning.

Smith argues that the loss of transcendence propels "the immanence of exclusive humanism."[126] Gould agrees, but more specifically shows that it leads to scientific knowledge becoming the great hope as "scientists [become] the new priests, prophets,

---

[122] Rishmawy, 50.

[123] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 54.

[124] Gould, 54.

[125] Gould, 58.

[126] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 65.

and kings of the modern world."[127] This worldview is imaginable only because God is unimaginable. Belief in God becomes more difficult than unbelief. Because the felt absence of God is the norm, religion becomes merely "external behaviors—dance steps—while God's grace and presence—the music of the gospel—are noticeably absent in the believer's everyday life."[128] The lives of the religious and the non-religious basically look the same. They have both learned to live without God.

A Meaningless World

Taylor asserts that all pre-modern views found meaning "outside of time, or in higher time or eternity."[129] Historically, meaning always lay in a "bigger picture, which extends across space but also across time."[130] Bailey illustrates the modern cultural shift from a scene in Jesus' ministry.

In John 12:27-30, Jesus is standing before a crowd, and suddenly, there is a mighty noise from above. Not dissimilar from the modern world, three different explanations are constructed. The first group concludes, "The phenomenon is an entirely natural one: 'It's just thunder.'"[131] The second group "believes that something mystical has occurred: 'An angel spoke to him.'"[132] All of these people did, in fact, hear

---

[127] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 55.

[128] Gould, 56.

[129] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716.

[130] Taylor, 716.

[131] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 24.

[132] Bailey, 24.

something, but they could not identify what it was or what it meant. It was only Jesus himself who identified the thunderous sound as the "voice of God."[133]

Taylor suggests that the "Grand Narratives" that once made sense of people's individual lives are now viewed as antiquated or obsolete, a view unique to the modern world.[134] But Bailey reveals that this flattening effect on the human experience is not only a modern problem but was also present in the ancient world (at least in seed form).

These explanations are not merely "three different interpretations, but three fundamentally different experiences."[135] Various interpretations of the same experience reveal the power of perception but also raise questions about the conditions of belief. People have been conditioned to "perceive the world in a particular way, and it can be difficult to get outside of that way of seeing."[136] Smith agrees but adds that being unable to see beyond a flattened world is because of "the loss of reference."[137] For example, moderns listen to "Bach's *Mass in B Minor* (a liturgical work whose 'home,' as it were, is in worship) in a concert hall to 'appreciate' it as a work of art disembedded from that liturgical home."[138]

---

[133] Bailey, 24.

[134] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716–17.

[135] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 24.

[136] Bailey, 25.

[137] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 74.

[138] Smith, 75.

Since the Enlightenment, the world has been "emptied of the divine and the sacred." [139] The cosmos, once viewed as sacred, has been reduced to a "barren desert of materialism," which relegates personal values to the human mind.[140] The consequence, according to C.S. Lewis, is that "the subject [became] as empty as the Object."[141] In other words, removing the Creator from the social imaginary has left the world in a state of meaninglessness, as "sacredness vaporized into the crisp, cold air of this disenchanted age."[142] The results are troubling in ways perhaps not anticipated. Lewis adds, "In emptying out the dryads and the gods (which admittedly, 'would not do' just as they stood), we appear to have thrown out the whole universe, ourselves included."[143] In removing transcendence, the world was drained of meaning.

Nonetheless, the Enlightenment project was not capable of completely exorcizing the world of its metaphysical moorings. Karen Swallow Prior, a speaker and writer on Christianity and culture, says there is a good reason why "fantasy is so popular today."[144] In the absence of transcendence, something must replace the human need for meaning. She writes, "Fantasy is kind of like training wheels for a people who have labored too long under an impoverished social imaginary."[145] Thus, Flannery O'Connor defended her

---

[139] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 46.

[140] Gould, 47.

[141] C. S. Lewis, "The Empty Universe," in *Present Concerns*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2002), 83.

[142] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 47.

[143] Lewis, "The Empty Universe," 85.

[144] Karen Swallow Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2023), 246.

[145] Prior, 246.

vivid writing style: “For the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures,” but for the metaphorically deaf, “You shout.”[146]

The current culture’s fascination with fantasy in literature, films, games, cosplay, and “even the growing popularity of Halloween celebrations,” Prior argues, “reflects an awareness that we live in a disenchanted world, as well as our desire to return to that sense of transcendence in the imminent.”[147] Authors like J.R.R. Tolkien and Lewis call readers out of the immanent into a world beyond through “symbols writ large” like “a lion, a ring, and Sauron, [which] are billboards on the highway of a disenchanted world, pointing us, with bold letters and bright lights, to the forgotten places, on the side roads of the modern soul.”[148]

Symbols make sense of the real world. The power of fantasy and world creation is “to help us see the enchantment in our own.”[149] Samuel Coleridge explains the significance of a symbol and how it points to the eternal: “A symbol is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual … [but] above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal.”[150] He suggests that a “symbol” is more than merely representative of a specific thing; it provides a lens to see the eternal; it acts as a window into truths beyond the immediate immanent frame. What is needed are

---

[146] Gary M. Ciuba, “‘To the Hard of Hearing You Shout’: Flannery O’Connor and the Imagination of Deafness,” *Flannery O’Connor Review* 10 (July 2012): 1.

[147] Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination*, 247.

[148] Prior, 248.

[149] Prior, 248.

[150] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual; or, The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon, Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society, with an Appendix, Containing Comments and Essays Connected with the Study of the Inspired Writings* (London: Gale and Fenner, 1816), 37.

"enchanted worlds," according to Prior, "to help us see the enchantment in our own."[151] In agreement with Coleridge, Prior concludes that the scarcity of symbols results from "inattention to aesthetic experience" and significance, which points to "meaning beyond the literal surface" of ordinary life.[152]

The Individual Self

Since the mid-twentieth century, post-World War II, Prior continues, "We have moved into a time in which the whole culture attributes far more importance and power to the individual self than ever before. No longer do we think we have the power merely to discover moral reality and truth—we think we have the power to actually create it."[153] An example of this change anchors the opinion of the 1992 Supreme Court case, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."[154] Divine transcendence being passé, humanity can now define reality according to its own will.

Lewis, realizing these changes from the mid-twentieth century, succinctly describes the difference between the ancient world and the modern world: The old problem was "how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge,

---

[151] Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination*, 248.

[152] Prior, 249.

[153] Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Viking, 2015), 122–23.

[154] "Planned Parenthood of Southeastern PA v. Casey (505 U.S. 833, 1992)," accessed October 9, 2024, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/505/833/.

self-discipline, and virtue," but the new problem in late modernity is "how to subdue reality to the wishes of men."[155]

As a result, the individual became "like an overinflated balloon."[156] This idolatry of the self replaced the mystery and glory of the sacred. The Apostle Paul, in the first chapter of Romans, names those who suppress the truth about God as "futile" in their thinking, and their hearts are "darkened" (Rom. 1:21). When there is a failure to acknowledge God, the ability to see reality becomes distorted, which is "the first step of our decent into disenchantment."[157]

Looking Within

For centuries, "All cultures believed in a standard of truth of right and wrong," but it was not based on human feelings.[158] The foundation of the sacred order was not living for the self but aligning oneself with these objective realities of good and evil. Premoderns believed in "objective guilt and sin and that the problems of human life are solved when we connect to that sacred order."[159] Even though most major religions disagreed about the details of that sacred order and how to experience salvation, Keller said, "Everyone agreed that it existed, and we needed to find a way to touch it."

---

[155] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2015), 77.

[156] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 47.

[157] Gould, 46.

[158] Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter*, 6.

[159] Keller, 6.

But now, in the late modern world, the goal in life is no longer to cultivate a vibrant spiritual life with God or to live a virtuous life to honor him. According to Keller, the late modern West set itself apart because it is "the first culture based on a rejection of a sacred order."[160] Gould concludes that this makes life utterly "subjective" because purpose and meaning are not found outside of the natural world, but life is "found within the self" and in "the satisfaction of their personal desires."[161] Keller agrees and argues, "Academic, artistic, and entertainment institutions teach that the only sacred depths are the ones found within us."[162] Therefore, it is up to the individual self to determine right and wrong, good and evil. The consequence of life with no transcendence is a world where there are no stated values and meaning—rather, one must "choose [your] own values and create [your] own meaning."[163] To claim otherwise is oppressive because personal choice and meaning-making are some of the greatest values in the modern world.[164] Stiller agrees, along with Taylor and other scholars, that meaning is "located within."[165]

Bailey is largely in agreement, but he points out that a unique difference between the ancients and the moderns is "what the experiences can tell us about ourselves: our

---

[160] Keller, 6.

[161] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 53.

[162] Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter*, 6.

[163] Keller, 6.

[164] Keller, 7.

[165] Eric Stiller, "A Picture Set Us Free Preaching to the Imagination in a Secular Age" (DMin diss., St. Louis, MO, Covenant Theological Seminary, 2022), 44, https://www.covenantlibrary.org/etd/2022/Stiller_Eric_DMin_2022.pdf.

personal or cultural psyche."[166] This makes moderns skeptical about any claim that there might be an "aesthetic order" in the world.[167] Therefore, it seems more reasonable to moderns to conclude that "our desire and delight are socially constructed" and that "beauty [is] in the eye of the beholder."[168] But is that what modernity really teaches?

Bailey quotes one of the famous Muppet characters, Miss Piggy: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and it may be necessary from time to time to give a stupid or misinformed beholder a black eye."[169] There are two "conflicting intuitions" embedded in her imagination; the first part states that beauty is subjective.[170] What one person finds beautiful, someone else might strongly dislike based on anything from background to personality.[171] Beauty is often found in things that align with one's interests.

But Miss Piggy says more. She contradicts herself by saying, "Some people are simply more beautiful than others, some cultural artifacts are just better than others, and if you can't see the difference, you are the one with the problem."[172] Virginia Postrel, a columnist and speaker on the intersection of culture, commerce, and technology, writes in *The Atlantic*, "Our eyes and brains pretty consistently like some human forms better than others. Shown photos of strangers, even babies look longer at the faces adults rank the

---

[166] Justin Ariel Bailey, *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 109–10.

[167] Bailey, 110.

[168] Bailey, 110.

[169] Bailey, 110.

[170] Bailey, 110.

[171] Bailey, 110.

[172] Bailey, 110.

best-looking."[173] She explains that some people are simply more beautiful than others. She continues, "We still thrill to the centuries-old bust of Nefertiti, the Venus de Milo, and the exquisite faces painted by Leonardo and Botticelli. Greta Garbo's acting style seems stilted today, but her face transcends time. We know beauty when we see it, and our reactions are remarkably consistent. Beauty is not just a social construct."[174]

When a person or a piece of art is described as beautiful or excellent, it suggests that there is a force behind the judgment and that others "should agree with our assessment."[175] Of course, people will disagree, and two people rarely see things the same way. However, even in a world with no sacred order, "If we let [others] say, 'That's just … your opinion,' it somehow betrays what we have seen."[176] Disenchantment can never fully extract inherent beauty and truth. It haunts reality and then suddenly appears. And not unlike Miss Piggy, late modern culture is just as committed as any generation "to fight for our judgments of cultural worth."[177]

Reconstructing the World

Secularity created not just a vacuum of disbelief but a change in conditions that gave "tremendous power to and [placed] incredible pressure on the imagination to supply

---

[173] Virginia Postrel, "The Truth About Beauty," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2007, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/03/the-truth-about-beauty/305620/.

[174] Postrel.

[175] Bailey, *Interpreting Your World*, 110.

[176] Bailey, 110.

[177] Bailey, 110.

new connections."[178] According to Taylor, the Protestant Reformation played a primary role in "[beginning] to carve out the possibility of a humanist alternative to the Christian faith."[179] Collin Hansen, the editor-in-chief for The Gospel Coalition, disagrees with Taylor's Catholic view of the Reformation but still values his scholarship. He notes, "Whether he recognizes it or not, Taylor aligns with at least one key aspect of the evangelical tradition. The Reformation may have risked anarchy and secularism, but it did so in search of this pure religion."[180] As the Reformation sought renewal and the world became more secular, other renewal movements emerged to replace it.

The Reformation

For centuries, the medieval church sought to protect its people "from evil magic through good magic, instantiated in saints and relics."[181] The Reformation offered a new approach. Iconoclasm was one way the Reformers removed mediatory abilities from icons, which resulted in a "theocentric shift." It permitted a "disenchanting edge toward the world at large: magic was illegitimate because God alone was to be adored and feared."[182] According to Taylor, the Reformers' reaction to the medieval view of good

---

[178] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 32.

[179] Bailey, 32.

[180] Collin Hansen, "Hope in Our Secular Age," in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 12.

[181] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 32.

[182] Bailey, 33.

magic in the Mass to protect from the evil magic in the pagan world was to "leap out of the field of magic altogether, and throw yourself on the power of God alone."[183]

One of the results of the Reformational doctrine of faith alone was that "the sacred could no longer be located in people, places, or things of intrinsic power … all places could be holy places. All honest vocations could advance God's kingdom. Ordinary life took on a new significance."[184] Even John Calvin, the great pastor and Reformer, locked the doors of the Genevan church throughout the week to "avoid superstition and to remind his congregation [of] the wider world."[185] The executive editor for *Desiring God*, David Mathis, emphasizes that Calvin was eager to see Christ's church worship on Sundays, but Calvin was "not happy for his flock to retreat from everyday life and hide within the walls of the church during the week."[186] He desired his congregants to be fully engaged in Geneva—"in their families, in their jobs, with their neighbors and coworkers."[187] The mission of God was to be carried out "not just for monks but for everyone."[188]

In this cultural shift, problems emerged—what Bailey calls the "Syndrome Paradox," using the 2004 film *The Incredibles* to illustrate the point.[189] The villain,

---

[183] Bailey, 32; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 74.

[184] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 33.

[185] Bailey, 33.

[186] David Mathis, "Divine Glory & the Daily Grind," in *With Calvin in the Theater of God: The Glory of Christ and Everyday Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 23.

[187] David Mathis, John Piper, and Julius Kim, eds., *With Calvin in the Theater of God: The Glory of Christ and Everyday Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 23.

[188] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 33.

[189] Bailey, 34.

Syndrome, believes everyone should possess the same power to be great. It doesn't seem so bad until it becomes evident that "when everyone is super, no one will be."[190] This reality forces a question: "If all places can be holy, are any places holy? Have all vocations been elevated by the priesthood of all believers, or have the distinctions simply been leveled?"[191] Michael Goheen, a professor of missional theology, believes that the "church gathered" and the "church scattered" are both holy and equally instrumental for God's mission. He writes, "The church cannot be reduced to a religious body that carries out religious rituals."[192] That would be too limiting. The ecclesiastical calling of the church means when the church is outside of the walls of the church building, it remains the church. "The laity are not fragments scattered about in culture that then become the church when they gather again for worship and fellowship."[193] Worship spaces and vocations outside the walls of the church (assuming they are not against God's will) are both holy in their own ways.

Bailey shows that the Reformer's desire to replace the sacred-secular divide with a biblical worldview that supported the sacredness of all God's creation also "made it possible for the scope of sanctification to be stretched thin."[194] He believes, "The possibility of disenchantment came about through heightened attention to God's presence

---

[190] Bailey, 34.

[191] Bailey, 34.

[192] Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 109.

[193] Goheen, 109.

[194] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 34.

in ordinary life."[195] Taylor and Bailey conclude that the Reformation had a significant impact on changing conditions of faith in modernity.

The Enlightenment

The Reformers, having a God-centered view of reordering society, envisioned "colonizing Christian civilization, one so self-contained that it could take on a life of its own outside of the theological soil in which it had grown."[196] But over time, Bailey argued, "Interest in this world (the immanent) grew large enough to eclipse concerns about the next (the transcendent)."[197] The missiologist Lesslie Newbigin's view of the Enlightenment was "a shift in the location of reliable truth from the story told in the Bible to the eternal truths of reason."[198] The flattening of the world provided the ingredients to reduce existence to an immanent frame. This rejection of an enchanted cosmos was "a tremendous imaginative achievement."[199] Disenchantment dissolved the cosmos.[200]

In the absence of transcendence, the enchanted world was replaced by a universe "ruled by laws … unresponsive, or indifferent, like a machine, even if we held that it was designed as a machine for our benefit," the construction of a new society.[201] Bailey

---

[195] Bailey, 34.

[196] Bailey, 35.

[197] Bailey, 36.

[198] Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Chicago, IL: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 73.

[199] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 39.

[200] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 280.

[201] Taylor, 280.

argues that such a reconstruction of existence and disbelief in the supernatural required new sources of meaning to emerge. The immanent frame would have to produce meaning from within. Thus, the birth of a new movement—Romanticism—in the nineteenth century provided a "nostalgic stopgap against Enlightenment rationalism."[202]

Romantic Movement

Romanticism began from a place of emptiness. Taylor and Bailey agree that the price people pay for modernity and rationality is that "our actions, goals, achievements, and the like, have a lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance."[203] The Romantics took the responsibility to restore meaning eliminated from the Enlightenment period. They did this by elevating the imagination to reorder the world.[204] The fundamental similarity between these two cultural periods is that both assume "the loss of absolute purpose," placing the burden of meaning-making entirely "into human hands."[205] Creating one's own identity and meaning can initially feel liberating. Taylor describes the vacillating experience: "We are alone in the universe, and this is frightening; but it can also be exhilarating. … The thrill at being alone is part sense of freedom, part the intense poignancy of this fragile moment" to seize the day.[206] But is it sustainable for human flourishing, and can it be fulfilling?

---

[202] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 40.

[203] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 307.

[204] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 41.

[205] Bailey, 42.

[206] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 367.

The Romantic movement believed it had what was needed to make the immanent frame "habitable," according to Bailey.[207] Taylor confirms this point by arguing that the Romantics figured out that "the felt inadequacy of moralism, the important defining goal or fulfillment which it leaves out and represses, was to be found in the aesthetic realm."[208] In other words, the way to achieve fullness was an experience of beauty. The Romantics' believed, "Beauty is what will save us, complete us … So created beauty, works of art, are not only important loci of that beauty which can transform us, they are also essential ways of acceding to the beauty which we don't create."[209] The Romantic period held artistic expression as the highest good in human achievement because the "identification of beauty" was "the key to restoring our lost unity."[210]

Disenchantment or Enchantment

Taylor's concern is not so much about the content of belief but the change in its condition. Late modernity has "changed from a condition in which belief was the default option, not just for the naïve but also for those who knew, considered, talked about atheism, to a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones."[211]

---

[207] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 42.

[208] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 358–59.

[209] Taylor, 359.

[210] Taylor, 359.

[211] Taylor, 12.

On one hand, Taylor explains disenchantment through the lens of subtraction stories. Bailey agrees that this is one possible option. These stories "assume that the world was never really enchanted in the first place."[212] Bailey adds, "Either the world was never enchanted … and … now all of the superstition has been scraped away by science, and so we have begun to live in the world as it truly is. We have, in a sense, emerged from Plato's cave of ignorance into the sun of scientific certainty."[213] Scientific explanations of reality reduce the supernatural to superstition. This cultural narrative presents humanity as "buffered individuals" who manage their life in the world using rationality "rather than persons embedded in an intrinsically meaning-filled cosmos, beholden to a transcendent reality not of their making."[214] Subtraction stories assume a disenchanted world is life in its "default setting."[215] Stiller points out that "once humans subtract superstitious religious belief, what's left over is science, reason, and progress."[216]

There is another possibility to consider. Bailey, agreeing with Taylor, suggests, "Our secular age is not the result of triumphant elimination but rather a long process of construction."[217] Rather than a subtraction story, it is one of addition. Several scholars agree. Smith adds, "We had to learn how to be exclusively humanist; it is a second

---

[212] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 27.

[213] Justin Ariel Bailey, "Thinking about Disenchantment: An Assist from C.S. Lewis for Understanding Charles Taylor," *Justin Ariel Bailey* (blog), October 26, 2016, https://pjustin.com/thinking-about-disenchantment-an-assist-from-c-s-lewis-for-understanding-charles-taylor/.

[214] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 27.

[215] Bailey, 27.

[216] Stiller, "A Picture Set Us Free," 51.

[217] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 28.

nature, not a first."[218] If the construction story is correct, the journey from enchantment to disenchantment is less like emerging from a cave and more like building an immense stone castle and then forgetting that there is anything outside the castle.[219] Meynell adds "that secularism is only in part a subtraction story (removing the metaphysical realm); it claims to offer a better narrative, an alternative narrative."[220]

Lewis illustrates this point in his classic children's story, *The Silver Chair*. Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb, two of the main characters, are captured by frightening creatures and are sent to an underground realm. A sorceress controls the underground and enchants them with a spell to believe that the above-ground world does not exist. They look at a lamp and imagine a much bigger lamp, which they call the sun. They look at a cat and imagine a much bigger cat, which they call the lion Aslan."[221] The bewitching of the children causes them to deny reality, which unfolds in the following conversation:

> [Jill:] "I suppose that other world must be all a dream."
>
> "Yes. It is all a dream," said the Witch.
>
> "Yes, all a dream," said Jill.
>
> "There never was such a world," said the Witch.
>
> "No," said Jill and Scrubb, "never was such a world."
>
> "There never was any world but mine," said the Witch.

---

[218] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 48.

[219] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 28.

[220] Meynell, "A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise," 110.

[221] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 29.

"There never was any world but yours," said they.[222]

The Witch's successful act of disenchantment is actually an act of addition (or enchantment) to cause skepticism and disbelief of another world. The effect of the Witch's spell causes the children to be cut off from reality and to reject what they once knew to be true. Now, the only thing that remained was the "immanent underground."[223]

Resistance to Disenchantment

Although living in the immanent frame can eliminate a sense of transcendence, Taylor acknowledges that "it doesn't necessarily do so."[224] Everyone in the modern West experiences the effects of the immanent frame, but some "want to live it as open to something beyond; some live it as closed."[225] Noble synthesizes Taylor's argument, writing, "Although our daily experience isn't imbued with the supernatural, we still believe that some transcendent being exists and that he can break into our world at certain times and places. … [But] even when the immanent frame is open, it is still the immanent frame."[226] Whether one believes in the God of the Bible, another faith system, or a bespoke religion, by "mixing and matching spiritual and aesthetic and experiential and philosophical traditions," believing still happens inside an immanent frame.[227] This can't

---

[222] C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia. Book 6: The Silver Chair* (New York, NY: HarperTrophy, 2005), 184.

[223] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 29.

[224] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543.

[225] Taylor, 543–44.

[226] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 56.

[227] Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), 19.

be easily dismissed because it is deeply embedded in the social imaginary, even among the most religious.

Of course, not everyone agrees with Taylor's fundamental argument in his seminal work *A Secular Age*. Jason Josephson-Storm (JJS), an award-winning author and professor of religion, in *The Myth of Disenchantment*, challenges Taylor's take on modernity. JJS takes the position that secularization hasn't disenchanted the world at all; instead, it has promoted its enchantment. He references anthropological and sociological research, indicating that most people in Europe and North America, to varying degrees, "believe in spirits, witches, psychical powers, magic, astrology, and demons."[228] JJS is not denying that the West hasn't experienced a historical, cultural change. His main concern is that modernity, defined "as a world that is 'disenchanted' (devoid of belief in spirits, myth, and magic), does not accurately describe the world we live in."[229] He names influential philosophers (e.g., Arthur Schopenhauer, whose work Taylor cites) and scientists (e.g., Francis Bacon, considered the father of the scientific method) who continued to believe in magic despite existing in the modern world; therefore showing that the modern world was never assumed to be disenchanted. However, JJS does agree with Taylor on one point: "There has been a changing attitude toward God over the last five hundred years." He credits Richard Dawkins and company with spreading the myth of disenchantment, but all these movements have failed or only partially succeeded. JJS concludes, "For most people (elite and popular) the choice is not one between

---

[228] Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, "Why Do We Think We Are Disenchanted?," *The New Atlantis*, Summer/Fall 2018, https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/why-do-we-think-we-are-disenchanted.

[229] Josephson-Storm.

disenchantment and enchantment, science and religion, or myth and mythless rationality, but rather between different competing enchanted life worlds."[230]

Despite these arguments, Alan Jacobs makes a case for a disenchanted age. In his course titled, "The History of Disenchantment," he cites how JJS referred to studies showing the "persistence of beliefs in spirits, ghosts, and a wide range of paranormal phenomena."[231] He invites his class to consider JJS's argument: That modern society has never been disenchanted, saying, "The single most familiar story in the history of science is the tale of disenchantment—of magic's exit from the henceforth law-governed world. I am here to tell you that as a broad cultural history, this narrative is wrong."[232] JJS argues that suppressing magic in the world is a failed project, at least partially because he doesn't see how science "deanimates" nature.[233] When the Christan God is removed from society and belief, a void emerges, "spirits come" to fill the absence left behind.[234]

Jacobs supports Taylor's assessment and shows how modernity led to a new environment of disbelief in transcendence. He writes, "The early modern era in the West inaugurated the construction of the Modern Moral Order."[235] This new order establishes a cultural narrative in which "(a) spirits do not populate the world and therefore cannot be directed and need not be propitiated; (b) magic is impossible; (c) God exists but is not

---

[230] Josephson-Storm.

[231] Alan Jacobs, "On the Myth of Disenchantment," *The New Atlantis*, May 9, 2018, https://www.thenewatlantis.com/text-patterns/on-myth-of-disenchantment.

[232] Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 2017), 3.

[233] Josephson-Storm, 3.

[234] Jacobs, "On the Myth of Disenchantment."

[235] Jacobs.

directly involved with the world He made, which runs along on its own power; and (d) God expects everyone to meet His moral standards."[236] Bailey adds that belief is natural and intrinsic, but it is "unbelief that must be taught."[237] The result is a dramatic shift in the conditions of modernity, which created "such an environment … [that] human beings are no longer 'porous' but rather 'buffered' selves who dwell within a 'disciplinary society' that produces good citizens of a disenchanted order."[238]

Jacobs offers a rebuttal to those who resist the idea of disenchantment, including JJS. He writes, "It seems to me … interest[s] in séances, or … endorsement[s] of mysticism, or … speculations about some realm of knowledge that lies beyond science as we now know it, is not the persistence of an enchanted cosmos or the renewal of one."[239] That would assume too much about the role of science in the discovery of transcendent realities or values. Jacobs insightfully suggests what is really occurring in the minds and hearts of moderns: "I think what we see is a group of people dwelling day-by-day and hour-by-hour fully within Taylor's [Modern Moral Order] who occasionally peer over the fence at goings-on among the naive, credulous, and superstitious."[240] Jacob's evaluation of the cultural situation is one of still wishing something supernatural were true. He describes it as "a kind of brief mental vacation from a disenchanted world of buffered

---

[236] Jacobs.

[237] Bailey, *Interpreting Your World*, 74.

[238] Jacobs, "On the Myth of Disenchantment."

[239] Jacobs.

[240] Jacobs.

selves."[241] Perhaps this argument is best summed up by Julian Barnes, a columnist for the *New York Times*, when he wrote, "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."[242]

This longing, or wishing it might be so, is expressed in the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy's "The Oxen." This poem was written and published in 1915, during the First World War—a nostalgic reflection from his childhood on Christmas Eve. As he sat around the fireplace with others, honoring the coming birth of Christ, they could envision the cattle kneeling before the Lord. But now, as adults, very few could believe such a thing. The last stanza expresses a longing for the possibility that it might be true.

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.[243]

Hardy contrasts the trusting knowledge of childhood ("our childhood used to know") with the uncertainty of adult belief, still "hoping it might be so."

JJS or Hardy do not persuade Jacobs that disenchantment has never been, yet he concludes that these modern expressions prove "that we have, and sometimes we hate it."[244]

---

[241] Jacobs.

[242] Julian Barnes, "'Nothing to Be Frightened Of,'" *The New York Times*, October 4, 2008, sec. Books, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/books/chapters/chap-nothing-to-be-frightened-of.html.

[243] Thomas Hardy, "The Oxen," The Poetry Foundation, 1915, accessed November 4, 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53215/the-oxen-56d232503c32d.

[244] Jacobs, "On the Myth of Disenchantment."

Summary of Disenchantment in Late Modernity

The Western world is drastically different from 500 years ago. The literature suggests that the late modern world is a disenchanting experience where the presence of transcendence is no longer felt. Even the religious who are open to transcendent realities experience life and faith within an immanent frame. Meaning and purpose, once found outside of the self, are now found by looking within. This change in conditions has produced a flood of new meanings in the world, untethered to anything beyond the immanent. It infuses the self with the power to define what is valuable and true—moreover, to create meaning—because personal choice is the highest value. Although disenchantment is deeply embedded in the social imaginary, there are reasons to hope because there remains a haunting, even within the buffered self, that there must be more.

To begin the journey out of disenchantment, one must understand a biblical framework of beauty to apprehend the nature of God and the world inhabited by his creatures. The apologetic power of beauty allows belief to become believable, which happens in the aesthetic dimension, where faith and doubt are negotiated.

A Theology of Beauty

The Bible doesn't appear to have much to say about beauty, and a search for the word "beauty," yields few results. However, N.T. Wright expresses that when the Bible addresses beauty, it is not often recognized because some traditions are trained in the Scriptures to "[go] looking for dogma rather than delight."[245] It might come as a surprise,

---

[245] N. T. Wright, *Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2020), 95.

but almost half of the book of Exodus is about beauty (Exodus 25-40). The intricate detail of the Tabernacle, including the finest materials and elegant decorations, "must have been all the more striking in the midst of a barren desert."[246] The theologian Wesley Vander Lugt highlights the symbolic significance of the Tabernacle's beauty, noting that the elaborate priestly garments were designed for worship, and also "made them more beautiful."[247]

Most agree that beauty is a universal value in the human heart. Lewis writes that beauty (as well as knowledge) is an "appetite … in the human mind and God makes no appetite in vain."[248] But Jonathan King's dissertation on theology as aesthetics shows that many modern scholars relegate beauty to a place of lesser importance. "Beauty typically takes third place in modern theology," he observes, "behind *truth* and *goodness.*"[249] Kevin Vanhoozer argues that the topic of beauty is largely ignored: "Many systematic theologies set forth the *truth* of Scripture; liberation theologies focus on the importance of doing what is *good* and right, especially pursuing justice, but few have taken up the cause of *beauty.*"[250]

---

[246] Wright, 95.

[247] Wesley Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen: Finding a Faith That Breathes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2024), 22.

[248] C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001), 56.

[249] Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), xi (emphasis original).

[250] King, xi (emphasis mine).

A biblical framework of beauty is necessary because sound doctrine "does not always stir the heart."[251] It is the aesthetic dimension where a "fuller appreciation of the sublimity of God's eternal plan" is apprehended.[252] Thus, spiritual formation and the public witness of Christians should not be reduced to mere truth-telling or moral ethics. Even the Apostle Paul, whose many New Testament letters are full of doctrine, calls the church the "holy temple in the Lord" and a "dwelling place for God" in Ephesians 2:21-22, which is "a picture that the apostle has constructed," according to Bryan Chapell, where followers of Christ "are no longer foreigners and aliens, but family members of God's household."[253] Chapell adds, "God makes our lives a temple for his praise even when we may not think anything special is happening to or through us."[254] This imagery is why Vanhoozer believes "focusing on the beauty of the Lord" possesses the power to "inspire" followers to conform to Christ, which "is beautiful indeed."[255]

For example, in O'Connor's short story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," a 12-year-old girl overhears her older cousins talking about a nun, Sister Perpetua, who advises young women to fend off young men desiring a sexual encounter by saying, "Stop, sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!"[256] The older cousins laugh, but the young girl is deeply moved by the provocative image that she is the dwelling place of God.

---

[251] Kevin Vanhoozer, "Forward," in *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), xii.

[252] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 1.

[253] Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, Reformed Expository Commentaries Ser (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 130.

[254] Chapell, 130.

[255] Vanhoozer, "The Beauty of the Lord," xii.

[256] Flannery O'Connor, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (New York, NY: Mariner Books, 1977), 85–102.

Being overwhelmed with a sense of awe, she tastes what it means to be treasured by God and is compelled to live in gratitude to him. This experience did not remove all temptations, but it awakened her to the transcendent reality that she was made for more as one made to be the holy dwelling of God. The Bible is full of such images. They are there to capture the heart and form people into the image of Christ.

Justifying Beauty

Artists and scholars regularly point to the beauty of creation. Vander Lugt asks, "Is it necessary for a peacock's tail feather to be so enormous and intricate?"[257] Wright agrees that creation is indeed beautiful but adds that its beauty is a "constant pointer to the glory of God."[258] There is a type of beetle shaped like a violin, another type that can carry 850 times its weight, and one with a red, polka-dotted body (a ladybug).[259] The Tabernacle in Exodus 25 is also decorated lavishly. Moses is told to make this structure aesthetically beautiful with "gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece" (Exodus 25:3-7).

---

[257] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 22.

[258] Wright, *Broken Signposts*, 96.

[259] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 23.

The text doesn't explicitly point out the obvious. Wrights says, "Only a poor writer says, 'It was exciting,' 'It was beautiful,' or 'It was terrifying.' A good writer … makes you *feel* and *imagine* the beauty and excitement without spelling it out."[260]

The Priority of Divine Beauty

The interplay between beauty and truth is an "ancient instinct" which goes back to Greek philosophy.[261] The Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle believed the world to have genuine meaning and purpose. In the classical world, according to apologist professor Kenneth Samples, "The cosmic values of truth (that which defines reality), goodness (that which fulfills its purpose), and beauty (that which is lovely) were objective in nature and knowable by the noble seeker."[262] The noble seeker "had the internal capacities of logos (reason), ethos (morality), and pathos (emotion)," which corresponded to the transcendentals for human fulfillment.[263]

Kreeft asserts that the three transcendentals are "absolutely universal properties of all reality."[264] The challenge becomes knowing where to place beauty within the transcendentals because "[it] is more obscure and mysterious than either truth or goodness."[265] On the one hand, beauty is considered last because it depends on goodness

---

[260] Wright, *Broken Signposts*, 100.

[261] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't*, 5.

[262] Kenneth Samples, "The 3 Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, & Beauty," Reasons to Believe, February 2, 2021, https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/reflections/the-3-transcendentals-truth-goodness-beauty.

[263] Samples.

[264] Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty," 23.

[265] Kreeft, 27.

and truth. But on the other hand, "Beauty is first because it is the most immediately appealing," according to Kreeft.[266] Someone can easily use reason to argue against truth, and someone can rationalize against goodness, but beauty is difficult to deny. "Beauty is irresistible."[267]

The Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar not only recognized the significance of beauty among the medieval transcendentals but prioritized them; he "fixes a fundamental ordering principle in the opening set of his trilogy (*The Glory of the Lord*)."[268] He argues that there is a primacy to aesthetics.[269] Von Balthasar writes, "Beauty is the word that shall be our first."[270] In other words, beauty is the beginning of theological understanding, not an afterthought. His lengthy work was an attempt to "develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful (*pulchrum*)."[271]

Attaining an understanding of beauty is no small task. As von Balthasar states, "Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendor around the double constellation of the true and the

---

[266] Peter Kreeft, *Wisdom of the Heart: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful at the Center of Us All* (Gastonia, NC: TAN Books, 2020), 281.

[267] Kreeft, 282.

[268] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 144.

[269] King, 144.

[270] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, 2nd ed, vol. 1, Seeing the Form (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2009), 18.

[271] von Balthasar, 1:9.

good and their inseparable relation to one another."[272] Beauty may be viewed as difficult to define, especially when compared to the true and the good; nonetheless, von Balthasar argues in the forward of his trilogy, "The *pulchrum* appear[s] in its rightful place within the total ordered structure, namely as the manner in which God's goodness (*bonum*) gives itself and is expressed by God and understood by man as the truth (*verum*)."[273] King describes von Balthasar's theological perception of beauty as a means of apprehending God himself, which is more than mere comprehension. "Such apprehension will lead to action (i.e., the good), and only then, as one is inside the action, can one take up the question of truth properly."[274]

To understand von Balthasar's view of aesthetics in the divine economy, it is important to realize that beauty is a form (*gestalt*, literally 'form, shape')—"the form God's revelation takes in the order of creation and redemption."[275] He points out that beauty's light "breaks forth from the form's interior," and "the content (*gehalt*) does not lie behind the form (*gestalt*), but within it."[276] The form does not conceal God's identity but reveals his nature and character. The theological concept described above is manifested in the incarnation, which is why von Balthasar puts the incarnation of Christ as the pinnacle of God's self-expression: "Christian thought has always known that Jesus Christ is the central form of revelation, around which all other elements in the revelation

---

[272] von Balthasar, 1:18.

[273] von Balthasar, 1:11.

[274] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 145.

[275] King, 145.

[276] von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 1:146–47.

of our salvation crystallize and are grouped."[277] Calvin, the great sixteenth-century pastor, writes, "At the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam [Gen. 3:15], it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last—when all the clouds were dispersed—Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth [cf. Mal., Ch. 4]."[278] Not only does the physical form of the Son reveal his beauty, but it also uniquely shapes how the story is told.

To perceive the Son in his divine beauty "can be brought to such perception only by the grace of God," according to von Balthasar. But when one does behold the "Christ-form—to use von Balthasar's term—[he] perceive[s] the beauty of God's love in and through it and the hidden depth of God's self-revelation to which it points."[279] To behold Christ by faith "evokes a response of delight … [stemming] from the form itself."[280] King concludes, "The form of God's revelation as it appears to us is beautiful" because "in the form itself, the truth and goodness of its reality are made manifest to us."[281]

The critical point von Balthasar is making about the purpose of being enraptured by the beauty of Christ is that "this absorption leads out of oneself and into the wonder of the form itself."[282] For this reason, an apologetic understanding of beauty places it at the

---

[277] von Balthasar, 1:149.

[278] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 446.

[279] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 146.

[280] King, 146–47.

[281] King, 147.

[282] King, 147.

beginning of the order of transcendentals. Von Balthasar summarizes his argument: "God does not come primarily as a teacher for us ('true'), as a useful 'redeemer' for us ('good'), but to display and to radiate himself, the splendor of his eternal triune love in that 'disinterestedness' that true love has in common with true beauty. For the glory of God the world was created; through it and for its sake the world is also redeemed."[283] King clarifies what von Balthasar means by aesthetic "disinterestedness" in simple terms: "This idea … is that beauty *as beauty* is not desired as a means to another end."[284] In other words, beauty's value stands apart from any usefulness. What is the utility of a sunset or a vista from a mountaintop? Nothing. It simply is to be enjoyed. Likewise, the beautiful truth of the gospel in a disenchanted world is not that God created humanity merely to know things about him, but to enjoy him, to be enthralled by God's character and care—to love God for God.

Kreeft makes a distinction between the ontological and psychological order of the transcendentals. The ontological order is truth, goodness, and beauty because "truth is defined by Being … goodness is defined by truth, not by will, which is good only when it conforms to the truth … and beauty is defined by goodness, objectively real goodness."[285] Although the ontological order begins with truth, according to Kreeft, "Beauty has the greatest power over our souls."[286] Kreeft agrees with Thomas Aquinas,

---

[283] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1993), 80.

[284] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 147 (emphasis original).

[285] Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty," 25.

[286] Kreeft, 25.

who defined beauty as "that which pleases when seen."[287] The psychological order is in the reverse. It is through the window of beauty that truth is eventually perceived. Kreeft explains, "As we know Being through first sensing appearances, so we are attracted to goodness first by its beauty, we are attracted to truth by its goodness, and we are attracted to Being by its truth."[288] Bailey agrees that there is a psychological order in apologetics, suggesting that beauty begins the discovery of truth. He states, "Perhaps truth-oriented apologists have it backwards. Perhaps it is truth that provides the final 'push' into belief once the imagination is already captivated by the goodness and beauty of the Christ."[289]

A Reawakened Memory

The meaning of eternity in the heart, according to Ecclesiastes, is "no other than a knowledge of God." Johnson explains that this type of knowledge "is innate to us without being connatural: it is above us in kind, and so not of a similar nature to us."[290] The irreducible knowledge of God is understood on some level by every rational being in an "innate mode" (Eccl. 3:11) and according to an "empirical mode" (Ps. 19 and Rom. 1).[291] Both types of knowledge are complementary but not identical. Johnson argues that the biblical text supports "the assertion of a type of irreducibly basic empirical knowledge

---

[287] Christopher Scott Sevier, "Thomas Aquinas on the Nature and Experience of Beauty" (PhD diss., Riverside, CA, University of California, Riverside, 2012), viii, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7d25w3x9.

[288] Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty," 25.

[289] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 75.

[290] Junius Johnson, *The Father of Lights: A Theology of Beauty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 23.

[291] Johnson, 23.

that fundamentally grounds thought in addition to thought-grounding innate knowledge."[292]

This memory of God is "compound in its origin, for it is partly innate and partly empirical; but it is also compound in its orientation."[293] Empirical knowledge of God "looks backward" to things seen in creation, but innate knowledge "looks forward" to someone not yet seen "but our being is attuned to desiring."[294] Both types of theological memory are "correctly keyed to that within each temporal moment that transcends time," which is God himself, the eternal One.[295]

This memory is what led to Lewis's experience of joy and, ultimately, faith in God. He defines joy as a "desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction … [which] must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure."[296] He continues to distinguish between joy and pleasure, saying, "Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is"—it is desirable but not controllable.[297]

Lewis describes an encounter as a child while reading *Squirrel Nutkin* by Beatrix Potter. He became caught up with the "Idea of Autumn."[298] He would return to the book

---

[292] Johnson, 23.

[293] Johnson, 23.

[294] Johnson, 24.

[295] Johnson, 24.

[296] Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 18.

[297] Lewis, 18.

[298] Lewis, 16.

to re-awaken the elusive desire that he longed for. His desire was not an ordinary experience or even an ordinary pleasure but something "in another dimension."[299]

The experience of a piece of music, a work of literature, or a spouse's face—these each possess the power to re-awaken longing. Kreeft defends the power of an encounter with a work of art because "aesthetics proves to be in some ways more, not less, adequate than intellectual or moral analogies."[300] But Johnson argues that this encounter is more than a personal longing, but "the fundamental and indelible memory of our Creator."[301] It may be rejected by many in the secular West, but these earthly memories are there to draw each person back to the Beautiful. Therefore, what people call beautiful are really those things that "excited this memory in us."[302]

The Hope of Art

Do art and beauty have a place in a world filled with suffering and need? The broken state of the world is not a recent phenomenon; since the rebellion in Eden, the world has continually been in a mess and on the brink of disaster.[303]

In a sermon titled "Learning in War-Time," in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, in October 1939, Lewis addressed the concerns of Oxford undergraduates at the beginning of World War II. He answered curious minds asking, "How it is right, or even

---

[299] Lewis, 17.

[300] Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty," 30.

[301] Johnson, *The Father of Lights*, 24.

[302] Johnson, 24.

[303] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 77.

psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to Heaven or to hell to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology."[304] Meynell adds that Lewis was addressing the "insecurities circulating in many university towns." "Could the university even justify staying open, Lewis asked? Perhaps it was more sensible to close the humanities' faculties to assign every resource to the war effort. After all, how on earth might the study of Petrarchan sonnets, J. S. Bach's masterpieces, or Renaissance portraiture possibly defeat Nazism?"[305]

Vander Lugt argues that beauty and art should be sought all the time, "even (especially!) during times of war," because it is "healthy and humanizing to nurture beauty in a time of crisis."[306] The alternative will exacerbate the problem, but beauty provides the opportunity for "healing and hope."[307] For example, at the US-Mexico border in Tijuana exists a mile-long mural painted by artist Enrique Chiu and thousands of volunteers.[308] This work of art offers a glimpse of hope in a place that some associate only with pain and division.

---

[304] Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," 48–49.

[305] Mark Meynell, "War Changes Everything—and Nothing," Christianity Today, January 8, 2025, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/01/war-changes-everything-nothing-ukraine-cs-lewis/.

[306] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 77.

[307] Vander Lugt, 77.

[308] Enrique Chiu, "The Mural of Brotherhood by Enrique Chiu (Mexico)," WorldCitizenArtists, May 8, 2022, https://www.worldcitizenartists.org/post/the-mural-of-brotherhood-by-enrique-chiu-mexico.

Figure 1: Enrique Chiu, *Mural de la Hermandad*, 2016, Tijuana, Mexico
https://www.worldcitizenartists.org/post/the-mural-of-brotherhood-by-enrique-chiu-mexico

The healing and hope of beauty can be felt in ordinary, everyday experiences. "It can feel like simply enjoying your surroundings while waiting in line or at a stoplight," suggests Vander Lugt, "rather than scrolling through your crisis-driven newsfeed. Amidst all the chaos, beauty humanizes and brings meaning."[309]

The message of Ecclesiastes teaches that "life is hard, and life is a vapor, but it's still beautiful."[310] Ecclesiastes 9:7 instructs believers to "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do." The context of Ecclesiastes 9 is "under the very cloud of death," which can lead one to

[309] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 77–78.

[310] Vander Lugt, 78.

believe that despair is all there is, according to Derek Kidner.[311] The Preacher agrees that "life is decidedly worth living … as far as anything temporal can, for though it is not the full answer, it does enjoy the approval of God. It is not for nothing that He is the source of all the gifts of earthly life: its bread and wine, festivity and work, marriage and love."[312] Old Testament scholar John Currid gives the full answer: The good news of Ecclesiastes means "a believer ought to be happy because God favorably accepts you in and by the work of Christ."[313] Although human beings are not in control, God is.

Douglas Sean O'Donnell clarifies the point: "if God is in control of life and death," then walk in "wisdom," which is "the journey of joy."[314] Vander Lugt recognizes the inevitable challenges that threaten to steal one's joy—the toil of work, sickness, death, oppression, and fading libido—but humanity should carry on and "soak in whatever traces of glory" can be captured.[315] God's people are encouraged to "enjoy life" in Ecclesiastes 9:7, but Zack Eswine adds that the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is offering more than pleasure; he is offering freedom. Because God has already approved typical daily life (Eccl. 9:7), "[loving] each other, [cultivating] the garden, [taking] time for meals, and [caring] for the place with God … was enough in God's eyes."[316]

---

[311] Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2023), 83.

[312] Kidner, 82-83.

[313] John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning?* (Leyland, England: EP Books, 2015), 114.

[314] Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 176.

[315] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 78.

[316] Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, Gospel According to the Old Testament Series (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 109.

However, John Piper argues that all pleasure should be directed at God. In one of his first books, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, Piper passionately defended the idea that Christians are to glorify God by enjoying him forever. The problem, according to Vander Lugt, is how little Piper engaged the book of Ecclesiastes: "He only quotes 3:11 in passing," which Vander Lugt considers an oversight.[317] Piper's concern with earthly beauty is its power to distract from the ultimate beauty, God himself. "The tragedy of the world," argues Piper, "is that echo [read: worldly beauty] is mistaken for the Original Shout [read: divine beauty]. When our back is to the breathtaking beauty of God, we cast a shadow on the earth and fall in love with it. But it does not satisfy."[318] Recognizing that all that humans long for cannot be fulfilled in this life, Lewis argues, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."[319]

Vander Lugt takes a different posture toward earthly beauty. He acknowledges in *Beauty is Oxygen* that despite the danger of falling in love with beauty to the degree that one turns away from God, he nevertheless believes that "God's beauty belongs to this world in astonishing ways."[320] It is possible to ignore God's relationship with the world and worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator, as Romans 1:25 states. It is also possible to diminish the relationship between God and creation in such a way that creates suspicion around worldly beauty. "If we ignore the beauty of God, we'll get lost

---

[317] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 80.

[318] John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 10th Anniversary ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 242.

[319] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136–37.

[320] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 80.

in the beauty of the world. But if we ignore the beauty of the world, we might miss God, and our souls will suffer."[321]

There is danger in worshiping the creation over the Creator. The Apostle Paul warns about the temptation to "[exchange] the truth about God for a lie" and "[worship] … the creature rather than the Creator."[322] Vander Lugt critiques Piper's conclusions about earthly beauty and points out the reductionism. "While we can ignore God's relationship to the world and thus idolize creation," says Vander Lugt, "we can also disregard that relationship in a way that makes worldly beauty constantly and notoriously suspect. Perhaps this is why Piper includes a chapter … on evangelistic missions but nothing on the mission of gardening, woodworking, wine-making, or festive living."[323]

However, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes sees life as a gift and encourages readers to enjoy it: "Eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. … Enjoy life with the wife whom you love" (Eccl. 9:7-9). In his *Confessions*, Augustine recognizes that he used to give himself over to the lovely, created things of the world without knowing their existence in God. He writes about God's faithful presence despite his worldly idolatry: "You were with me, and I was not with you."[324] He reflects on his life, stating, "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

---

[321] Vander Lugt, 80.

[322] Rom. 1:25.

[323] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 80.

[324] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 201.

which you made."[325] Vander Lugt adds, "If the beauty of these things comes from 'that beauty which is higher than souls,' then the problem lies not in the beauty of this artistry but in the failure to be attuned to how it's an expression of God's beauty."[326]

Beauty Will Save The World

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky has often been quoted as saying, "Beauty will save the world."[327] In actuality, the statement is taken from a fictional character named Hippolite from Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*. Hippolite was a 17-year-old boy dying from tuberculosis who felt like a complete outcast in society. He believes nature has cheated him, and he deserves to suffer and die. This leads to a failed suicide attempt, but before his despair, he remembers a fascinating painting of Jesus being removed from the cross, which caused a strange uneasiness in him. He thinks, "Painters usually have a way of depicting Christ … with a trace of extraordinary beauty still in his face; they strive to preserve this beauty in him even during his most dreadful agonies. … In [this] painting, there was no beauty; it was a faithful representation of the corpse of a man who has borne infinite agony even before crucifixion."[328] Hippolite observes the ugliness of his physical condition: "His body on the cross was fully subject to the laws of nature. In the painting his face is dreadfully disfigured by blows, swollen, covered with

---

[325] Augustine, 201.

[326] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 81.

[327] Jimmy Myers, "Is It True That 'the World Will Be Saved by Beauty'?," First Things, July 25, 2015, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/07/student-essay-contest-winner-first-place.

[328] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Henry Carlisle and Olga Carlisle (East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin, 2010), 426.

terrible swollen and bloody bruises, the eyes open, the pupils turned up, the large open whites of the eyes bright with a … deathly, vitreous gleam."[329]

This is not unlike the prophet Isaiah's account of the coming Messiah as having "no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him."[330] Yet, "What is so profound about the face of this human is that his is also the face of God. His face radiates the Beauty of divinity, for he is Light from Light uncreated, the perfect image of the Father," writes Jimmy Myers for *First Things*.[331] For Jesus is, according to Hebrews 1:3, "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." Likewise, Psalm 27:4 declares the beauty of the Lord: "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple."

In fact, the Bible begins and ends with beauty. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, a refrain repeats after each day to describe God's creation as "good." When God saw everything that he had made, it was called "very good."[332] Genesis 1 does not primarily convey moral goodness. The Old Testament scholar C. John Collins says God's statement that it was "good" means upon seeing what he made, it was "pleasing to him, answering his purpose (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)."[333] Collins argues, "To affirm that the creation is 'good' then, is to affirm that God takes delight in it and that man at his

---

[329] Dostoyevsky, 426.

[330] Isa. 53:2.

[331] Myers, "Is It True That 'the World Will Be Saved by Beauty'?"

[332] Gen. 1:31.

[333] C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 69.

best will do so as well."[334] According to Albert Mohler, the phrase "it was good" in Hebrew "carries the connotation beautiful;" therefore, the refrain in Genesis 1 could be translated as "It was beautiful. It was very beautiful."[335]

The Bible not only begins with beauty, but it is where the Bible ends. The Apostle John describes his vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21: "And [an angel] … showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."[336] John continues describing this beautiful city with magnificent gates and foundations where the "names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed."[337] The details and symbols reveal that this holy city coming down out of heaven from God is something to behold. The commentator Dennis Johnson says, "The bride-city symbolizes the saints, the church in its eschatological beauty."[338] This holy city is identified "as being the church glorified," according to King.[339]

In a few chapters earlier (Revelation 19), the bride was given a wedding gown of "fine linen, bright and pure" to clothe herself with, which were "the righteous deeds of the saints."[340] Johnson concludes, "All the details of the city's appearance illustrate

---

[334] Collins, 70.

[335] Mohler, "Will Beauty Save the World?"

[336] Rev. 21:10-11.

[337] Rev. 21:12.

[338] Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 309.

[339] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 292.

[340] Rev. 19:8.

aspects of the church's loveliness in the eyes of God."[341] King adds that what makes the church lovely is not only their righteous works but what Jesus Christ is doing to prepare and make "his church beautiful for her end-time glorification as the wife of the Lamb (Rev 19:7–8)."[342]

The church, his bride, is decorated with precious stones listed in Rev. 21:19-20. They are built into the foundations of the walls of the city, which put on display the "quality of irresistible attractiveness."[343] But the attraction of these stones is a doorway into deeper meaning. From beginning to end, the unfolding story invites readers to see it as one story fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus, who has come to bring healing and restoration to the world. The beauty of the gospel story can be found in even the subtle ways that the end is even better than its glorious beginning. For example, "the stones' value and loveliness are reminiscent of the goodness of Eden before the fall (cf. the gold, bdellium, and onyx of Eden in Gen. 2:12). As these stones now beautify the foundations of the new Jerusalem, they mark it as 'paradise restored,' in which John will soon see the tree of life, no longer barred from our access but now bearing fruit that feeds and leaves that heal the nations (Rev. 22:2)."[344] King prefers to describe the new creation, not as restored to an original form, but completed. Bono, lead singer of U2, would likely describe the future new heaven and new earth as "Even Better Than the Real Thing."[345]

---

[341] Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 309.

[342] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 292.

[343] Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 313.

[344] Johnson, 316.

[345] Bono, "Even Better Than the Real Thing (Single Version)," U2 Songs, 1992, https://www.u2songs.com/songs/even_better_than_the_real_thing_single_version_340.

King argues, "The new earth in its entirety is God's new-creational garden of delight, unsurpassably more than just creational paradise regained, it is paradise *consummated.*"[346] This is where God's image bearers get to experience the pure delight of his presence without the possibility of a fall. King describes this eschatological imagery of the consummation as the "inseverable union with Christ through his life-giving Spirit, [in which Jesus] will be their delight and they will flourish forever."[347]

Revelation is where the story has always been headed. According to Richard Bauckham, the end is not limited to an aesthetic beauty but includes a beautiful relationship, when "God will make his home with humanity on earth (Rev. 21:3)."[348] This revelation of the divine plan is the "happy-ever-after ending" to the winding theodrama with all sorts of ups and downs along life's complex journey.[349]

In the final pages of *The Last Battle*, the adventurers eventually arrive at the great golden gates of Aslan's country, wondering if it is right for them to enter. There, Lucy meets her oldest friend, Tumnus, the Faun, who says, "The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside."[350] When Lucy looks at Aslan's garden, she realizes it is more than a garden but a truer and better

---

[346] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 320 (emphasis original).

[347] King, 321.

[348] Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), 140.

[349] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 320.

[350] C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia. Book 7: The Last Battle* (New York: HarperTrophy, 2005), 224.

world— “This is Narnia, and more real and more beautiful than the Narnia down below.”[351] She is drawn to it and compelled by it.

Matt Capps, in his book *Drawn to Beauty*, says, “Beauty demands to be noticed” but it is “often suggested that beauty is a category we ought to discard.”[352] Mohler agrees that the human draw to beauty is instinctive: “This fact is the reason why we go to museums, art shows, or the Grand Canyon.” [353]

Beauty can be seen everywhere. But can it really save?

Provocative Nature of Beauty

The arts enable the imagination to consider new possibilities in a provocative way that an argument often can’t. Sometimes the bold truth told directly can be off-putting or simply too much to be received at once. Other times, reality is best understood when it comes from an unexpected place. The arts are uniquely designed to do this very thing. Emily Dickinson calls this “telling it slant.”

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

---

[351] Lewis, 224.

[352] Matt Capps, “In Christian Theology, Beauty Demands to Be Noticed,” The Gospel Coalition, July 23, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christian-theology-beauty-demands-noticed/.

[353] Albert Mohler, “Will Beauty Save the World?,” Ligonier Ministries, April 25, 2017, https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/will-beauty-save-world.

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind —[354]

To tell it slant means to approach a topic from an angle rather than head-on to avoid overwhelming the listener. Turnau adds that in the post-Christian West, "Telling the truth straight on, unslanted, will be dismissed as cliché or bombast—a kind of self-imposed blindness."[355] Therefore, telling the truth is sometimes better told indirectly to ensure the listener can receive it.

Asking the question "What if?" is an alternative form of telling it slant. According to Vander Lugt, trauma can stifle the imagination, causing a person to focus only on "the repetition of what has been and still is, whereas beauty stirs our imaginations to wonder *what if*?"[356] This question can also induce social anxiety and even spiritual paralysis. Shel Silverstein captures the potential negative effect in his poem "Whatif:" "Whatif I get sick and die? Whatif I flunk that test? Whatif green hair grows on my chest? Whatif nobody likes me? Whatif a bolt of lightning strikes me?"[357]

However, the question encompasses both ugliness and beauty, which can lead to feelings of despair or hope. "The solution," according to Vander Lugt, "is not to shut down the imagination, but to open it up even wider to beautiful possibilities. What if

---

[354] Emily Dickinson, "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant," The Poetry Foundation, 1865, accessed November 25, 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263.

[355] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 186.

[356] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 86.

[357] Shel Silverstein, "Whatif," All Poetry, 1981, accessed November 25, 2024, https://allpoetry.com/Whatif.

goodness triumphs over evil? What if, despite all the trouble, God is making all things new?"[358] This is exactly what Revelation 21:5 promises amid hardship, grief, and persecution. "And [God] who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"[359]

As Jesus ministered throughout the Judean countryside, when people experienced centuries of weariness and fear of the future, "His preferred method of communication was parables and metaphors."[360] For example, Jesus referred to the kingdom of God as a mustard seed, a sower, a lost sheep, a hidden treasure, and yeast. Vander Lugt points out, "By telling the truth slant through stories and images, Jesus helps listeners in every culture imagine a new economy, a new reality, and a new family in which the last are first and the first are last."[361] God is creating a new people, a new community where he will dwell together with them. His presence on earth will radically change the human experience for eternity. In Revelation 21:4, a vision of the new heaven and new earth is given: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."[362] It is the kind of world every human heart longs for. This is only possible because God, seated on his throne, is making all things new.[363]

---

[358] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 88.

[359] Rev. 21:5.

[360] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 88.

[361] Vander Lugt, 88.

[362] Rev. 21:4.

[363] Rev. 21:5.

Tolkien in his work, *On Fairy Stories,* stresses the significance of the joyous ending in a fairy-tale (what he calls the good catastrophe, "the sudden and joyous 'turn'"). He argues that it is not "escapist" or "fugitive." Tolkien defends his position by acknowledging that this joyous turn "does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."[364]

At a time when Jesus' disciples were anxious about what they were going to eat and where they were going to get clothes, Jesus had them consider the beauty of creation: "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!"[365]

The human struggle with fear and the mystery of the unknown can be settled with God's transcendence. Vander Lugt writes an imaginative conversation with God based on Luke 12:27 and Job 38:4, 12, which captures this comforting power.[366]

My question: do I have what it takes to endure this?

God's answer: look to the flowers.[367]

---

[364] J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 68–69 (emphasis original).

[365] Luke 12:27-28.

[366] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 92.

[367] Luke 12:27.

My question: why all this suffering?

God's answer: where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?[368]

My question: how can I navigate this heartache?

God's answer: have you ever given orders to the morning?[369]

God's response to Job was not dismissive but rather a gracious call to taste and see that the Lord is still good even in the midst of suffering. Perhaps beauty is God's healing balm when everything else seems to be crumbling. Sarah Clarkson says as much in *This Beautiful Truth*: "God did not diminish what Job suffered, but there was God's aching request for Job to behold the kind of beauty that allowed him to live in the tension between God's power and his own suffering … to let it speak to him of God's tenderness and power, to walk forward into the wild country of trust … what if, in the bent and twisted darkness of our broken world, beauty is God's theodicy?"[370]

According to Piper, true beauty is sometimes best revealed through beautifully expressed words. In a lecture he delivered in 2013, he shared a striking example of the profound impact of a moving poem. Piper recounted how "Simone Weil, the French philosopher, was totally agnostic toward God and Christianity but encountered [George] Herbert's poem 'Love (III),' and became a kind of Christian mystic, calling this poem "the most beautiful poem in the world.'"[371]

---

[368] Job 38:4.

[369] Job 38:12.

[370] Sarah Clarkson, *This Beautiful Truth: How God's Goodness Breaks into Our Darkness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 37–38.

[371] John Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully: The Power of Poetic Effort in the Work of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis*, The Swans Are Not Silent, v. 6 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway,

Leland Ryken describes "Love (III)" as a "back-and-forth dialogue" between God and a guest who feels "unworthy[y] to be welcomed by God."[372] In this poem, God is personified as "Love" who "attempts to persuade a reluctant guest to stay for a meal."[373]

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.[374]

Piper noted, "People have met God in Herbert's poems, and their lives have been changed," emphasizing the provocative power of poetic language. [375]

The Power of Beauty in the Arts

Some Christian theologians would say that beauty lacks salvific power. Wright states that created beauty cannot save one's soul but is a "broken signpost" of the Creator who does.[376] Chris Green, a Pentecostal theologian, in *All Things Beautiful,* makes the point in his chapter, "Beauty Will Not Save the World," that "no beauty, not even God's

---

2014), 63; Helen Wilcox, *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), xxi.

[372] Leland Ryken, ed., *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 97.

[373] Ryken, 97.

[374] George Herbert, "Love (III)," The Poetry Foundation, 1633, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44367/love-iii.

[375] Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*, 63.

[376] Wright, *Broken Signposts*.

beauty, can save our world—at least not in the way we want it to be saved."[377] He goes on to say, "Beauty cannot redeem. But it can be redeemed."[378] How could it save when beauty is fleeting (Prov. 31:30), and all creation has been subjected to futility (Rom. 8:20)? George Steiner, a Franco-American literary critic who wrote about the relationship between literature and the Holocaust, reflected in a 1995 interview on the impact of Nazism, communism, and Stalinism: "Bookishness, highest literacy, every technique of cultural propaganda and training not only can accompany bestiality and oppression and despotism but at certain points foster it."[379] Beautiful art does not necessarily stave off the brutality of human existence and convince people of the truth.

Vander Lugt reframes the question of beauty and salvation. His argument is not that beauty, in general, will save the world but instead challenges his readers to think with specificity. He writes, "If beauty will indeed save the world, it needs to be a particular kind of beauty."[380] He argues that the right question is, "What *sort* of beauty will save the world?"[381] Some artists and poets believe that natural and artistic beauty possesses the power to save. For example, the late poet and Pulitzer Prize winner Mary Oliver shared in a 2015 interview that she grew up attending church as a child but never accepted the resurrection. Her difficult childhood troubled her, but she escaped by turning

---

[377] Chris E. W. Green, *All Things Beautiful: An Aesthetic Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 76.

[378] Green, 76.

[379] George Steiner, The Art of Criticism No. 2, interview by Ronald A. Sharp, 1995, https://theparisreview.org/interviews/1506/the-art-of-criticism-no-2-george-steiner.

[380] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 122.

[381] Vander Lugt, 122.

to the woods and the arts. She said, "I got saved by poetry, and I got saved by the beauty of the world."[382]

Nevertheless, beauty should not be relegated to a state of powerlessness. Beauty found in the arts not only appeals to human longing but points to the eternal. As Lewis argues in *The Weight of Glory,* "The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing."[383] Lewis presses his argument further. Artistic beauty and even fond memories "are good images of what we really desire," states Lewis, "but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."[384] Although artistic beauty lacks the power to save, it possesses real power to reveal human longing for a distant country.[385] Green draws a similar conclusion about creative art: "Beauty, given or made, must be saved from itself and from us" to avoid misuse and to give life to the soul.[386]

Vander Lugt gives a more nuanced answer, saying, "Only God can save the world from ultimate tragedy"; then he adds: "But to the extent that God is Beauty, then yes, the

---

[382] Mary Oliver, "Mary Oliver with Krista Tippett," Interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being with Krista Tippett*, February 5, 2015, https://open.spotify.com/episode/47fnWgpfIPSvjwPRqJkEuq.

[383] C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001), 30.

[384] Lewis, 30–31.

[385] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 125.

[386] Green, *All Things Beautiful*, 88.

world will be saved by beauty."[387] Green agrees that without the Beautiful One, "there can be no redemption without the death of beauty … and that is exactly what God has achieved and suffered in Christ."[388]

Paul offers a fuller picture of salvation in his letter to the Romans, which describes redemption not only in the suffering of Christ but his resurrection: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."[389] The world will be saved through the death of Christ, but it also includes permanent fellowship in union with the Beautiful One.

Vander Lugt makes a distinction about the *sort of beauty* that will save the world. First, he acknowledges that "natural and artistic beauty can save us from apathy, aimlessness, and despair."[390] Beauty makes earthly life more attractive and livable. Second, he distinguishes natural beauty from the "divine beauty revealed in Christ by the Spirit" because it "will save us from death and alienation from God."[391] This beauty not only makes eternal life possible but secures it. The fullness of beauty is found in the intimate connection of the natural world and the nature of God. Vander Lugt argues that natural (or artistic) beauty and divine beauty have their place in experiencing the fullness of God's beauty. The famous line in the 1918 hymn "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," written by Helen Howarth, says, "Look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth

---

[387] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 126.

[388] Green, *All Things Beautiful*, 87.

[389] Rom. 6:5.

[390] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 127.

[391] Vander Lugt, 127.

will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." This is a reminder to look to Jesus, reflecting on who he is and what he has done, and the struggles and stresses in life will be overshadowed by the transcendent reality of Jesus.[392] Looking to "the things of earth" was never meant to completely satisfy the soul. Earthly beauty is not meant to replace divine beauty. For that is idolatry and lamentable for the Christian. On the other hand, "If keeping our eyes fixed on the beauty of Jesus diminishes the beauty of blue jays or Banksy' prophetic graffiti, then we're missing the full potential for God's beauty."[393] Banksy is known as "the world's most famous anonymous street artist," whose work is mostly satirical with political and social commentary.[394] One of Banksy's most famous works of art, "Girl With Balloon," symbolizes childhood hope and the need to hold on to it.[395]

---

[392] Helen Howarth Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," 1922, accessed November 17, 2024, https://hymnary.org/text/o_soul_are_you_weary_and_troubled.

[393] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 127.

[394] Max Lakin, "What's a Banksy Museum Without Banksy?," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2024, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/30/arts/design/banksy-museum-review.html.

[395] Lakin.

Figure 2: Banksy, *Girl With Ballon*, 2002 (first appeared as an original graffiti mural first painted outside a Shoreditch shop in 2002 and later at London's Southbank) https://banksyexplained.com/issue/girl-with-balloon-graffiti-legend/


Figure 3: Banksy, *Scar of Bethlehem*, Walled Off Hotel in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50881270

In 2019, Banksy unveiled his own version of the classic Nativity, titled *Scar of Bethlehem*. The image captures the traditional manger scene but with one stark difference: a towering concrete wall with a star-shaped mortar hole above it. Banksy's art intentionally draws attention in a provocative way to the conflict and division (literally, a

wall) separating Israel from the Palestinian West Bank during Christmas. This piece is a reminder that the people of Bethlehem, where the birth of Christ took place, may not celebrate Christmas quite like the rest of the world.

Figure 4: Banksy, *Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem*, 2005, First exhibited at Santa's Ghetto exhibit in London, https://www.albawaba.com/editorchoice/banksy-christmas-cards-456164

In 2005, Banksy painted a portrait of Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem to give birth to Jesus of Nazareth as if the journey was in the modern world. Banksy creatively added the Israeli West Bank Barrier that would inevitably block Mary and Joseph's path. This is a critique of conflict getting in the way of what could be, in this case, the birth of Jesus Christ. It also evokes a compassionate response because Mary and Joseph could have become refugees, like the many who have been stripped of their homeland by Israel's strict border control.

The American poet and literary critic Dana Gioia makes a strong assertion about the absence of beauty in Christian communities. In *First Things*, he writes, "Whenever the Church has abandoned the notion of beauty, it has lost precisely the power that it hoped to cultivate—its ability to reach souls in the modern world. Is it any wonder that so many artists and intellectuals have fled the Church?"[396] Likewise, King is concerned that Christians have underestimated the power and role of the natural world. "The affective power of beauty to elicit such visceral responses as 'awe,' 'fear,' and 'wonder' is generally seen as substantiating the universal search for meaning and spiritual insight within human aesthetic experience."[397] The Bible does not merely appeal to reason but uses pictures and images to awaken the heart. "The Church requires that we be faithful," affirms Gioia, "but must we also be deaf, dumb, and blind?"[398] The answer, according to Gioia, is no.

However, it would be reductionist to acknowledge the beauty of the world without allowing it to lead to the beauty of God, its divine source. Vander Lugt recognizes the value of coupling this world's beauty and God's beauty because "if we abandon earthly beauty, we are fleeing from the revelation and presence of God."[399] The Psalmist affirms this very point in Psalm 19:1-2, as listeners are invited to look up to the heavens to behold the glory of God. Undoubtedly, this experience is not merely to encounter earthly beauty but divine beauty. "The beauty that will save the world is not

---

[396] Dana Gioia, "The Catholic Writer Today," *First Things*, December 1, 2013, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/12/the-catholic-writer-today.

[397] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 3.

[398] Gioia, "The Catholic Writer Today."

[399] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 128.

either the beauty of creation and artistry *or* the beauty of the triune God, but God's beauty revealed in Christ as well as through creation and human creativity."[400] Likewise, Mohler emphasizes the beauty that will save the world is Jesus's substitutionary act of love for sinners when he writes, "I'm entirely confident that beauty will indeed save the world because nothing could be more beautiful than the work of Jesus."[401]

Divine beauty is not limited to the cross but includes humanity and creation itself. Vander Lugt is careful to assure his readers, "Only God through Christ by the Spirit can save the world in the ultimate sense, but God does so through ordinary means like the beautiful feet of those who bring good news."[402] The image of a runner bringing good news from battle is from Isaiah 52:7. The commentator Alec Motyer describes the scene: "[It] must have repeated itself often, with ill news and good, during Jerusalem's turbulent history. How beautiful they would reckon the sight of a lone runner—not a straggle of fugitives betokening defeat, but one messenger with a spring in his step! As he comes within earshot he shouts: peace, good tidings, salvation, Your God reigns."[403]

The concern of many skeptics is if a good God exists, why would this God allow so much suffering in the world? But the more interesting question, according to Vander Lugt, is, "Why would God create a world with so much beauty?"[404] The American author best known for her nature writing, Annie Dillard, observes, "The wonder is that all the

---

[400] Vander Lugt, 128–29 (emphasis original).

[401] Mohler, "Will Beauty Save the World?"

[402] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 129.

[403] J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah. An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 419.

[404] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 129.

forms are not monsters, that there is beauty at all, grace gratuitous, pennies found, like mockingbird's free fall. Beauty itself is the fruit of the creator's exuberance that grew such a tangle, and the grotesques and horrors bloom from that same free growth, that intricate scramble and twine up and down the condition of time."[405] Karissa Riffel, a contributor to *The Rabbit Room*, puts it more simply, "God could have made the universe purely utilitarian, but instead, he made it pleasing to the senses: He made apples sweet, water refreshingly cool, flowers colorful, babies cuddly."[406] Ultimately, humanity is experiencing salvation through beauty as God's redemptive plan unfolds in history.[407]

To recover the priority of beauty and simultaneously avoid reductionism, Timothy Patitsas, writes, "The *actual* Beauty that will save the world will be nothing less than the ultimate revelation of Christ and of him crucified. Such Beauty will save us because it will wipe away any trace of estrangement we have acquired towards God through the trauma in our lives."[408] This Beauty will accomplish salvation for the entire world through his work on the cross but will also, at his return, make all things new.[409] This gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope of salvation, which is the power to heal the nations. "This is the beauty that entices us to believe and to move beyond the suffocating

---

[405] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013), 148.

[406] Karissa Riffel, "Beauty Matters—A Short Theology of Beauty," The Rabbit Room, October 3, 2024, https://www.rabbitroom.com/post/beauty-matters-a-short-theology-of-beauty.

[407] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 130.

[408] Timothy G. Patitsas, *The Ethics of Beauty* (Maysville, MO: St. Nicholas, 2020), 619. (emphasis original)

[409] Rev. 21:5.

boundaries of a buffered existence into a life of faith, grace, and joy. This is the beauty that brings hope and healing despite all the troubles and the traumas we carry."[410]

This is the sort of beauty that will save the world.

Summary of a Theology of Beauty

The Bible begins and ends with beauty. Almost half of the book of Exodus is dedicated to the beauty of the temple and the priestly garments. Although a theology of beauty is largely ignored, it has a critical role as one of the medieval transcendentals. Sound doctrine does not always stir the heart, while beauty serves as the starting point of theological understanding, rather than a mere afterthought. Beauty is a form that does not conceal God's identity; instead, it reveals his true nature and character, shaping the way the story is told. What people call beautiful are really those things that excite the innate knowledge of God established in the human heart (Eccl. 3:11).

Divine beauty is not limited to the cross but includes humanity and creation itself. Created beauty is a signpost of the Creator, which is why Jesus had his listeners "consider the lilies of the field." The Bible does not merely appeal to reason but uses pictures and images to awaken the heart. And beauty found in the arts not only appeals to human longing but points to the eternal. Although artistic beauty lacks the power to save, it possesses real power to reveal human longing for a distant country and the Beautiful One who can provide eternal healing and hope.

---

[410] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 131–32.

The Role of the Imagination in Re-enchantment

"Once upon a time, Tommy opened a door" is all a small child needs to be captivated by a story, claims G.K. Chesterton.[411] But the older one gets, the more difficult it is to engage the imagination. A child of seven (more developed than a small child) is excited by being told, "Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon."[412] The imagination tends to be much stronger in childhood than in adulthood.

Of course, children's stories are rife with imaginative tales, but what about a profound and complex book like the Bible? Turnau and others show that the Bible "is steeped in imagination because it comes, ultimately, from a master storyteller who weaves his tale with vividness and passion."[413] Biblical revelation does not simply rely on propositional statements to convey divine truths. Pastor Rankin Wilbourne admits that the assertion "'God loves as you are, not as you should be'—as consoling and true as that might be—won't reach us in the same way as a story that begins, "There was a man who had two sons …" (Luke 15:11).[414]

Imagination and Renewal

The imagination is not as mysterious as one might initially believe. It is "that distinctly human capacity by which we image anything and everything that is not

---

[411] G.K. Chesterton, "Ethics of Elfland," in *Orthodoxy* (Chicago, IL: Moody Classics, 2009), 82.

[412] Chesterton, 82.

[413] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 102.

[414] Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2016), 17.

immediately visible to our eyes."[415] Imagination is an important and normal part of everyday life—a mental faculty used regularly by everyone. Whether planning a vacation or trying to remember where a document was filed, the imagination is being used. Even scientific discovery requires imagination. Understanding "any invisible force, anything conceptual," like Isaac Newton seeing an apple fall from a tree, requires the use of "imagination to discover the fact of gravity," according to Wilbourne.[416] Perhaps this is why Albert Einstein confessed that "imagination is more important than knowledge."[417]

Knowing and enjoying God also requires the use of the imagination because "no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16) the invisible "King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). In other words, understanding the Bible requires imaginative work. When Paul says, "Set your minds on things that are above" (Col. 3:2), Wilbourne argues, "It's not a command to crane our necks and look at the skies, but to look for a reality beyond what we can naturally see."[418] Additionally, when readers or listeners are instructed to "look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen" (2 Cor. 4:18), it is an appeal to the imagination. Or, to properly engage the Lord's Supper by obeying Jesus' command to "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19) is impossible without engaging the imagination.

Renewal of the imagination is necessary for re-enchantment to occur, especially in the secular West. The scholar Walter Brueggemann observes, "The key pathology of

---

[415] Wilbourne, 18.

[416] Wilbourne, 18.

[417] Albert Einstein, "What Life Means to Einstein," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929, https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/wp-content/uploads/satevepost/einstein.pdf.

[418] Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*, 19.

our time, which seduces us all, is the reduction of the imagination, so that we are too numbed, satiated, and co-opted to do serious imaginative work."[419] Perhaps this is "at least part of what Jesus meant when he said, 'Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'"[420] In Jesus' ministry, he frequently appeals to people through "word pictures, similes, and metaphors … The fact that similes and metaphors—the language of poetry—must be used at all tells us there is no way to get at [all] truth directly."[421]

Apologetics must value the imagination because it opens up the possibility of being taken captive and reshaped by a new story.[422] Lewis famously said after reading *Phantastes* by George MacDonald, and before converting to Christianity, "My imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer."[423] This encounter allowed Lewis to envision a different way of perceiving the world. Bailey argues, "Aesthetic experience is generative: by its very nature, it forces us to make sense of surprising new possibilities."[424] As poet Rainer Maria Rilke reminds readers, aesthetic encounters demand attention and invite reflection, proclaiming, "You

---

[419] Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 199.

[420] Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*, 20.

[421] Wilbourne, 22.

[422] Wilbourne, 20.

[423] Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 181.

[424] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 94.

must change your life."[425] Spiritual transformation becomes possible through a renewal of the imagination.

An apologist's prayer for disciples of disenchantment is not unlike Paul's prayer for Christians: that "the eyes of your hearts [would be] enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance" (Eph. 1:18). What are the eyes of the heart, "if not your imagination?" an invitation into an enchanted reality.[426]

The Necessity of the Imagination

The topic of the imagination may cause some initial anxiety among Christians because, by nature, the imagination "innovates."[427] Because Christianity is an ancient religion founded on historical events and truth claims that do not change, some might assume that the imagination is unnecessary. Turnau claims that imagination is critical in engaging a post-Christian world with the gospel, and he adds that the Bible encourages newness. For example, God's people are invited to "sing a new song" (see Psalm 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1).[428] Of course, like with anything that possesses potential benefits, there are also potential dangers when misapplied. On the positive side, the imagination "frees us to savour Christian insight, to mine deeply and richly, yet also discover new blessings, like polishing a gemstone to reveal new facets that refract and reflect the light in

---

[425] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Poets.org, 1995, https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo.

[426] Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*, 26.

[427] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 97.

[428] Turnau, 97–98.

unexpected ways."[429] The dark side can result in "gulags and concentration camps" and "seduce people into foolishness and self-destruction."[430] Like anything, the imagination can be abused. Collins would regularly remind his students at Covenant Theological Seminary of the Latin phrase, "*Abusus non tollit usum*" (abuse does not negate use).

Untethered from God's moral law, especially the second commandment, which forbids God's people from creating or imagining a representation of God for worship (Exodus 20:4), imagination can be tossed about to its own demise.[431] The prophet Isaiah declares, "All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations—a people who continually provoke me to my very face" (Isaiah 65:2-3 NIV). On the other hand, Turnau says, "The imagination is like a kite … when connected to the ground, it can truly fly without wrecking itself."[432]

Escape, Recovery, Consolation

Tolkien argued that fantasy and good stories had the power of escape, recovery, and consolation.[433] Stories can invite readers into "secondary belief."[434] This is one of art's remarkable abilities: to allow one to believe from the inside of that story. This experience is more than merely a suspension of belief. Vanhoozer argues that stories or

---

[429] Turnau, 97.

[430] Turnau, 98.

[431] This prohibition does not apply universally to all images. The Law is concerned with making statues of God or other creatures for worship.

[432] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 98.

[433] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 66–76.

[434] Tolkien, 61.

myths "do not simply communicate ideas but allow us to see and taste the reality of what they are about. Lewis wrote stories not so readers could escape but so that they could experience reality."[435] He did not pit reason and imagination against one another. Vanhoozer explains Lewis's view: "Both reason and imagination can communicate truth, but reason does it in bits and pieces while the imagination grasps the big picture, how things fit together, and allows us to feel as true what reason treats only as abstractions."[436] In other words, the imagination helps one taste and see the goodness of God (see Psa. 34:8).[437]

Gould points out that when people enter the secondary world (a term used by Tolkien to describe an internally consistent, fictional setting that is separate from the real world or primary world), "We experience joy and sorrow, hope and fear, as if we were part of the story. When we put the book down or leave the theater, if the story has done its job, we should see reality afresh."[438] Tolkien calls this experience "recovery"—this includes a "return" to the primary world and a "renewal of health."[439] Good stories that capture the imagination "clean our windows, so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness of familiarity" because what is most familiar is difficult "to see with fresh attention."[440] This assessment is critical for apologetics. Because the late

---

[435] Kevin Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow: C.S. Lewis on the Imagination for Theology and Discipleship," https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/in-bright-shadow-c-s-lewis-on-the-imagination-for-theology-and-discipleship.

[436] Vanhoozer.

[437] Vanhoozer.

[438] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 112.

[439] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 67.

[440] Tolkien, 67.

modern culture "is both jaded by and ignorant about Christianity. … We need to help people recover a fresh view of the truth—to see Jesus for the first time and really see him; to actually see the reality of sin, and the beauty and brokenness of the world."[441]

Ordway illustrates this point using a biblical story and a fictional story. First, if a secular person assumes the term "God" means "old man in the sky," then what that person needs is to see afresh the biblical notion that "God is existence itself or as he says to Moses, 'I AM'" (Exo. 3:14).[442] Fictional stories can also help with seeing things anew. Thinking about "the self-sacrifice of Frodo and the kingliness of Aragorn" can compel readers to respond "more immediately, more intuitively, to these ideas when we hear them in the Gospel."[443]

Ordway describes an important distinction between escape and escapism because they are not the same thing: "Escape allows us to see something beyond the limits of our world."[444] She uses Tolkien's metaphor of a prisoner to defend this point: "If you are a prisoner, you want to escape: the prisoner's duty is to escape," and stories "allow you to see beyond the walls of your prison cell."[445] Ordway concludes, "We can't desire what we can't imagine. To have a sense of the possibilities of your life, you have to imagine them. … Literature and fantasy can give us escape from our limitations in a way that is

---

[441] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 88–89.

[442] Ordway, 89.

[443] Ordway, 89.

[444] Justin Brierley and Tindall Belle, "Middle Earth - Holly Ordway," Re-Enchanting, May 29, 2024, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/re-enchanting-middle-earth-holly-ordway/id1682867001?i=1000657124824.

[445] Brierley and Belle.

very profoundly healing and freeing as opposed to escapism."[446] This process has the potential to lead to recovery, "the journey of return from disenchantment to re-enchantment."[447]

Literary scholar Alison Milbank believes the arts and storytelling have the ability to re-awaken desires for transcendence by "[shocking] people into engagement with reality."[448] Some view the arts, especially fantasy, as a silly attempt to enter a make-believe world and escape reality.[449] Ordway points out that "depending on one's circumstances, escape may be sensible or even heroic."[450] In Tolkien's essay *On Fairy Stories*, he puts it this way, "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?"[451] Most would agree in these circumstances, a desire to escape (physically or mentally) is within reason. Tolkien continues, "The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way, the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter."[452]

---

[446] Brierley and Belle.

[447] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 112.

[448] Alison Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange," in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 38.

[449] Holly Ordway, "Escape Is Not Escapism," *Word on Fire*, September 13, 2024, https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/escape-is-not-escapism/.

[450] Ordway.

[451] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 69.

[452] Tolkien, 69.

The act of escaping does not so much take the reader out of the world as it calls attention to what is permanent and true in the real world.

To appreciate the felt or real need for an escape means there is "something negative to be escaped from and something positive to be escaped into."[453] Ordway, agreeing with Tolkien, says, "The imagined world gives the reader the opportunity to see things differently: to see what it's like to live in a world with certain assumptions, certain ways of being … Imaginative experiences help us to know what's possible, and they help to shape what is desirable."[454] One escapes to see clearly and then re-enters the world changed. She asserts in *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, "Good stories and poetry help us to see more clearly when we close the book and re-enter ordinary life."[455] This is the power of stories and their transformative effect on real life.

Not only fairy tales but various types of stories are able to provide a sense of consolation. The happy ending is the "experience of joy as the story resolves and all is made right in the universe."[456] The ultimate consolation, however, goes beyond the resolution of the secondary world or fictional story. Drawing from Lewis' essay "Myth Became Fact," the apologist Josh Chatraw points out the good news about every story: Even "as nonbelievers tell their stories—to explain the world, to hope for a better day, to

---

[453] Ordway, "Escape Is Not Escapism."

[454] Ordway.

[455] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 89.

[456] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 112.

warn of evils—somewhere in the distance, God's story looms."[457] And that story, insists Newbigin, is revealed in the Bible because it is the one true story of the whole world.[458]

Stiller posits that "the highest and most important form" of consolation is what Tolkien terms "eucatastrophe."[459] Eucatastrophe is the "sudden joyous turn … a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be recounted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies … universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium,* giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world."[460] Stiller observes that the "*evangelium*" (or "good news") is in the midst of defeat, but the good news "is not the Joy itself;" it is a 'fleeting glimpse.'"[461] The glimpse is "a brief vision that the answer may be greater" or "it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world," according to Tolkien.[462] These joyous turns point to the grace that is fulfilled in the one true story, which is the Christian story.

Goheen argues that Newbigin believed that "story is the very *structure* of the Christian faith."[463] Ordway affirms that "all of human history is a story."[464] Wright agrees that "the whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of

---

[457] Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 15.

[458] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 199.

[459] Stiller, "A Picture Set Us Free," 65.

[460] Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 75 (emphasis original).

[461] Stiller, "A Picture Set Us Free," 66.

[462] Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 77 (emphasis original).

[463] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 200.

[464] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 141.

the whole world. It is public truth."[465] Therefore, this story is "universal history, it is the clue or light for understanding everything in creation," including every story, song, or image.[466] Every story of hope or redemption is pointing to the biblical story. For example, Stiller explains how eucatastrophe in the Secondary World can be so powerful for the Primary World: "It elicits the longing for the real eucatastrophe that took place through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."[467] Getting a taste of joy in the Secondary World invites one to be able to long for true joy in the Primary World. Tolkien says it with more force: "The joy which the 'turn' in a fairy-story gives … has the very taste of primary truth."[468] Thus, stories invite people to imagine the truth and experience re-enchantment—even for a moment. Similarly, Milbank defends Tolkien's epic story in *The Lord of the Rings,* saying that it "calls the reader to something beyond itself," which is imaginative apologetics at work.[469] Ordway clarifies that the power of stories and the work of apologetics is to help people see things differently, which "is not the same thing as believing, but it is a step in the right direction."[470]

---

[465] N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 41–42.

[466] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 200.

[467] Stiller, "A Picture Set Us Free," 66.

[468] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 78.

[469] Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange," 41.

[470] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 96.

Imagination and Reason

The imagination plays a powerful role in captivating the mind and heart, unlike anything else.[471] Smith says, "Rather than being pushed by beliefs, we are pulled by a *telos* that we desire. It's not so much that we are intellectually convinced and then muster the willpower to pursue what we ought; rather, at a precognitive level, we are attracted to a vision of the good life that has been painted for us in stories and myths, images and icons."[472] But Gould argues that the imagination does more than captivate. "Without the imagination," Gould asserts, "the mind lacks the raw materials needed to judge something as true or false."[473] Reason and imagination are truth-bearing faculties that work together. Lewis famously said, "Reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition."[474] Before it settles on what is true or false, belief in truth is cultivated in the soil of the imagination (what a thing means). Thus, Smith argues that the "aesthetic currency of the imagination—story, poetry, music, symbols, and images" is often how God awakens a longing for more in the heart.[475]

---

[471] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 74.

[472] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 54.

[473] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 74.

[474] C. S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2013), 354.

[475] James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 129.

The imagination is the mental faculty to envision an "image of something that is not present."[476] This is what Tolkien calls "the mental power of image-making."[477] Medieval scholars defined the imagination as the mental process that presents "sensory data to the intellect such that the intellect can know."[478] Bonaventure, a medieval scholar, affirmed that the imagination receives sensory data and configures images for the intellect by putting them into "a form that the intellect can act on and use to understand."[479] Therefore, imagination and reason are related, but Ordway concludes, "Reason is dependent on imagination" like a "building's foundation is related to the structure that is built upon it."[480]

In *Poetic Diction*, Owen Barfield, one of the members of the Inklings, argued, "The mind is never aware of an idea until the imagination has been at work on the bare material given by the senses."[481] Ordway says, "Not even science is exempt from the necessity of the imagination because the intellect cannot deal directly with raw perceptions of the world."[482] Barfield acknowledges that science engages the world it "perceives," but the mind can only perceive through the imagination: "Only by

---

[476] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 15.

[477] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 59.

[478] Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2017), 31.

[479] Karnes, 87.

[480] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 23.

[481] Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, 2nd ed., Wesleyan Paperback (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1987), 26–27.

[482] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 17.

imagination … can the world be known."[483] Barfield points out this challenge for those outside of the arts and poetry because the activity of the imagination "proceeds at an unconscious level" but is always there.[484] In other words, the imagination is always working, whether one is aware of it or not.

Ordway gives a historical rationale for the cutting off of imagination from reason. She explains, "For the past several hundred years, but especially in the twentieth century, Western culture has increasingly accepted a very limited view of the world, in which only the things that can be measured or experimentally verified are considered to be real or true."[485] This view reduces the world to merely material, separating reason from the imagination. The net effect of this divergence is a lack of meaning, which is further intensified by "the rise of cultural illiteracy in Western culture (among Christians as well, unfortunately)."[486] The religious ideas, language, and doctrine that were once packed with meaning have lost significance over time. The disenchantment of Western culture occurred over centuries, but Ordway argues for a recent intensification, highlighting the relevance of a renewed imagination. "Up until a few decades ago, Christianity was a cultural institution," she claims, "which meant that most adults had a basic familiarity with Scripture and with the central ideas of Christianity, whether or not they believed. In

---

[483] Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 28.

[484] Barfield, 28.

[485] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 18.

[486] Ordway, 19.

this context, apologists could count on a certain level of meaning provided by cultural exposure."[487]

Given the state of disenchantment, it should not come as a surprise that much of the Christian message is lost on secular people. Perhaps the hurdle to belief is not as much a theological disagreement as an absence of meaning. The literary critic and theologian Michael Ward addresses this concern well in his essay: "It is no good arguing for 'God' or 'Christ' or for 'the atonement' or even for 'truth' until the apologist has shown, at least at some basic level, that these terms have real meaning. … Apologetic arguments … must all be imaginatively realized before they can begin to make traction on the reader's reason, let alone on the reader's will."[488]

Ordway and Ward agree that the key difference between the Christian and the secular skeptic is not merely a matter of knowing certain facts about God or Christian doctrine. Rather, the "most important" difference is that Christians and the secular world "have a different understanding of what they see."[489] Barfield posits, "Wherever two consciousnesses differ, as it were, in kind, and not merely in relative lucidity—there the problem of sympathy can always be narrowed down to the meaning of some one or more fundamental words."[490] Barfield acknowledges that there is an interpretative challenge with any modern generation engaging ancient literature unless the reader "has enough

---

[487] Ordway, 19.

[488] Michael Ward, "The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C.S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics," in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 72.

[489] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 79.

[490] Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 132.

imagination and enough power of detachment from the established meanings or thought-forms of his own civilization, to enable him to grasp the meaning of the fundamental terms … he will simply re-interpret everything they say in terms of subsequent thought."[491]

The theologian Andrew Davison illustrates the difference based on his experience in India: "People who believe in karma and reincarnation see a leper as someone paying the price for past sins. As a result, they will not show him much pity. A Christian has a different worldview and consequently sees the leper differently: as someone unfortunate, as someone requiring help … The mental act of seeing already integrates sensation with value and meaning."[492] Davison concludes, "We do not first see neutrally and then interpret."[493] In other words, what is imagined about the world shapes the interpretation, which impacts the ability to make reasonable judgments.

Imagination as a Bridge

Smith asserts that what people think is far less important than what they experience through embodied habits ("rituals"). He argues, "The way to the heart is through the body."[494] According to Turnau, Smith is right to say that "liturgies work affectively and aesthetically—they grab hold of our guts through the power of image,

---

[491] Barfield, 133.

[492] Andrew Davison, "Christian Reason and Christian Community," in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 15.

[493] Davison, 15.

[494] Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 46.

story, and metaphor … they speak to our senses; they get under our skin."[495] While Turnau agrees with Smith that "we are not merely thinking things," he is concerned that if bodily habits become mere dead liturgy, it risks "bypassing the mind" (and the imagination).[496] Turnau acknowledges, "Much of the evangelical church (particularly Reformed circles) over-emphasizes theology, as if the mind were the only thing that matters."[497] His contention, however, is that "liturgy on its own does not lead to the kind of mercy-shaped imagination that should be formed within Christians."[498] Theologian Matthew Bingham shares Turnau's concern that Smith has swung the pendulum too far toward ritual practices. Bingham points out, "Embodied rituals often fail to ignite the hearts of those involved. One thinks, for example, of the many people raised in highly liturgical, embodied traditions like Orthodox and Catholicism whose hearts were left cold and unmoved."[499] Rather, "It is a dialogue between body and mind," argues Turnau.[500] This is illustrated by the psalmist who challenges and questions his own imagination: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" (Psalm 42:5. 11; 43:5). The imagination is like a

---

[495] Smith, 46.

[496] James K. A. Smith, "Redeeming Ritual: Penance Takes Practice" (Biola University: Center for Christian Thought, March 27, 2014), https://cct.biola.edu/redeeming-ritual-penance-takes-practice/; Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 359.

[497] Ted Turnau, "Review Article: Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works (James K. A. Smith)," *Foundations*, no. 65 (Autumn 2013), https://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations/issue-65/issue-65-article-5-review-article-imagining-the-kingdom-how-worship-works-james-k-a-smith/.

[498] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 360.

[499] Matthew C. Bingham, "Brains, Bodies, and the Task of Discipleship: Re-Aligning Anthropology and Ministry," *Themelios* 46, no. 1 (April 2021), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/brains-bodies-and-the-task-of-discipleship-re-aligning-anthropology-and-ministry/.

[500] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 360.

game of tennis constantly oscillating between our bodies and minds, and, Turnau argues, "We must attend to both."[501]

The literature professor Karen Swallow Prior calls the imagination a "bridge" that connects the "objective and subjective human experience."[502] She explains, "We act based on what we imagine about the objective, external world, yet we also imagine based on what we perceive and receive from the world."[503] Therefore, the imagination should not be minimized because of its significant role in affecting human behavior and interpretation of the world.

Human beings, according to Douglas Hedley in *The Iconic Imagination*, are "body and spirit, and the imagination is the unifying field of this duality rather than its dissolution."[504] Hedley, like Prior and Guite, concludes that the imagination bridges the physical and spiritual worlds. Because the imagination is a "truth-bearing faculty," says Guite, "artists, poets, sculptors, storytellers, and filmmakers" are able to "kindle our imaginations for Christ, who is himself the kindling imagination of God, who brings all things into being."[505] The imagination is "a mediating power" and more: "the locus of revelation."[506] Therefore, Prior concludes that the imagination is "not only spiritual revelation but the revelation of all that is encompassed by the Logos or ultimate reality

---

[501] Turnau, 136; 360.

[502] Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination*, 13.

[503] Prior, 13–14.

[504] Douglas Hedley, *The Iconic Imagination* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 10.

[505] Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 11.

[506] Hedley, *The Iconic Imagination*, xii.

named in John 1:1. Even the logic of a correct mathematical formula, for example, has no meaning apart from what the imagination reveals to be that meaning."[507] The French intellectual Luc Ferry, writing from a secular humanist perspective, confesses, "I can do nothing about it, 2 + 2 = 4, and this is not a matter of taste or subjective choice. The necessities of which I speak impose themselves upon me as if they come from elsewhere, and yet, it is inside myself that this transcendence is present, and palpably so."[508] The imagination is doing more than just making an image; it is connecting humanity to divine realities whether it is recognized or not.

Looking Along the Imagination

Lewis describes being in a dark toolshed and noticing a beam of light coming through the crack at the top of the door. When Lewis *looked at* the beam itself, he saw only the dust particles floating in the air. He was looking at the beam but "not seeing things by it."[509] Lewis points to the difference between looking at the beam and looking along the beam as an illustrative way of contrasting reason and the imagination.[510] Vanhoozer explains what Lewis meant: "Reason remains aloof, maintaining a critical distance from the shaft of light, observing only the swirling particles of dust. Imagination,

---

[507] Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination*, 15.

[508] Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2011), 237. "Ferry explores not only math but also four areas—truth, beauty, justice, and love—that he calls "the fundamental values of human existence," writes Ortlund in Gavin Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't: The Beauty of Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 83.

[509] C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper, repr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 212.

[510] Lewis, 212.

by way of contrast, steps into the beam of light and looks along it, tasting and participating in its illumination."[511] Vanhoozer also posits that Lewis may have been writing to "correct Plato's 'Myth of the Cave,' with its high view of speculative Reason."[512] Plato's worldview is "full of shadows (appearances) and only Reason apprehends the Eternal Forms (truth) … [Although] for Lewis, the world is full of bright shadows, but it is the imagination that perceives the brightness—the holy otherness—in the shadow."[513] Gould, agreeing with Vanhoozer, concludes, "In *looking at* the beam, Lewis contemplated the nature of light itself. In *looking along* the beam, Lewis was led to its source: the sun."[514] Dillard commented about this light: "I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam."[515]

The apologetic impulse is to cooperate within a good story, but this is ultimately accomplished by "following the crumbs, clues, and signs along the way, until we pass through them to Christ himself."[516] Vanhoozer adds that the imagination plays an important role in biblical interpretation: "We must look not simply *at* but *along* the Bible, especially if we want to see more than specks of doctrinal dust. The imagination is a way of looking along the Bible's metaphors, a way of indwelling its stories … letting biblical patterns organize and interpret our experience [so that] we see God, the world, and

---

[511] Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow."

[512] Vanhoozer.

[513] Vanhoozer.

[514] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 93 (emphasis original).

[515] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 35.

[516] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 94.

ourselves as we truly are."[517] Tolkien agrees that the Christian story "is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused."[518]

Looking along is possible in any story or work of art. Even "pagan stories," according to Lewis, "are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things.'"[519] Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides an example. An ambitious scientist, Victor Frankenstein, is eager to discover the secret to life, and he patches together a monstrous-looking creature from human body parts. The story transports its reader into another world where a scientist creates life in a lab, and, in the end, the creature turns against his maker because it was neglected and rejected. The creature tells Frankenstein, "All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us."[520] The creature concludes, based on what he knows about the nature of humanity, that his monstrous appearance means everyone will hate him. The darkest point, however, is when he addresses Victor directly because his own creator has deserted him.

This tale—like all good, well-told stories— "speaks to our primary experience as well. It leads us to reflect on the sacredness of life as a gift to be received and enjoyed in

---

[517] Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow" (emphasis mine).

[518] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 78.

[519] C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 1: Family letters 1905-1931 (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 977.

[520] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 96.

humble creaturely response."[521] Reflecting on this story's impression on his own life, Gould says, "I also grasped anew the deep love of the Father, who, unlike the creator Frankenstein, looks upon his creation with joy and delight, proclaiming it 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). I marveled at the Father's pursuing love as I contemplated how we, like *Frankenstein* in reverse, ran away from our Creator only to have him pursue us, even becoming like us, so that we might be brought home." [522] Art provokes the imagination and sheds light on reality by exploring human longing through stories and imaginative worlds.

In a 1956 New York Times article, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," Lewis explains why he wrote fairy tales such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He said, "I wrote fairy tales because … an obligation to feel [a certain way about God or Christ's sufferings] can freeze feelings … But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could."[523] Ordway adds that literature and the arts have a unique apologetic value besides helping in bypassing people's defenses. She writes that literature "is not the same thing as making an argument in the form of a story; rather, at its best, it *shows* the truth and helps us desire it. It is not a

---

[521] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 111.

[522] Gould, 111.

[523] C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1956, sec. Archives, 3, https://www.nytimes.com/1956/11/18/archives/sometimes-fairy-stories-may-say-best-whats-to-be-said.html.

substitute for teaching about doctrine, but it helps us see what doctrine *means* and suggests that we might want to discover whether it is really true."[524]

Motive Matters

The Greek word *apologia* means "to make a defense for," which comes from the Apostle Peter: "Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."[525] Put simply, apologetics explains what is believed to be true.[526] But Davison adds, "Apologetics is as much an invitation as an argument: an invitation to 'taste and see' what it is like to live and think differently."[527] Scholar David Lose explains that gospel engagement in a secular age is "less like certain knowledge and more like an invitation to an adventure, an adventure described throughout the pages of Scripture and which, at almost any single point, is simultaneously too good to be true and so good it must be true."[528] The task of apologetics is more nuanced and dynamic than strictly saying what is true. Lose argues that defending the gospel first includes listening "for the deep yearning … for a story that is worthy of their devotion."[529] The telling of

---

[524] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 146 (emphasis original).

[525] 1 Pet. 3:15.

[526] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 1.

[527] Davison, "Christian Reason and Christian Community," 15.

[528] David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World and Our Preaching Is Changing* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 63.

[529] Lose, 63.

the gospel that invites listeners into biblical faith is to "make real and imaginable once again—the improbable, even fantastic Christian story."[530]

Ordway argues that Christians need to "return to an older, more integrated approach to apologetics," which provides not only the call of the gospel to come and see but a "motive" to answer the call.[531] She describes this motivation as "some sort of imaginative engagement with the idea, or at least the possibility, that there might be something worth seeing."[532] In John 4, the woman at the well left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" The people then left town and went to Jesus.[533] This woman has encountered Jesus in such a way that she is now seeing a new world "that doesn't exist as far as she knows it, and yet a world that she now desperately wishes were real. This is a world where Jews and Samaritans relate to one another; where men are not just men; where water is more than water; and where thirst can be quenched, and water can bring eternal life."[534] This imaginative experience provoked her to invite others into it with her.

Before Lewis became a Christian, he struggled to make sense of the meaning of Christianity. Meynell recounts the beginnings of C.S. Lewis's conversion through an imaginative encounter with his friend Tolkien. Although Lewis "embraced the closed universe of scientific materialism as a philosophical necessity, his longings pointed him

---

[530] Lose, 63.

[531] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 5.

[532] Ordway, 5.

[533] John 4:28–29.

[534] Carl Santos, "Preaching to the Imagination," The Gospel Coalition | Canada, July 4, 2023, https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/preaching-to-the-imagination/.

far beyond the confines of the material."[535] His innate affection for "Norse and Celtic mythology, suffused as it is with both the immanent and transcendent frames … seemed truer, somehow, than the raw objectivity demanded by naturalism."[536] It was based on Lewis's longing for transcendence "that Tolkien built bridges to his skeptical friend after their famous late-night conversation on Magdalen's Addison's Walk. Lewis discovered that "the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened."[537]

Tolkien (and Dyson, also on that walk) did not show Lewis the facts of Christianity because that was not what he was missing; rather, they "used Lewis' love of myth and mythic stories to help him see the truth of Christianity."[538] Only after Lewis was able to "connect his imaginative response to the story, to the factual reality of the Christian claim about the crucifixion and resurrection, the final barrier to belief fell."[539] Summarizing how Lewis' imagination and reason fully engaged, Stiller writes, "The historical events formed the content of the myth, apprehended by the imagination. Only then could it be analyzed by the reason and formulated in theological doctrines," which moved him toward faith in Christ.[540]

---

[535] Meynell, "A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise," 64.

[536] Meynell, 64.

[537] Lewis, *The Collected Letters*, 1: Family letters 1905-1931:977.

[538] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 8.

[539] Ordway, 8–9.

[540] Stiller, "A Picture Set Us Free," 71.

Imagination and Re-enchantment

In a disenchanted world, the "universal longing for transcendence is either unnoticed or suppressed."[541] According to Milbank, "Part of our problem in presenting the Faith is that our world deadens desire, and many people do not know that they are missing anything."[542] Disenchantment has lulled hearts to sleep in the West. Lewis describes modern culture as being under a spell, and the solution is re-enchantment under a new kind of spell to counter the dark magic. He writes, "Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness" that looks to humanity's moral goodness apart from transcendence.[543] Gould suggests the mission of the post-modern church is "to reawaken in human hearts a longing for more," a longing for the divine.[544]

Relearning to See

The effect of disenchantment has not only made unbelief possible but the default position. According to Gould, the problem of disenchantment is often misdiagnosed. Instead of holistic efforts to re-enchant Western culture, apologists have too often focused on "the plausibility of Christianity without much attention to its desirability. But Christianity's plausibility is not the only or even the most significant obstacle to belief in

---

[541] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 72.

[542] Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange," 35.

[543] Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 31.

[544] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 72.

a disenchanted age."[545] Rather, the solution Hans Boersma proposes is sensitive to the cultural shift and human longing. He believes apologists must "relearn to see the world with sacramental eyes."[546] According to Boersma, it is the "only faithful way forward."[547] When re-enchantment occurs, belief in God becomes believable again. Or, as Taylor puts it, "Going against God is not an option in the enchanted world."[548]

Gould argues more specifically that the path to re-enchantment, "relearning to see," is through the imagination. Distinguishing between the role of beauty and the imagination, he says, "If beauty is what calls us, drawing forth our longings, it is the imagination that guides us in perceiving … beauty."[549] Most theologians, philosophers, and artists who study the nature of the imagination agree, "It is crucial to our lives, playing a significant role in perceiving, creating, dreaming, meaning, judging, learning, and moralizing."[550] The philosopher Colin McGinn calls man "*Homo imaginans*," which means that man, by nature, imagines.[551]

Coleridge argued that the imagination connects the human mind and the supernatural. He explains that it is the "prime agent of all human perception, and as a

---

[545] Gould, 92.

[546] Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 99.

[547] Boersma, 189.

[548] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 41.

[549] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 106.

[550] Gould, 106.

[551] Colin McGinn, *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2006), 5.

repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."[552] In other words, the human imagination reflects the divine imagination. Tolkien, in *On Fairy-Stories*, emphasized the creative ability of the imagination to generate "mental images of things not actually present. … That the images are of things not in the primary world (if that indeed is possible) is a virtue not a vice."[553] He thought of fantasy as "not a lower but a higher form of art."[554] Stiller explains why: "When done well, which is an important distinction for Tolkien, a Secondary World will achieve 'the inner consistency of reality' and foster Secondary Belief: an experience of that world as true and real while one is in it."[555] Tolkien argues that readers can experience "literary belief," which is a Secondary Belief that is more than simply a "willing suspension of disbelief."[556] Rather, a story-maker creates a Secondary World, "which your mind can enter. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed."[557] Tolkien acknowledges that the suspension of disbelief is a "substitute for the genuine thing" so that one can reenter the Primary World having been changed from their experience in the Secondary World. Ordway, drawing from

---

[552] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (New York, NY: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1834), 172.

[553] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 59–60.

[554] Tolkien, 59–60.

[555] Stiller, "A Picture Set Us Free," 29.

[556] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 52.

[557] Tolkien, 52.

Tolkien, explains that "fantasy offers an escape that can be transformative because you are looking beyond the limitations of your life and saying … 'what if?'"[558]

Stories and Re-enchantment

Re-enchantment in a disenchanted world will likely begin with the use of stories because they have an extraordinary way of getting to the heart. Mike Cosper illustrates the point. "It's one thing to hear someone say, 'Life is random and meaningless.' It's another to watch a movie like … *Castaway*' with Tom Hanks, which is a tragic story that 'erode[s] a sense of meaning, order, and purpose in the world.'"[559] The power of movies, music, and literature as storytelling mediums is that they capture the imagination. Cosper's advice to begin re-enchantment is to "reorient our lives around a different set of stories."[560]

The book of Exodus is an epic story that has formed God's people for thousands of years. "When Moses tells the people to say from generation to generation, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt' (Exo. 13:8), he is calling them to use their imaginations—to put themselves in the Exodus story and to make it their own," argues Wilbourne.[561] In the very center of the book, the Ten Commandments are introduced, but not before reminding the reader of the redemptive story of God's deliverance, then instructing the Israelites to a new way of life: "I am the

---

[558] Brierley and Belle, "Middle Earth - Holly Ordway."

[559] Mike Cosper, *Recapturing the Wonder: Transcendent Faith in a Disenchanted World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 27.

[560] Cosper, 27.

[561] Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*, 18–19.

LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2).[562] Theologian Phil Ryken explains, "When the children of Israel asked why they had to keep God's law, their parents were supposed to tell them a story. The only way they could understand the meaning of the law was by knowing its context, which was the experience of the exodus—the story of their salvation. First the gospel, then the law."[563] Otherwise, the biblical story becomes about the discipline of personal morality instead of the wonder of redeeming grace.

Remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy is the longest of all the commandments and is best understood in the context of the biblical story. According to Ryken, one of the reasons for its length is that "we are prone to forget the great work of God in creation and redemption. And when we forget, we fail to praise him for making us and saving us."[564] The word "sabbath" means "to cease or to rest" in Hebrew, but it is also "God's memorandum to his people, reminding us to give him glory for his grace" for rescuing his people from oppression and slavery from false gods.[565] In other words, without the discipline of remembering the gospel story, it will get lost. That is exactly what happened to ancient Israel throughout the Old Testament. They would forget the story of God's salvation, and "the gods of neighboring tribes [would] begin to appear in Israel's worship." But then, someone would reencounter God's law and the Exodus story,

---

[562] Cosper, *Recapturing the Wonder*, 27–28.

[563] Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 537.

[564] Ryken, 590.

[565] Ryken, 590.

inspiring "a renewal movement."[566] The act of forgetting becomes a sobering refrain throughout the Old Testament ("But they forgot" Judg. 3:7; 1 Sam. 12:9; etc.), which Wilbourne describes not only as "a failure to call to mind," but "a failure of the imagination."[567]

The Old Testament is well known for its vivid stories, but the New Testament has its own awe-inspiring stories. In fact, "Every sermon in the book of Acts is a retelling of the story of God's salvation through Jesus," according to Cosper.[568] Stephen's speech in Acts 7, for example, is a retelling of biblical history from Abraham, Moses, and David to Jesus, whom the Jews betrayed and murdered on the cross. The sacraments—baptism and communion—are "shorthand symbols for the story of Jesus' death, resurrection, and the restoration of all things" so that God's people don't forget.[569]

Not only is re-enchantment needed for God's people, as is demonstrated by Paul showing the Jews how Jesus is the true and better fulfillment of the story of Israel (Acts 17:1-4), but in Athens, Paul engages those who do not share the same Jewish history and cultural background. Chatraw explains that "[Paul] entered their social imagination and leveraged their cultural stories (Acts 17:16–34). He quotes pagan sources and affirms where Athenian thinking is correct, which includes at least two things: the Athenians' desire to worship the divine … and their intuition that they're missing something."[570]

---

[566] Cosper, *Recapturing the Wonder*, 28.

[567] Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*, 19.

[568] Cosper, *Recapturing the Wonder*, 28.

[569] Cosper, 28.

[570] Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 66.

Paul's engagement doesn't end there; he "subverts the dominant stories, explaining how the Athenians went wrong. He challenges their culture by using one of their own beliefs to demonstrate that God must be independent from his creation … and skillfully maps the Christian story onto the prevailing cultural narratives of his particular audience."[571] This well-known encounter is one of the best examples of cultural apologetics and the use of story for the sake of re-enchantment in the New Testament.

The consequence of an uncultivated imagination is to use the Bible to "stuff [listeners'] heads with soul-deadening, imagination-killing factoids."[572] Pastor and author Douglas Wilson emphasizes the development of the imagination through good stories and the Bible for Christian discipleship. He writes, "If our [children] are to be prepared for the world God made, then their imaginations must be fed and nourished with tales about … Sam Gamgee carrying Frodo up the mountain, Beowulf tearing off Grendel's arm, and Trumpkin fighting for Aslan while still not believing in him."[573] Some Christians view works of fiction as optional at best (if busy schedules allow it), but Wilson proposes that renewing the imagination is vital to discipleship. These types of stories provide a more precise appreciation for "the kind of war we are in."[574]

The Bible tells the story of humanity falling into the cunning scheme of a serpent (Gen. 3:1). In Genesis 3:15, God promises to defeat the serpent by crushing his head once and for all. The gospel is the story of a "dragon-fight" between the serpent in the garden

---

[571] Chatraw, 66.

[572] Douglas Wilson, *Future Men* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 101.

[573] Wilson, 102.

[574] Wilson, 102.

and the mighty warrior sent by God.[575] Readers learn at the end of the biblical story that "The serpent of Genesis is the dragon of Revelation (Rev. 20:2 'that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan'), and they are called to rejoice that the dragon has been slain" through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.[576]

Wilson argues, "The Bible is a fantastic book, with all the connotations of that word involved."[577] Jesus Christ comes not to fight a "puny devil," but rather as a son of David, who overcame the ultimate Goliath, the strong man, and took away his armor and bound him (Luke 11:22).[578]

Prayer and Re-enchantment

The spiritual discipline of prayer plays a significant role in re-enchanting the disenchanted. Cosper suggested "breath prayers," which are "prayers that can be said in a single breath."[579] The simplicity of this practice draws a person out of disenchantment to a renewed awareness of the presence of God.[580] Cosper suggests regularly using a shortened version of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me," derived from the tax collector's prayer in Luke 18:13 and also a common practice in the Eastern Orthodox Church. This simple discipline is adaptable and portable: "There is no place, no meeting,

---

[575] Wilson, 102.

[576] Wilson, 102.

[577] Wilson, 104.

[578] Wilson, 103.

[579] Cosper, *Recapturing the Wonder*, 31.

[580] Cosper, 31.

no encounter in life where one can't stop and take a slow, deep breath" and pray.[581] Any passage of Scripture can become a prayer. For example, Matthew 11:28 can become "Lord, I am weary, give me rest," or Colossians 3:3 can be combined with the hymn "Rock of Ages" into: "Let me hide myself into thee."[582] According to Cosper, these prayers are a starting point and a "practical way of re-enchanting our world and our experiences, signposts on our journey that remind us that the world is far bigger, far more wonderous, and far more mysterious than we have been told."[583]

Worship and Re-enchantment

From beginning to end, the biblical story has an "irresistible momentum toward worship … Genesis (creation sings God's glory) to Revelation (redeemed creation sings God's glory, with added volume and beauty)."[584] Turnau and Cosper look to a reorientation around the full narrative, but Cosper points out that even in a particular chapter of the Bible, like the Ten Commandments in Exo. 20, exists a window into the entire story: "I am the LORD your God, *who brought you out of the land of Egypt*."[585]

Turnau affirms, "Worship is a storyteller, weaving a web of narrative," but adds that it is also the "repeated behavior (ritual) … that shapes the imagination …"[586] Smith adds that the weekly rhythm of liturgical worship puts the body through "a regimen of

---

[581] Cosper, 31.

[582] Cosper, 31.

[583] Cosper, 31.

[584] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 346.

[585] Cosper, *Recapturing the Wonder*, 27–28 (emphasis original).

[586] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 359.

repeated practices that get hold of our heart and aim our love toward the kingdom of God."[587] In other words, worship is not only a matter of the mind. Singing hymns, reading Scripture, praying, and partaking of the sacraments are all instrumental in renewing "an imaginative vision of the world, both how it is and how it should be."[588]

Romans 12:1-2 shows how the relationship between worship and the imagination re-enchants the disenchanted. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."[589] Turnau concludes that worship "reorients the imagination, recalibrates our seeing-as, setting us free from our slavery to self and refocusing our eyes on the God of grace."[590]

The goal of the godless "world" is conformity to its image. But Paul says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world;" rather, "be transformed by the renewing of your mind.[591] The verb "be transformed" (*metamorphousthe*) is passive, so it is the Spirit's work, with "Spirit-awakened imaginations, we learn to see things anew, through a new lens (namely, verse 1, 'in view of God's mercy')."[592] But the tense of the verb

---

[587] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 1:33.

[588]Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 359.

[589] Rom.12:1-2 (NIV).

[590] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 347.

[591] Rom. 12:2 (NIV).

[592] Turnau, *Oasis of Imagination*, 353.

metamorphousthe is present continuous, so renewal or re-enchantment "must happen repeatedly … through worship—offering our bodies as living sacrifices."[593] Turnau concludes, "The imagination is the true arena of spiritual warfare … a genuine 'battle for hearts and minds' … That battle is best fought through worship, the engine that renews our imaginations as we repeatedly apprehend the beauty and majesty of God."[594]

A Summary of the Imagination

The Bible is an inherently imaginative book because it is authored by a master storyteller. This story of redemption includes adventure, conflict, loss, victory, and hope. All good stories possess similar qualities because they reflect the one true story, which is why even fiction can awaken the imagination to a sense of transcendent realities. In an age of disenchantment, renewal of the imagination becomes of critical importance to experience re-enchantment. The Bible instructs its readers to have "the eyes of your hearts enlightened" and to sing a "new song," which both engage the imagination.[595]

The imagination captivates the mind and heart as a truth-bearing faculty. Reason and imagination serve one another, but the mind alone lacks the raw materials to judge something as true, until it is cultivated in the soil of the imagination where meaning is supplied. However, the imagination is doing more than just making an image to provide meaning so that the reason can judge; it is connecting humanity to divine realities.

---

[593] Turnau, 354.

[594] Turnau, 354.

[595] Eph. 1:18; Ps. 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1.

Summary of Literature Review

In light of the literature examined, there are three primary themes pastors must consider to engage a late modern culture with the gospel: the conditions of disenchantment, a theology of beauty, and the role of the imagination in re-enchantment. Although the world is inherently enchanted, the conditions of postmodernity have blinded Westerners to that reality. The absence of a felt presence of the divine and lack of meaning in the world produced a widespread malaise. Even attempts to live as a buffered self in the immanent frame, searching for meaning and fulfillment from within, have their limits. The conditions of disenchantment cannot purge the human longing for more.

Beauty captures the heart. It demands to be noticed. Without beauty, truth loses its power to enthrall. Arguably, aesthetics moves the emotions and desires more than intellectual or moral analogies. Therefore, a truth-first approach to apologetics may be backward. The irresistible quality of beauty suggests a beauty-first approach that positions truth as the final push into faith once the imagination has been reawakened by the beauty and goodness of the gospel.

The move from disenchantment to re-enchantment is made possible through the imagination. Because belief in transcendence is more difficult than ever, and what can't be imagined can't be desired, the apologetic role of the imagination is critical. The imagination functions as a bridge between the objective and subjective and the physical and spiritual worlds—ultimately, it connects the mind to the supernatural. The Bible calls its hearers to set the mind on things above, and Jesus instructs his followers to partake in the Lord's Supper by doing it in remembrance of him. The imagination makes meaning

of sensory data, which allows the mind to see beyond the limits of the material world and desire transcendent realities that were previously not possible.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel. The research identified three main areas central to this study: disenchantment in late modernity, a theology of beauty, and, finally, the role of the imagination in re-enchantment.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe the priority of an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
2. To what extent are pastors aware of the power of the arts in prioritizing beauty to communicate the gospel in a disenchanted world?
3. How do pastors describe the challenges they encounter in prioritizing beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
    a. What are some cultural challenges?
    b. What are some theological challenges?
4. What methods do pastors use in the creative process to engage a disenchanted world with the beauty of the gospel?
    a. What goals do the pastors have at the start of the creative process?
    b. How do pastors incorporate the arts in communication?
    c. How do pastors incorporate the arts outside of the Christian community?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, defines a general, basic qualitative study as that which is "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences." Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research: "the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive."

First, qualitative research is concerned with meaning and understanding. The researcher's purpose is to "achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives."[596] The researcher is interested in the participant's experience and the meaning they have constructed. Merriam explains, "This is sometimes referred to as the *emic* or insider's perspective, versus the *etic* or outsider's view."[597] Second, the role of the researcher is to gather insights and perspectives from the participants rather than confirming a predetermined thesis. Since the researcher is the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis," it makes for an ideal means of research because probing or follow-up questions can be asked to clarify "for accuracy of interpretation" and further exploration.[598] Third, qualitative research is inductive. Researchers "gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in

---

[596] Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 15.

[597] Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

[598] Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

positivist research."[599] Finally, this type of research is "richly descriptive" because "words and pictures rather than numbers are used" as the primary data to gain insight.[600]

This study employed a basic qualitative research design so participants could describe and explain how their engagement with beauty makes truth more plausible. Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of more comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives in the narrow phenomena of pastors prioritizing an apologetic of goodness to communicate gospel truth in a disenchanted world. Merriam describes three types of structures for interviews: the highly structured or standardized, the unstructured or informal, and the semi-structured, which is "in the middle, between structured and unstructured."[601] The semi-structured format is "more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions."[602]

Participant Sample Selection

This research required purposeful sampling of participants able to communicate in depth about preaching and evangelism that engages the apologetic value of the transcendentals for the sake of re-enchantment in a secular age. A "unique sample" of participants was selected with distinct attributes according to the following criteria.[603]

---

[599] Merriam and Tisdell, 17.

[600] Merriam and Tisdell, 17.

[601] Merriam and Tisdell, 110.

[602] Merriam and Tisdell, 110.

[603] Merriam and Tisdell, 97.

First, to gain data toward best practices, the participants self-reported to the researcher that they had more than ten years of experience in Christian ministry, regularly preaching, teaching, or engaging in evangelism. They felt that their efforts increasingly resulted in hoped-for outcomes.

Second, the participants were from a concentration of people experiencing the effects of disenchantment.

Third, the pastors self-reported that they regularly engaged in cultural apologetics to "demonstrate not only the truth of Christianity but also its desirability."[604]

This length of experience and intentional engagement with culture increased the likelihood that they were thoughtful and judicious toward their listeners, which provided solid data about their methods and experiences.

Participants were purposefully chosen to provide variation in age and denominational affiliation within the Reformed tradition to minimize theological variables beyond the perspective of this research. They also varied in communication methods—some were preachers, some teachers, and some evangelists. This variety provided a wide spectrum of experience for the study.

Finally, to minimize other variables beyond the perspective of this research, only male pastors were selected.

The final study was conducted through personal interviews with nine ministers who met the above criteria in cities across the United States and the United Kingdom. The participants who expressed interest were invited to participate via an introductory letter, followed by a personal phone call. All expressed interest and gave written

---

[604] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 25.

informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a "Research Participant Consent Form" to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is "minimal" to "no risk" according to the Seminary IRB (Institutional Review Board) guidelines. The following is a sample of this consent form.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Corey Smith to investigate how pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1) The purpose of the research is to investigate how pastors in Christian ministry prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel.
2) Potential benefits of the research may include helping pastors and leaders appreciate the importance of beauty and the imagination in apologetics, become more aware of the power of the arts in re-enchantment, understand the challenges of communicating the gospel in a disenchanted world, and equip them with best practices to provide a path to re-enchantment within the church and beyond. Although there are no direct benefits for participants, the researcher hopes they will be encouraged by the experience of sharing their experiences with an eager listener and learner.
3) The research process will include 8 individuals on one occasion with the audio recorded. These will be transcribed and then analyzed as part of the research for the final thesis. All participants will remain anonymous.
4) Participants in this research will meet with the researcher for up to 90 minutes, for a recorded interview (audio-only)
5) Potential discomforts or stresses: None
6) Potential risks: No Risk Level Criteria because participants are to give opinions or viewpoints on commonplace and benign topics that will not impact them in any manner such as socially, psychologically or spiritually.
7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.

8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Researcher Date

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Participant Date

Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues to explore them more thoroughly.[605] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[606]

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing

[605] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 124–25.

[606] Merriam and Tisdell, 297.

process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[607]

The researcher interviewed nine individuals for ninety minutes each. Prior to the interview, the participants were given a brief description of the research topic and a list of terms with definitions as a basis for shared understanding. To accommodate participant schedules, the researcher sought meeting places of the participant's choosing when possible. The researcher recorded the in-person interviews and videotaped the Zoom interviews. By conducting two interviews in a week, the researcher completed the data gathering over the course of four weeks. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. To what extent does living in a disenchanted culture affect how you think about gospel engagement?
2. Tell me about any times in a sermon, teaching, or conversation when you made beauty a priority to evoke a sense of transcendent reality. *Person had this Q in advance.*
3. Can you tell me about any times when you witnessed re-enchantment taking place, evoking a sense of the reality of transcendence?
4. In what ways do you understand the power of the arts to engage the imagination to provide a path to re-enchant a disenchanted world with the gospel?
    a. What are some ways this engagement benefits skeptics?

[607] Merriam and Tisdell, 208.

b. What are some ways this benefits the Christian community?

5. Describe some methods or practices that have helped cultivate a sense of re-enchantment by prioritizing an apologetic understanding of beauty.
    a. What goals do you have at the start of your creative process?
    b. How do you integrate the arts (including stories/illustrations/metaphors) in communication to stir the imagination so that listeners may perceive the gospel as desirable?
    c. How do you integrate the arts outside of the Christian community to stir the imagination?
6. What are some challenges with prioritizing an apologetic understanding of beauty?
    a. What are some challenges inside the Christian community?
    b. What are some challenges outside the Christian community?

Data Analysis

As soon as possible and always within one week of each meeting, the researcher transcribed each interview by using computer software to play back the digital recording on a computer and typing out each transcript. The software allowed for corrections and editing. This study utilized "the constant comparison method," routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.[608] Merriam writes, "The

[608] Merriam and Tisdell, 32.

overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data … [which] are arranged in relationships to each other."[609]

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were color-coded and analyzed. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and approaches across the variation of participants; and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants. To maintain participants' confidentiality, names were changed as soon as the interviews were transcribed.

Researcher Position

Since the researcher is the primary means of data collection, the research leaves room for subjectivity and potential bias. Merriam advises investigators "to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken."[610] Identifying these potential biases "allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data."[611]

The researcher is an ordained teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America and has spent fifteen years in full-time pastoral ministry, which has included regular communication and preaching. He planted a church in 2010 with recent college graduates who became urban professionals and then started families. The congregation was made of a variety of people from the city of Indianapolis, with many Millennials and

---

[609] Merriam and Tisdell, 32.

[610] Merriam and Tisdell, 249.

[611] Merriam and Tisdell, 249.

Gen Z'ers. In some cases, the researcher's experience of significant cultural shifts within a younger church body inevitably affects objective analysis. At the same time, this demographic makeup has given the researcher a unique perspective from the inside.

Study Limitations

Due to limited resources and time, this study is limited to those preaching and teaching in larger cities and engaging in secular contexts. As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed for this research were limited to ordained Christian ministers in the Reformed tradition. Further research is needed to broaden the participant selection to include women and others outside of the Reformed tradition. Therefore, some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar theological or ecclesiastical contexts. Readers who desire to generalize some of the aspects of these conclusions on the apologetic priority of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel should test those aspects in their particular context. Because of the effects of globalization, the results of this study may also have implications for those serving outside of cultural centers in an urban setting. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for those in other traditions and in other cultural contexts.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel. The research identified three main areas central to this study: disenchantment in late modernity, a theology of beauty, and, finally, the role of the imagination in re-enchantment. This chapter provides the findings of the nine pastoral interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe the priority of an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
2. To what extent are pastors aware of the power of the arts in prioritizing beauty to communicate the gospel in a disenchanted world?
3. How do pastors describe the challenges they encounter in prioritizing beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
    a. What are some cultural challenges?
    b. What are some theological challenges?
4. What methods do pastors use in the creative process to engage a disenchanted world with the beauty of the gospel?
    a. What goals do the pastors have at the start of the creative process?
    b. How do pastors incorporate the arts in communication?

c. How do pastors incorporate the arts outside of the Christian community?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected nine seasoned pastors to participate in this study. Each participant had ten to thirty years of preaching experience. All participants minister in city-center contexts where the effects of a disenchanted age are prevalent. Presbyterians, Anglicans, and non-denominational affiliations were represented, which provided some diversity in perspective. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect identity.

Table 1: Research Participants

Name	*Age*	*Nationality*	*Profession*
Ron	50s	US	Pastor
Zeb	50s	US	Pastor
Grant	40s	UK	Pastor
Will	40s	US	Pastor/Theologian
Ed	40s	US	Pastor
Allen	60s	UK	Pastor
Gus	40s	UK	Pastor
Jack	50s	US	Pastor/Artist
Mike	50s	Australia	Pastor/Musician

Priority of Beauty in a Disenchanted Age

The first research question sought to determine how pastors prioritize the role of beauty and the imagination to engage those experiencing the effects of disenchantment with the gospel.

An Enchanted World in a Disenchanted Age

A few participants made the case that the goal of the Christian is not to re-enchant. "We don't need to re-enchant the world, like we can't make the gospel beautiful," argues Grant. The world is already enchanted, and the gospel is already beautiful. But this does not mean that people are not disenchanted. In fact, Allen who ministers in the post-Christian UK, said, "Most people feel radically disenchanted." This state, ushered in by modernity, he argued, created a vacuum for "the appeal to beauty."

Zeb agreed with Taylor, believing that the church in the West is "in a turn." How far along in the turn is difficult to determine, but he has observed a "turn toward ancient spiritualities—paganism, witchcraft, psychedelics, and new age beliefs."

Grant suggested that the current state of the West is more like the dwarves in *The Last Battle* by C.S. Lewis, when they were "curved in on themselves, blind to the glories of Narnia—the dwarves are for the dwarves." Grant added, "We don't need to enchant Narnia for them. We need to awaken them to what is already there."

Ed affirmed that Western culture exists in an enchanted world because there is still tremendous spiritual hunger in the late modern world. He acknowledged that the world is getting more religious and spiritual, saying, "There is an explosion of spiritual interest in witchcraft, Wicca, and astrology." But he challenged the notion that this

cultural moment is not disenchanted. He argued, “It is disenchanted because we're still in the imminent frame.”

Ed, whose doctoral work examined Taylor’s immanent frame concept, explained, “Spiritual longings in modern Western culture are still framed within the imminent frame. Human flourishing is framed within this world.” He further elaborated, “It's about my personal identity construction, my authenticity narrative,” noted Ed, drawing on Noble’s work.

Ed continued, “Yes, we have spiritual longings (which is a kind of enchantment), but we are also disenchanted in that our spiritual longings are trapped within the immanent frame.” Therefore, according to Ed, the work of preachers in this cultural moment “is to give people a taste, a whiff of transcendence that takes them out of the imminent frame.”

Grant described that the “paradigmatic case” of trying to capture the imagination with a story was “Nathan going to David in 2 Samuel chapter 12.” He postulated, “David probably thought that he was living in the world of realpolitik.” He explained David’s twisted mindset in the throes of kingship: “Sometimes you've got to bump off your friend and steal his wife.” That’s what David thought was “realistic and pragmatic—what real life is like.” Grant concluded, “It's better to see David as living in a fantasy.”

Reflecting on David’s awakening in 2 Samual 12, Grant said, “One of the beautiful things about a story is it takes you out of your ego—it ceases to be main character energy.” To observe characters in a movie at the theater forces the viewer to leave his main energy at the door. Grant suggests, “Perhaps, it is the one time in life someone stops playing the main character.”

Zeb pointed out a similar observation but from Jesus's ministry. In the well-known event when Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ in Matthew 16. Jesus's approach allowed the disciples to first "put themselves in the shoes of others, talk about what others have said," Zeb explained, "before answering the question personally, which is what Nathan did with David."

Start with Beauty

All the participants agreed that beauty is important in engaging disenchanted people with the gospel. But Jack was explicit, "Beauty is a great place to start any relationship or any conversation." This is true for any relationship, but especially when it comes to apologetics. "It softens the blow, the punch of truth, and it makes it more palatable—it disarms," Jack argued.

Allusivity

Will agreed that telling the truth directly can be blinding. He referenced Emily Dickinson's defense of poetry in "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant," where she encourages telling the truth but in a way that it might be more readily received. Will explained that a sliver of the truth at a time is sometimes all a person can handle. If the truth doesn't all come at once, or maybe it is caught out of the proverbial corner of your eye, "You can recognize the beauty of it without being hurt."

Will further explained that truth "by virtue of its allusivity, not presenting truth or reality directly, but slant, is the reason why it is successful." In other words, sometimes the truth is better presented in a non-didactic way. Will drew from the philosopher Calvin Seerveld for his understanding of allusivity, who argued that art, and the nature of beauty,

is evocative and invites reflection through its form and symbolism. Will claimed that the aesthetic approach "taps into different parts of our humanity that we tend to shut off or lay aside in certain environments." The aesthetic approach allows people to gain understanding in a way they might never get if told directly.

This approach is not unlike Jesus's parables. Will referenced Matthew 13, where Jesus shares multiple parables about his kingdom and explains why he has chosen to use this form of storytelling. There is a power in this form, and "If you get it," Will said, "it will begin to reorient your life." It is more than informational; it is also expansive. Will argued that a parable, because of its form, is generative and invites the reader to consider, "If this is true in that way, then I wonder about this, and I wonder about that."

Grant adds that Jesus puts hundreds of questions to people but rarely gives a direct answer. He would often offer a question in return or tell a story. Other people put hundreds of questions to him, but Grant asked sarcastically, "When does Jesus actually give a straight answer to a question?" According to Grant's estimation, the answer is about twice in the gospel accounts.

Christians don't communicate the same way the world does. Grant said, "I think partly it's because of a theology of the imagination." Noting 2 Corinthians 10, Grant added, "You see the warfare is not carnal warfare." Instead, he continued, "By the weapons of the Spirit … we are to tear down the strongholds that the unbeliever is imprisoned within." Drawing from Paul, Grant said, "We wage war, but not as the world wages war."

The unbeliever thinks that "They are in an Imax cinema," but they are "actually in Jericho," according to Grant. He said, "The walls are keeping out their liberators. and

they are hemmed in by their own sense of imagination, by their own sense of what the world is like." What they think is reality, "is, in fact, a prison." Grant pointed out the solution: Christians "have been given the sword of the Spirit to actually break down those walls … to cast a different imagination."

Wonder

Beauty engages the whole person. Will, who has written at length about the significance and importance of beauty, regularly sends his students outside for twenty minutes to encounter creation. Cell phones are left in the classroom while they walk around and observe whatever they happen to see and hear. The students come back amazed after discovering a flower they've never seen before, or an orb-weaver spider that they didn't know existed, or something that they found on the trail. They all return with a story to tell about a new wonder they experienced. Will argued for prioritizing beauty because it engages "your emotions, your body, and your mind." The whole self is being activated, rather than just engaging your mind.

Will shared about a therapist applying ecotherapy with clients, a form of therapy in high demand that utilizes the natural environment to promote mental and physical health. He noted that these individuals may not be people of faith, but they desire more than just conventional therapy. During sessions, clients have their therapist with them to talk to, but there's a mutual experience of beauty at the same time. Will acknowledged that many studies showed how being outside is good for the brain and body, but experiencing nature "allows for more opportunities to encounter beauty and to have moments of … transcendence that you weren't expecting." For example, being on a walk

when a hawk swoops down in front of the path, and suddenly there is an arresting moment: “Wow!” Will exclaimed, “That thing exists, and it's not me.”

The gift of aesthetic experiences, whether individually or communally, is that there is a certain “uncontainability,” said Will drawing from Jeremy Begbie's *Abundantly More*. Will mentioned that when people experience a piece of music or a film, it offers them an “overflow of meaning in abundance.” When something is uncontainable, Will said, “It can't be reduced to the things we're used to reducing life to” in a materialistic worldview. Art is naturally generative: It generates conversation and personal questions. Experiences such as these can also “generate an openness to what God might be doing right in and through that aesthetic experience,” highlighting the apologetic nature of beauty. It calls viewers and listeners to look for and long for more beyond the limits of the material world.

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa, according to Will, recognized that “people are longing [for resonance], especially in a world where a lot of people feel dull and mute, not alive.” Disenchantment has created a longing for experiences of resonance beyond “my own voice and my experience,” argued Will, “for an encounter with another voice, another experience,” to be reawakened to transcendent realities.

The Role of the Imagination

Will continued, “Depending on your level of despair, or cynicism, or apathy, you’re going to have to encounter a really good story or film to jolt you to begin to imagine some new possibilities.” People are accustomed to “accepting the way that things are.” He pointed to American politics as an example: “People accept that it's just the way things are, but what if a different kind of politics were possible?”

Will shared that he had struggled with gravitating toward apathy in terms of his public life as a pastor and theologian. He shared that he recently started reading a novel about the life of Martin Luther King Jr, which is about his significant role in American history. Works of art like these create imaginative sparks to awaken the soul, but Will also emphasized that the Scriptures must not be overlooked: "Regular engagement with the Scriptures are needed, especially the prophetic books." He stressed, "Prophetic imagination is really crucial" for gospel engagement, and "other forms of artistry can do this for us as well."

Will added, "Something similar can happen for someone who's operating within the imminent frame." In this framework, people assume, said Will, "This world is all there is. I just need to find my own path and forge my own meaning," which is ultimately unsatisfying. He indicated that this is what Taylor calls "cross pressure" the "ache" inside moderns as they assume meaning is within oneself yet are haunted by a transcendent meaning beyond. An aesthetic experience can, at least for a moment, "enable someone to inhabit a different imaginary," Will said, "and if it's compelling enough, it may begin to influence their actual life."

Imagination and Reason

Each of the participants expressed the importance of the imagination in gospel engagement. Allen commented that although imagination and reason work together, separating them is necessary to appreciate their unique roles. He suggested, however, that they are much more integrated than expected. Allen commented, "C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton both understood this point very well. Both reason and imagination must be firing together." Allen called Chesterton's approach in *The Everlasting Man* "Two

Streams theory" because it showed that "Rationality and the imagination speak different languages." For example, a rationalistic approach to a red rose, Allen shared, "Would be something you break down in terms of its atomic structure, [but] for a poet the red rose speaks the language of love." Although the rationalist and poet are speaking two different languages, "Both are very important ways of coming to understand a rose," argued Allen. Like Chesterton, Allen saw the imagination as a means of perceiving deeper realities, but reason was needed to "assess" and apply those insights to life.

The effect of the imagination is not so expansive, however, that it is without guard rails. Ed stated, "Imagination works in conjunction with reason." Allen added that Christian discipleship requires "a commitment as his followers and his servants to have both firing." Imagination and reason must not work against each other; one need not be excluded for the sake of the other.

However, Zeb had a unique perspective on how imagination and reason work in tandem. He shared about the way he was trained to preach in homiletics classes. Instructors taught him to use imaginative material, such as illustration and metaphors, to "serve reasoning." In this case, reasoning was the ultimate goal. Zeb added that appealing to the imagination was considered a "luxury item" and unnecessary to communicate the truth of the gospel. Gus, who worked with creatives to help them integrate their art and faith to benefit the city, said, "Ninety percent of churches see this kind of stuff as a luxury. [They think] we can't spend our time doing this, we need to be doing the real work [of ministry]."

After preaching for decades and engaging skeptics and struggling believers, Zeb had come to see "illustrations *as* reasoning" because "[illustrations] reason with us." He

mentioned New Testament writer James, who repeatedly uses similes and metaphors to describe the power of the tongue. James describes this small but powerful part of the body, not in propositional statements, but with simile after simile: a fire, a wild beast, a rudder on a ship (James 3:4, 6, 7). Zeb concluded that images better convey the tongue's ability to cause great destruction or good with just a few words, rather than simply stating a propositional claim that the tongue is dangerous.

But Allen, who regularly engaged skeptics and addressed their honest questions and doubts, shared that he was naturally far more left-brained (generally associated with logic and analytical thinking) than right-brained (generally associated with creativity and intuition). In the next breath, he said, "But I want my whole life to move more into the right." He shared that neuroscientist Ian McGilchrist significantly influenced his life in *The Master and The Emissary*, in which he claims that the right side of the brain is where real life happens. According to Allen, moderns have become so left hemisphere in their thinking about the world that it has reduced existence to a dead world of abstraction. Therefore, Allen believed that gospel ministers should be aiming to engage the right hemisphere because that is where life expands and flows out.

Imagination and Meaning

Many participants referenced C.S. Lewis's view of the relationship between reason and the imagination: "Reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning." Most commented that without the imagination, reason is not able to decide or act on the information presented.

Zeb humbly shared how he was still learning about Lewis's distinction between imagination and reason even after decades of pastoral ministry. A colleague of his made

an intentionally provocative statement: “We are God’s *quockerwodgers*. True or False?” The mental exercise exposed that it is impossible to judge whether or not someone is or isn’t a quockerwodger until it is understood what the term means. A person is stuck, unable to reason one way or another, Zeb said, “because we can't make meaning out of the word quockerwodger.” The written letters Q-U-O-C-K-E-R-W-O-D-G-E-R appear as inexplicably drawn lines or symbols. However, Zeb added, “Once we know a quockerwodger is a marionette, a puppet on strings, suddenly we can reason whether the claim is true or false.”

Several participants acknowledged that imagination is necessary to make sense of the world. Ed called the imagination “an epistemological faculty.” In communication, engaging the imagination is much more than a means to grab a listener’s attention or to make the truth more appealing. Rather, it invites people to feel and envision the real world as it really is.

Disenchantment and Lack of Meaning

Most of the participants agreed that the West is in a state of disenchantment. Ron, who pastored a large church in one of the most influential and progressive cities in America, acknowledged that even if his parishioners were not bringing up concerns and doubts influenced by disenchantment, “They're definitely bringing with them the assumptions of a flattening out of the world that happens because it is the air we breathe.” This condition, according to Ron, made it “easy not to believe that God is even there.”

In a recent sermon from Exodus 3, the well-known story of Moses at the burning bush, Ron knew that before his listeners could apprehend the meaning of the text, they had to inhabit the biblical world as the real world. He explained, “The imaginative work

was to get people to see that the biblical text isn't an alternate universe. This is our world. You could stand on the same map coordinates where this event happened." As strange as it might seem to late moderns, God and Moses met in the created world. Imaginative work is more important today than ever because, according to Ron, "It's not the currency we deal in right now. It is a particular burden for pastors today." In the West, many assume the material world is a closed frame reality, and that world seems more real and more central than the enchanted world of the Bible.

Allen, having studied the topic of secularism and ministering in the UK for many years, observed that the problem facing people in the West today is a "chronic meaning crisis." He showed deep concern about widespread loneliness and lack of direction. Reflecting on the past thirty years of ministry and observing escalating rates, Allen concluded, "Suicide rates are directly correlated to the loss of meaning."[612]

Several participants acknowledge that cosmological arguments may still work for a few in an age of disenchantment. However, because people were openly asking *meaning* questions, Allen was convinced that "The place we have to [engage] today is the meaning crisis." He pointed out that many secular thinkers believe human life can't have true significance in terms of meaning without transcendence. Allen concluded, "If C.S. Lewis is correct that the imagination is the organ of meaning, then, we have to take the imagination extremely seriously."

---

[612] Tatjana Schnell, Rebekka Gerstner, and Henning Krampe, "Crisis of Meaning Predicts Suicidality in Youth Independently of Depression," *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 39, no. 4 (2018): 294–303, https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910/a000503.

Imagination and Children

Over his years of pastoral ministry, Zeb had grown more mindful of the presence of children in the congregation and how they engage the sermon. He said, “If I'm quoting a professor or a historian from the first century, I don't even know if our kids are going to get any of that at all.” It was also possible that some of the adults in the room were not gleaning much from scholarly statements either. Zeb was not proposing that scholars should not be quoted but that the imagination must be considered a truth-bearing faculty. Zeb shared how he reasoned with his congregation through a story about building a snow fort with his son and contending with a bully who tried to tear it down. He explained, “If I tell a scene, many of those kids are fully engaged, and it isn't distracting them from the message. It's actually putting them into the place they can imagine it and feel, which means they can reason about it.”

The story’s effect was evidenced by his 5-year-old son’s response. He was fully engaged and also distraught. At bedtime, he was calling out in fear because of what his dad said at church. Zeb, reflecting on the situation, said, “My son can't reason about all this stuff with just rational faculties. But he is in the scene, and he's still working it out.”

Summary of Priority of Imagination in a Disenchanted Age

The interviews revealed that the pastors believed the world is enchanted but many people felt disenchanted in this secular age. The apologetic task aims to awaken people to a sense of transcendence. However, some participants noted that pastors cannot cause a spiritual reawakening.

All participants agreed that there was still tremendous spiritual hunger for those inhabiting an immanent frame. Disenchanted people are longing for meaning and asserted

that many secular thinkers contend that without transcendence, human life cannot possess true significance or meaning.

Power of the Arts to Reawaken a Sense of Transcendence

The second research question sought to determine how pastors understood the power of the arts to provide a path to re-enchantment for those living within the immanent frame.

Power of Aesthetics

Will described the significance of aesthetic experiences because they challenge the "regular everyday imaginaries" and "open up that space of secondary imagination." Drawing from Samuel Coleridge, Will explained, "Primary imagination is how we have any understanding, because through imagination we take all of the data of the world, and we bring it into some kind of meaningful whole." He continued, "Secondary imagination is where you can imagine other worlds, and you can imagine other possibilities—it's the creative imagination." An aesthetic experience might provoke someone to ask, "What if the world is bigger than I thought? What if it's not just material? What if I'm not the center of it?"

Beauty is Compelling

Each of the participants acknowledged the disenchanting effects of the modern world in their own lives. Ron recognized that he ministers to people "who are living in a world in which it is easy, day in and day out, to live as if God doesn't exist." He added, "The practical atheism of everyday believers is very much on my mind and heart." Then

admitted, “I see the effects of disenchantment in my own heart. Even as a pastor, I have to push back against the assumption that this present world is the real world.”

Jack was the exception. He was honest about other weaknesses in his life, but disenchantment was not one of them: “I don't think my struggle has ever been … feeling weighed down by the secular world.” As a visual artist, he expressed that dealing with so many creative people and his engagement in creative projects has, perhaps, protected him from feeling a sense of disenchantment. After reflecting, Jack added, “What I have felt, though, which could be part of the malaise of modernity, is loneliness.” In his view, the biggest issue most people face in our modern age is loneliness.

The large, West Coast American city where Jack pastored is one of the most affluent regions in the United States (ranking among the top 5-10 percent of the wealthiest areas in the U.S. and among the richest 1 percent globally)—known for its high concentration of tech executives, entrepreneurs, and international population. Jack had observed a lack of connection, a lack of meaningful community, which “is a symptom of modernity and the world that we live in.” This observation resonated with his personal story that the church’s mission was to end loneliness in their part of the city. This calling had not developed as a strategic move to attract more people to Sunday worship. Rather, it touched on a deep need and longing people had, which was a condition of disenchantment. “Loneliness is also my own story, my own wounds, and loss of connection,” Jack said his church’s mission was to be a beautiful community that was compassionate toward those with feelings of isolation and disconnection and that authentically addressed the needs of the community through meaningful relationships.

Mike, who lived in a large post-Christian city as a musician and minister, emphasized the kind of community that the church embodies as a public witness to the world. Mike argued that the aesthetic of a community really matters (he defined aesthetic broadly, not only as an artistic aesthetic, but ethical). A beautiful community that breaks through the malaise of modernity must display an "ethical beauty of compassion, tenderness, thoughtfulness, and care," according to Mike. However, this particular aesthetic didn't exclude the truth because truth really matters. People must come to see that Jesus really is "the way … the mender … the healer … the one who has all things in his hands," argued Mike.

Will pointed out how beauty breaks through the haze of disenchantment because "It is very difficult to think our way out of what we really want." The poet Mary Oliver, who says, according to Will, "Our task is to learn how to be still, to stop, to pay attention, and be astonished." What people pay attention to, Will added, "is the most valuable commodity in the modern world—we love what we pay attention to."

Power of Poetry

In a world that suffers from a lack of metaphysical meaning, the arts have a unique way of appealing to human longing. Ed shared that he occasionally reads a few lines of poetry to engage more than only the left-brain part of the mind. He mentioned a section of W.H. Auden's poem, "September 1, 1939." The poem was written by Auden on the day that Nazi Germany invaded Poland, the beginning of WWII. He was living in New York City, sitting in a bar, reflecting on the state of the world, grappling with themes of anxiety, fear, and the search for hope in dark times.

Faces along the bar

Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Ed argued that narrating a poem or story was a significant component to allow listeners to be transported to the imaginative space the author intended. This mental shift meant going line by line to ensure listeners felt what it would be like to have been there. For example, after reading a line, he asked, "Have you ever been to a dive bar? Can you smell the cigarettes and beer?" The goal was to invite listeners into a "felt experience."

Even if a lonely bar in the midst of a war isn't where some moderns find themselves struggling with fear or anxiety of displacement, Ed said, "We still have this haunting sense that we're lost in this world; we're lost in a dark wood. We use distractions and pleasures in this world to appease ourselves." Ed read brief sections of poetry as a way of dealing with that impinging reality of being haunted but longing for transcendent realities of love, peace, and hope. Grant said, "There's something about poetry. There's something about song. There's something about lyric" that speaks to the heart.

Power of Music

Grant noted that Martin Luther, the German theologian and hymn writer, believed, "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise." Reflecting on the critical role of music in literature, he noted, "In the Silmarillion, creation is sung into being. Aslan sings Narnia into being." He continued, "There is something about from

harmony to harmony—from father, son, and spirit to a world that is harmonious—which is distinction united in love." With theological insight in mind, he said, "God is distinction united in love. Creation is distinction united in love. Music is distinction united in love. Music is the most awesome art form."

Each participant mentioned the role of music to re-awaken a sense of transcendence. Zeb shared about writing a worship song and playing that song at a church service. Some Christians were troubled because the music included minor chords. He was asked, "Isn't Christianity a major chord religion?" Reflecting on this incident, Zeb said with a pastoral posture, "For people who are skeptical and hurting, the minor chord really matters. If there's too many major chords and no minor chord anywhere, there's no dissonance, and they don't trust it." Music must reflect the nature of God and the gospel story, which is revealed in major and minor keys.

Acknowledging the mystery of music's power, Grant said, "It's just airwaves compressing. And yet, pressing the smallest bones in your body to judder." Every participant recognized the complexity of explaining exactly what happens when encountering lyrics and tunes that resonate, but no one denied music's power. Attempting to explain, Grant said, "Music is making some electrical signals happen which makes some neurons fire," and then he shouted, "And yet your brain is going, TUNE!" He added that music is "one of the first things I point to in apologetics as something that resists a materialist explanation." Music is the heart's universal language.

Allen told of a woman who had been attending his church. At the time, neither she nor her husband was professing Christians. However, she was a "deeply aesthetic creature," while her husband was a "hardcore physicist." He was more interested in the

facts of the Christian faith, but she needed more. The music drew them to attend Allen's church in the UK. One Sunday morning, there was a mix of old hymns and modern songs, but they were all lyrically rich. Allen shared that this woman was drawn to the ancient hymns, and their "poetic beauty struck her."

But the power of music to evoke the imagination toward belief in transcendent realities extends beyond hymns and corporate worship. Grant attended a worship service in the UK, where approximately a dozen teenagers and some in their early twenties were getting baptized, and it was striking "that more than half of them mentioned a song in their testimony— a couple of them mentioned secular songs," noted Grant. "A really typical Gen Z kind of testimony nowadays," he added.

Grant opened up about his own conversion in college through the lyrics sung by a secular blues band. Their music made more sense of the world than what his professors were teaching. After completing a degree in politics, philosophy, and economics, which he had hoped would articulate for him the good life, he found himself listening to the *Blues Brothers* soundtrack on repeat. He said, "I was 21, listening to John Belushi sing 'Everybody needs somebody to love,' when it genuinely dawned on me that John Belushi knew something that Plato, Descartes, and Kant didn't know." In mid-thought, Grant began singing the chorus "EVERYBODY NEEDS SOMEBODY TO LOVE." This song about human relationships and the need for love offered what these brilliant philosophers had missed—something transcendent and beautiful. What was happening was, perhaps, best explained by Ron who said, "In music, you are connecting truth with beauty."

Prior to this insight, the desire to investigate Christianity was not there. He was compelled to open the Scriptures and start reading the Gospel of Luke. Not only did he

find that everybody needed somebody to love, but "Jesus was the guy to do it." Grant's changed life could be traced back to the creative work of music, even secular music declaring profound truths with no explicit intention to call people to follow Christ.

Ron expressed how powerful singing as a congregation is to Christian formation. Congregational singing is a moving experience because "the words we sing are true," even when faithful Christians "struggle to believe they are true." Pairing truth with music and singing together as one voice with God's people "engages our aesthetic sense, our sense of beauty," to create a transformative communal experience.

Power of Scripture

Over the years of dealing with intellectual arguments and apologetics, Allen observed that the "more cerebral and theologically minded" tended to "neglect the pure aesthetic beauty of parts of the Bible." A woman who began attending his church commented that the liturgical elements of the service moved her, especially readings in the Psalms. For the first time, she realized that "The Psalms were beautiful to listen to," and through these encounters with God in the Psalms, she expressed faith in Christ.

All the participants expressed the blessings of hospitality and a safe environment to ask questions. But Allen described hospitality and gospel engagement as a way to invite outsiders to explore Christianity. He shared about a woman who was not a professing Christian but felt comfortable participating in this Christian community where the pastor's family welcomed the skeptic and the searching into their home. She was an intellectual, literary scholar, but when she encountered the prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18), which Allen read before one of his lectures, "She put her hand up, and said, 'Can you stop, please?'" Allen responded, "Oh, what's wrong?' She said, 'Could

you read that again?'" So, he read it again. Then, she sincerely asked, "Is that the Bible?" He replied, "Yes, it's the glorious introduction to John's Gospel." As an expert in literature, she was staggered by its beauty and became a Christian.

Summary of Power of the Arts to Reawaken a Sense of Transcendence

All the participants affirmed the ability of poets and artists to reveal new and deeper meaning by engaging beauty and the imagination from the raw material of the world. Only one participant claimed that disenchantment had no effect on him. He believed the integration of the arts provided him with opportunities to encounter transcendence, which protected him from disenchantment.

Aesthetics play a significant role in speaking to human longing and inviting belief once the imagination is captivated. Yet, no one claimed that the arts alone can re-enchant unto faith. Poetry, music, and the artistry of Scripture allowed readers and listeners to encounter beauty, evoking a sense of transcendence.

Challenges in Prioritizing Beauty in a Disenchanted Age

The third research question sought to explore how the participants perceived the challenges to communicate the gospel while prioritizing an apologetic understanding of beauty in a secular age.

Aesthetic Poverty

Jack spoke of aesthetic poverty, which is a lack of beauty in culture due to economic, social, or spiritual neglect. Jack's art created opportunities to engage those outside of the church. Some were deconstructing their faith and some were skeptical

about Christianity. “To hell with truth if there's no beauty with it,” stated Jack with force. As a pastor and life-long artist, Jack said truth by itself “will not keep anyone” without appreciating its beauty. On the other hand, beauty without truth, he argued, is “empty.”

As important as the arts were to Jack as a professional artist, he still said, “I don't think art is a silver bullet for the church. A good arts program isn’t going to be the answer.” Jack agreed that the arts are not salvific but responded, “The way a story grips the heart—a movie, artwork, or music—definitely reveals a deep longing and felt need people have for beauty.”

Slowing Down

All the participants remarked on the necessity of slowing down in the West’s fast-paced culture. Gus shared that slowing down, practicing a sabbath day made a significant difference in his own life. He said, “The best kind of sabbaths (not that this is always how it works) are ones when I'm watching a film that I can give a lot of attention to or walking around good galleries and museums.” He mentioned a couple of John Coltrane albums that help him disconnect from the grind of ministry and invite him into a new mental space to connect with God. For him, the soothing tones and sophisticated deliveries of jazz ushered in a sense of calm and peace that change the pace of life and allowed him to reflect and therefore “see” again.

Of course, not all methods of slowing down yielded fruitful results. Intentionality was required to create helpful paths to re-enchantment. Gus confessed, “The worst sabbath experiences are when I just sit on the sofa, binge-watching Netflix, and call that rest.” He explained that one of the biggest challenges was forgetting that “Part of the

spiritual battle, as much as anything else, is relying on self, instead of relying on the Lord to come through on his timing."

What added to the difficulty for people to ponder divine realities, Gus said, is "spiritual laziness" and the "tyranny of the urgent." Gus lived in a busy city with many relational and spiritual needs. He saw the "spiritual impoverishment," but, at times, struggled with paralysis because "when you want to do loads of things all the time, it usually means you don't really do anything worth anything." He learned to slow down and ask, "What is God calling me to now?" He added, "That usually means slowing down even more than what I would like to."

Enjoying God's Gifts

All the participants shared various challenges, but Zeb shared how his family dynamics, with lots of broken relationships, formed his engagement with God's gifts in creation. He described developing a cynicism as a young kid. He said, "Just when you thought something might be good, it's taken from you, so it becomes hard to trust." But the image of God presented in Ecclesiastes 3:13 renewed his hope in the wonderful and beautiful gifts in life. The Preacher says, "Everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man."[613] Not only did this text become personally renewing, but he witnessed it helping believers and skeptics see God as the giver of good gifts to be enjoyed. But to experience these gifts as blessings from God, Zeb said, "It requires a slower, paying attention type of pace, which is not easy to do."

---

[613] Eccles. 3:13.

Zeb first applied this principle to his own life and pace as a pastor and father. Speaking of an experience building a fort in the snow with his son, Zeb said, “My son was giggling, and I realized there is nothing better in life, really. To enjoy my food and the wife of my youth. These are gifts from God, and that's where the joy is meant to be.” Zeb concluded that it would be “a strange thing to try to point to beauty and joy and not possess it or to taste of it ourselves.”

Suspicion of the Arts

Almost all participants communicated a suspicion of the arts, especially in the Reformed tradition. Ron agreed that in some cases, suspicion is “well founded because there's some crazy stuff that goes on out there.” Unfortunately, he continued, “Not all efforts to engage imagination are helpful.” While anything can be distorted, Ron acknowledged that some in his conservative tradition prefer the facts and are fearful the imagination will move them to be “speculative and imagine [the biblical text] wrongly.”

Ron, who ministered in a Reformed evangelical church, referenced a Caravaggio painting in a worship service. Every time he makes a reference, he said, he received blowback from some in the congregation, but he also received more compliments than blowback. Some were concerned about a violation of the Second Commandment, which forbids the use of images for worship. But he shared, “I didn't even show the painting. I just mentioned it and encouraged people to look at it.” The negative response and suspicion made him wonder and ask himself, “Is it worth the hassle?” Will commented that the arts serve as “an incredible bridge to the God who created each portion of creation with dignity in such a vast universe.”

Family dynamics and church tradition can positively and negatively shape how people perceive the arts. Zeb, who was well into his 50s and naturally inclined toward creativity and the imagination, still found himself having to work through past criticisms about engaging the arts. He attended college to major in the arts, but it was frowned upon by those closest to him. Many saw the arts as impractical or a fun pastime. So, the arts were relegated to a hobby, meaning they weren't taken seriously. Zeb added that sometimes even the Reformed theological tribe can skew a proper engagement with beauty through the arts. He said, "I'm intentionally trying to let myself take a half hour to read a fable by Hans Christian Andersen, to read poetry by Mary Oliver, and to believe that this is part of helping me see God's world."

Comprehension or Apprehension

All the participants commented that the arts had a crucial role in reawakening imaginations. Zeb said, "Artists like [Tolkien] would tell us that our best fiction enables us to see the real world."

But Allen pointed out that Jesus's ministry was largely about helping people see the world as it truly is. Jesus asked the blind man in Mark 10, "What do you want me to do for you?" The man said, "Let me recover my sight." Drawing from this passage, Allen said, "How we see the world is the key thing" in life. He commented, "We see the world in such limited ways." But Allen argued that perception doesn't mean total comprehension of transcendence. "Comprehend is to conquer," Allen explained, which "goes right back to the enlightenment vision, the conquest of nature. We're in the phase of the conquest of human nature which Lewis said would destroy us. That's my disenchantment, thesis." On the other hand, he added, "To apprehend is to see." The

purpose of seeing is not to see through everything and therefore becoming cynical. Instead, seeing is to help find lasting "hope," Allen said, "to envision a future."

Individualism or Community

Individualism is one of the insidious challenges in this cultural moment. Will argued, "Beauty is rooted in a trinitarian theology … held together in community." He connected the Trinity to a trifold experience of truth, goodness, and beauty, which flows from God. It was certainly possible to have a personal experience of beauty, but that will "easily dissipate if it's not held together in a communal context. This is where the individualism of twenty-first century culture is working against the inherent longing for enchantment," Will explained. People desire beautiful experiences. In fact, they go searching for them.

He observed, "People are willing to go off and have a wilderness experience and a sense of the sublime or watch a show. But are they willing to process that experience with others in a way that's vulnerable?" The "secret sauce," according to Will, is processing those transcendent experiences to "bridge from aesthetic experience and the encounter with beauty to a point where someone might move in some way, intellectually, or emotionally, or willfully, toward God." Will argued that aesthetic experiences are "always more powerful with others."

Over-Explanation or Mystery

Allen offered a gentle critique for those in the Reformed tradition who over-explain the liturgical elements of a worship service, instead of allowing the liturgy to do the work of shaping the experience of the gospel. His concern was that "ministers,

especially Protestant Christians, try to over-control." One of the negative effects is a disruption in the lyrical flow. But Allen shared a deeper concern. The trouble with many pastors, he said, is that their "sermons so often tie up every loose end," which stands in stark contrast to his own Christian experience. He shared, "The longer I'm a Christian, the more questions the Bible generates in me. It doesn't [always] come to resolution. It opens up whole new worlds." He connected his Christian experience to Lewis' articulation of the continuous journey and expansive nature of life with God: "Further up and further in," Lewis wrote in *The Last Battle.* Allen continued, "I think the kind of Reform circles we come from, we tie everything up rather than leaving some huge metaphysical questions for people to expand them and to push them to go on. That's the experience of resonance."

Allen expressed that teaching without a definite conclusion would be an unrealistic expectation in the Reformed tradition. Sermons and teaching help to settle theological matters, and yet answering one question often raises several more. Allen was quick to admit that the longer he has been a Christian and reads the Bible, the more questions he has. The reason, he argued, is that the gospel and its implications are expansive. "The Bible doesn't come to a [neat] resolution; it opens up whole new worlds." He explained that the Bible invites people into new realities that are mysterious and may not be initially understood at first hearing.

Summary of Challenges in Prioritizing Beauty in a Disenchanted Age

All the participants affirmed that truth alone was not sufficient to reawaken the moral imagination or guard against disenchantment unless accompanied by a deep appreciation of its beauty. A deep suspicion of the arts prevented Christians from

enjoying God's good gifts in creation and constructed an unnecessary barrier to engage the arts apologetically. This posture toward the arts also created an aesthetic poverty in many evangelical and Reformed churches. One participant mentioned incorporating a song during a Sunday worship service for apologetic purposes, but no one described how to include visual arts.

Each participant shared that the frenetic pace of life was a significant challenge to having a meaningful encounter with beauty. A few pastors expressed the importance of weekly liturgy and rhythms in worship and a regular sabbath, which included experiences in nature and thoughtful engagement with the arts to see the world as it really is.

Methods in the Creative Process for Communicating the Gospel

The final research question sought to explore the goals and methods pastors employ in their creative process to communicate the gospel while prioritizing beauty.

Communicating Beauty

None of the participants shared identical methods or practices to prioritize beauty with those inside or outside of the Christian community.

Writing Poetry and Parables to Pay Attention

Zeb shared that he has been writing poems or fables inspired by his sermon preparation. This practice has made him more observant of the beauty around him, in nature and relationships. He said, "To communicate something beautiful means learning to look for it as a way of life," which is what writing poetry or fables did for him.

Zeb also pointed out that Scripture invites an artistic way of paying attention. He turned to Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 and read it aloud in the interview: “Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.” In other words, besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, but also carefully organized and crafted proverbs, and, Zeb observed, “So it is poetry” that is being celebrated.

Zeb had realized that in his preparation and study of God’s Word the doctrine was not what was solely important. He argued, “It isn't just the content that I pull away is from God, the mode in which the content comes is as important and intentional on God's part.” The prophet Isaiah says, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”[614] Zeb observed that God is employing metaphor to effectively reason. God makes a direct call for his people to come to him so that they can reason together using metaphorical language that their sins are *like* scarlet, *as* snow, *like* crimson, *like* wool. Zeb said it finally occurred to him, “Oh, God talks like this.”

Grant wrote a few fun but subversive poems that unexpectedly went viral online. He said, “I had a quite reductionistic view of poetry. I just thought it's a trick of the mind.” But he came to see the power of communication and gospel engagement through poetry. Even though writing poetry had come naturally to him as a teenager, he had not developed a theology of the art form. To him, poetry was initially a gimmick. Grant said, “My view of poetry was the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. So, I

---

[614] Isa. 1:18.

would leverage the gimmick and make it a delivery system for the gospel that I could inject." Instead of an art form with meter and metaphors that communicate truth and meaning, it was reduced to a technique to be instrumentalized. Grant described his shallow view of poetry as "using the paraphernalia of poetry" because the truth was unpleasant. Consequently, the preacher's goal was to make the "ugly truth" look better. Grant said that stories are often misused simply to "bait the hook" rather than to convey the deeper truth embedded within them.

Inviting to a Strange New World

A few participants referred to communicating the gospel as inviting people into the strange new world of the Bible. The work of the Christian, argued Ron, is to "keep telling people that the world we live in is enchanted," and show that the modern world "is actually an illusion, and it doesn't work" because it can't ultimately satisfy.

Grant spoke about Jesus's method: Jesus would take teachings and then "de-familiarize you" through imaginative and subversive storytelling. Almost all Jesus' hearers had heard the Old Testament stories, as well as the prophets being sent out to communicate God's covenant love for his people, which included being a blessing to the nations. But Grant said, "They'd never heard of it as someone inviting people from the highways and hedges into a wedding feast" (see Luke 14:23)—that was a completely new way of seeing salvation. It was a new way of seeing God's redeeming love for sinners.

Grant gave an example of this approach when he was preaching at Durham University in the north of England. He spoke on John 10, framing his sermon, saying, "Never has anyone claimed to be so high and so lowly in the same breath: 'I'm the Good Shepherd.'" In Hebrew Scriptures, Grant stated, the Lord is the shepherd (Ps. 23). In the

New Testament, Jesus claims to be "the good shepherd." Jesus proves his identity, Grant argues, by "lay[ing] down [his] life for the sheep." Reflecting on the provocative opening, Grant said, "You couldn't think of a stranger proof of divinity. … I'm God, and I'll prove it to you. … watch me choke to death on a cross."

Dare to Be Arresting

Many participants appealed to the imagination through stories and illustrations to draw people into the beauty of the gospel. They all agreed that beauty is a universal language of the heart that must be considered in tandem with the truth of the gospel.

Grant, after humorously admitting his own terribly short attention span (he said it was "almost zero!"), shared the importance of gripping people from the beginning. His intention was not to entertain his listeners, but he said, "You wouldn't necessarily say my introductions are beautiful, but my purpose is to be arresting."

In one of his classes, Will asked his students to write down their attention collection. This idea came from David Dark's *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious*, and Will summarized it this way: "Your attention collection are those bits of art, culture, and beauty that have held your attention in some kind of formative way." These were books, music, movies, or visual art that had formed identity for good or for ill. The purpose of the exercise was to be more than a memoir; it was also to be an imaginative project. Will asked, "What would you want in your attention collection? How do you want to be formed? What questions do you have that you want answered? Where do you feel that ache and hunger for meaning?" These questions directed the curation process to engage various works of art and to provide paths for others to experience re-enchantment.

Create Tension

Most of the participants spoke about using illustrations and stories to communicate the biblical text. Grant shared about investing a significant amount of creative energy on the introductions to his sermons. His goal was to set up the theme, and to say to the congregation, “You think it’s like this, but actually, it’s like that. Now, come with me … It will change everything you thought about X.” He added, “That's what Jesus’ is definitely doing in his parables. Even in his didactic teaching, I think that's what he's doing. It's what he's doing in every conversation.”

Ed mentioned trying to create tension. He showed contrasting pictures of reality to show that the stakes were high. The approach engaged the listener because the gospel matters. In Ed’s preparation, he regularly asked himself the following questions, “What is” and “What could be.” First, identify the problem ("What is"); next, articulate "What could be ..." by envisioning what one author describes as the new bliss. Ed argued that this method inherently apologetic because distorted views in culture are named but also countered with the good news of gospel realities that are better than anything that could be imagined with earthly wisdom. Ron stated, “Getting into the biblical text that grounds us in reality” is the only way to encounter eternal bliss.

Zeb applied this pedagogical principle in his ministry. He pointed to the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says, “You've heard *it* said, *but* I say to you.” That means, explained Zeb, “There is an ‘it’—there are things people have heard about that ‘it.’” Then, he continued, the ‘but” indicates a problem— “something incomplete between what people have heard said about that it.” Zeb shared how this reality gap shapes his sermon preparation: “I think about what people have heard or said about *it* or seen about *it*.” Zeb pointed out, “Philosophers tell our cultural stories, but our poets and storytellers

do, too." He suggested that most people are probably more in touch with modern storytellers, songwriters, and poets about what they are saying than most pastors assume.

Compare and Contrast

Zeb preached the Scriptures in a way that compares what is in the biblical text with what is said or believed in today's world. He related an experience when he preached on the Holy Spirit, knowing a woman would be sitting in the third row who considered herself to be an oracle. She was convinced of the supernatural and transcendent realities because she believed she was able to access spirits. Zeb decided to approach the topic of the Holy Spirit in the way of (e.g., slower paced and parabolic), rather than in the way of a prophet (e.g., urgent and direct). In the sermon, he said, "In the natural world, there are people who do good and people who don't. But in the supernatural realm, there are spirits who are with God and spirits who aren't, and Jesus is Lord over any spirit, any person, no matter what realm we're talking about." Then, Zeb intentionally engaged the imagination so that listeners could reason about the Holy Spirit, as someone beautiful: "What if there is no other spirit in existence that can claim the title of 'holy?'"

Zeb added that the Bible paints a picture spanning the natural world and the spiritual world but contrasts those two worlds with the biblical world where the Holy Spirit enters the physical world for all who simply ask God, like a child asking a father.[615] Zeb aimed to display the person of the Holy Spirit by communicating creatively so that the truth might be the final push into belief after the imagination was captivated by the beauty of the gospel. In this situation, the woman raised her hands high in the air with her

[615] Luke 11:13.

head bowed, as Zeb said, “Just ask him.” Zeb described a stillness that fell upon the congregation in that moment, and it appeared to him that she was asking. Her text to him afterward was, “DANG! God bless you. We are going to talk.”

A Beautiful Community

Gus’ ministry was in an urban area in the UK where community was desired but their busy and fragmented lives prevented them from experiencing it. He pointed out that there was a spiritual component to the social need in his city. Gus said, “There's not too many people who would say they're interested in Christianity in our neighborhood. Only about 0.3 percent go to a church at all out of 60,000 people. But there is that ache for something more.”

Gus shared that most people who attend his church were attracted to their community because they saw the church interacting with each other. Strangers, with nothing obvious in common, were loving one another. John 17 was a key passage that Gus preached over the years to lead and form his congregation to become this beautiful community for their city. Gus said, “When a Christian community understands that the Father sent the Son, and the Father loves those who love his Son, the church becomes a new kind of loving and infectious community.” Gus described his church as “attractive, confounding, and weird to people.” He said, “So, when we have our friends over, they're like, how in the world do you know [this variety of people]? You don't really have anything in common, but you seem to really know a lot about each other's lives.” They responded by sharing that they are part of the same church or small group, which is, according to the Gus, “a kind of beautiful community” that people long to experience.

Beauty was captured in a well-told story or work of art, and beauty was stunningly displayed in embodied lives together. Will argued, “There's a social element to beauty.” This was a critical point for Mike who served as a pastor and was involved in the arts community as a professional musician. He referenced Lesslie Newbigin who famously said, “The only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.” What made a church a credible hermeneutic of the gospel, argued Mike, was “the shared life of the church in their neighborhood.” Furthermore, “In that matrix of relationships that Christians have at work, formal and informal relationships, and how the church encounters their neighborhood,” he explained, “is how people will interpret the good news about Jesus.”

The church’s aesthetic witness came up as well. People noticed an “ethical aesthetic” and “an interpersonal aesthetic,” according to Mike, which is the church’s call to love its neighbors. He said, “Worship is a very powerful way of inviting people to consider more deeply the journey that God has us on together in our particular neighborhood.” There were also other ways “each household” can informally engage neighbors. Because of Mike’s musical talents, he hosted music events at his home, provide live music. He shared that these events have gathered “a diversity of ages, from teenagers to young adults to middle age, retirement, age.” Mike mentioned that many from his church have “become really knit in with some of our neighbors” through these social events, which is “a beautiful illustration of the way that art and celebration … becomes something that brings healing and joy” between secular neighbors and the Christian community.

Gus, who planted a church in an urban context the UK, shared about a man—a materialist, fundamentalist atheist type—who visited his church but was interested for only two reasons. He "wanted to understand Shakespeare better" (he needed the biblical references), and he "wanted to write a book about why people shouldn't believe in Christianity." He began coming to gatherings and getting to know people in the church to collect research for his book. To his surprise, he discovered that his atheist community ostracized him for associating with Christians, even though he intended only to study them for his project. Eventually, he experienced Christians as intelligent and loving. Reflecting on this experience, Gus said, "The church loved him well, helped him through some really difficult things, and he was baptized last year." The man, who had been antagonistic toward the church, was now leading "Intro to Christianity" courses at the same church that walked with him when he was "argumentative and cantankerous." Gus, using the man's own words, described the reason for his dramatic conversion: "the beauty of community."

Jack pointed out that the beauty of Christ can also be seen in an individual person. But he was careful to define a beautiful person as someone who is broken—in whom "the grace of Jesus comes through the clay vessel." A beautiful person wasn't necessarily someone who had an "airtight" life, which often produces "a self-righteous, critical, judging person," he said. Rather, from the place of brokenness, he said, "the truth of the gospel comes through in such a more powerful way."

Art Nights

Jack was a fourth-generation artist, which began with his grandmother, a nationally known cartoonist and illustrator. He managed an art studio in a West Coast

city in the US “to share beauty through art, books, and film.” During Jack’s three pastorates, he hosted quarterly art nights, taking themes like longing, beauty, love, or happiness—something everyone would be interested in—and exploring those themes through drama, film, music, comedy, paintings, and poetry.

Allen expressed how meaningful it was to host film nights with a small group of people, including Christians and skeptics. But he also stated, “A problem with film nights is, we quickly go from watching the film to discussing it and try to parse it and analyze it. I think we talk about films too quickly, and we just become theoretical. We don't allow the piece of art to work on us.” Allen went on to say, “I often find when I wake up in the morning, after watching a great film the next morning, it's been in my dreams.”

Will took small groups of students and parishioners to participate in Slow Art Day, an international event founded in 2010 and typically occurring in the spring. Will argued that it's more likely to “influence their actual social imaginary if they're able to process with others.” Additionally, the benefit of doing this event with others counteracted “the natural defenses from going up as soon as you are done, and just going directly back into your custom imaginary,” according to Will.

Spiritual Mentors

Will, who has written extensively about the human need for beauty, recommended equipping spiritual mentors to provide “direction on the level of a curate, based on someone’s struggles, personality, and wherever they are in their journey.” Will expressed with disappointment, “The algorithms are choosing for us. Our mentors are social media, or whatever's on the bestseller list, or the next queue on Netflix.”

Then Will shared about a friend who broke his neck in his 20s and since then, has experienced many dark nights of the soul. Yet, every time his friend had an encounter with beauty, he would "take a picture or send a line from a poem," saying, "This is God's gift for me today. This is how I'm getting through today." Will claimed, "The only reason he's still alive is because of beauty. Beauty is what has given him hope."

Integrated Life

Jack gave a long pause before providing an answer about how he prioritized beauty in his creative process. His artistry and pastoral ministry were so integrated that it was difficult to separate the two. Unexpectedly, he said, "I'm playing pickleball, which isn't necessarily art and beauty, but it's community and friendship and connection. I go and visit people in the hospital when they're sick." Those experiences were quite different from his massive painting series of 365 bridges along the river that runs through his community. The artistic vision for the project, Jack said, was "to build bridges between the different cultures and religions, between generations, between the history of the place and people." Reflecting on this project, he argued, "Is it pastoral? Well, yes, is it. Is it the arts? Well, yes. Is it apologetic? Yes, it's completely integrated."

Jack's main goal was not to preach a compelling sermon on a Sunday morning or to create inspiring art for his community; rather, he said, "I'm trying to live a beautiful life: a life of truth and beauty and creativity and be who God made me to be."

Summary of Methods in the Creative Process for Gospel Engagement

All the participants understood that there is an artistic way of paying attention. A few of the pastors wrote creatively to train their eyes and heart to see what would

otherwise go unnoticed. A few participants wrote poetry. One regularly wrote fables inspired by his sermon preparation. Others hosted art events. A few thoughtfully contrasted the modern world with the biblical world to expose the beauty of the gospel.

Some participants expressed a lack of training to appreciate the apologetic importance of beauty and imagination. However, they discovered years into ministry that God communicates artistically through the Scriptures. All expressed creative ways the arts must be employed to inspire wonder and delight as disenchanted people are invited to consider the strange new world of the Bible.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined how pastors prioritized an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel. The findings were from nine pastoral interviews and reported common themes and relevant insights drawn from the research questions. Although the world is inherently enchanted, the conditions of secularity in late modern culture had disenchanted many. The allusiveness of stories was a powerful means to break through the immanent frame and perceive true reality.

Spiritual longing continues despite disenchantment. Many secular thinkers believe without transcendence, life cannot possess significance or meaning. Although none of the participants claimed that the arts alone can re-enchant unto faith, the arts invite people to encounter beauty, evoking a sense of transcendence. However, the busy pace of modern life and a suspicion of the arts among many evangelical churches has presented significant challenges to having meaningful encounters with beauty. All the participants understood that God communicates artistically through the Scriptures and expressed

creative ways the arts must be employed to inspire wonder and delight to consider the strange new world of the Bible.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted age with the gospel.

The following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe the priority of an apologetic understanding of beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
2. To what extent are pastors aware of the power of the arts in prioritizing beauty to communicate the gospel in a disenchanted world?
3. How do pastors describe the challenges they encounter in prioritizing beauty to engage a disenchanted world with the gospel?
    a. What are some cultural challenges?
    b. What are some theological challenges?
4. What methods do pastors use in the creative process to engage a disenchanted world with the beauty of the gospel?
    a. What goals do the pastors have at the start of the creative process?
    b. How do pastors incorporate the arts in communication?
    c. How do pastors incorporate the arts outside of the Christian community?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from nine senior pastors. The literature review examined three main areas:

disenchantment in late modernity, a theology of beauty, and the role of the imagination in re-enchantment.

The literature has shown that while the world is inherently enchanted, the conditions of late modernity have blinded many Westerners to transcendence, leading to an absence of a felt presence of God, a lack of meaning, and an existential malaise. Attempting to live as buffered selves in an immanent frame and searching for meaning from within cannot satisfy the human longing for more beyond the material world. In this cultural milieu, beauty emerges as a compelling force—capturing the heart and stirring the emotions more powerfully than intellectual or moral arguments can. Without beauty, truth loses its power to enthrall, but a beauty-first approach to apologetics contains singular pedagogical and cultural advantages over a truth-first approach. Once the imagination is reawakened by the beauty and goodness of the gospel, truth provides the final push into faith.

The imagination, functioning as a bridge between the immanent and transcendent, enables the mind to perceive transcendent realities that lie beyond the limits of the material world. For example, setting the mind on things above or remembering Jesus in the Lord's Supper requires imaginative engagement and fosters re-enchantment in an age that doubts transcendent realities.

The interviews revealed that many pastors and congregations are experiencing the effects of disenchantment, along with strong spiritual longings. Many secular thinkers argue that, without transcendence, life lacks significance. The allusiveness of stories, poetry, music, and other forms of art breaks through the immanent frame and reveals transcendent reality. Although none of the participants claimed that the arts alone can re-

enchant unto faith, they relate how the arts invite people to encounter beauty, evoking a sense of transcendence. However, the busy pace of modern life and suspicion of the arts among many evangelical churches present significant challenges to meaningful encounters with beauty. Despite these obstacles, all participants agreed that God communicates artistically through the Scriptures and advocated for creative employment of the arts to inspire wonder as individuals delight in the captivating world of the Bible.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined insights from contemporary scholars writing on the role of beauty and the imagination in a secular age and from several pastors and artists leading congregations, ministries, and theological students to engage disenchanted people with the gospel. In this section, I synthesize the findings into five main areas and then provide some recommendations for ongoing pastoral practice.

Priority of Beauty in a Disenchanted Age

Based on my research and pastoral experience, the aesthetic dimension of traditional apologetics has often been ignored. Instead, a cogent argument is viewed as the primary task of engaging people with the gospel. This approach relies on a well-reasoned case to engage people with the Christian faith. The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal proposed a different approach, summarized in a three-fold strategy: “Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next, make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it

is."[616] Rather than attempting to prove that Christianity is true, desirable, and, finally, respectable, Pascal reverses the progression and instead recommends that Christians show religion to be *respectable*, then *desirable*, and then *true*.[617] My analysis indicates that Pascal's reversal is not simply a rhetorical shift but an epistemological claim: beauty reveals truth in profound ways that mere propositional arguments cannot.

Given that the late modern West has grown disillusioned with Christianity—often rooted in historical and theological reasons such as the Crusades and the problem of evil—I contend that beauty functions not as a luxury but as a precursor to belief.

A Disenchanted Age in an Enchanted World

The interviews revealed that from the beginning of creation in Genesis 1, when God made the heavens and the earth, the world was inherently enchanted. The world was physical and spiritual as God was the divine Creator and sustainer of all things and intimately connected to the daily lives of his creatures. The created world doesn't need to be re-enchanted, nor does the gospel need to be made beautiful. However, the cultural shift 500 years ago during the Enlightenment has reshaped how the West interprets the world. Late moderns now presume no sacred order exists at all, or if a spiritual realm does exist, it is disconnected and impersonal.

My findings confirmed that while many people in late modern culture are in a state of disenchantment, spirituality in the West is on the rise. Some interpret this "spiritual turn" as a potential restoration of re-enchantment; others, like Jacobs, describe

---

[616] Pascal, *Pensées*, 4.

[617] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't*, 3.

it merely as "a kind of brief mental vacation from a disenchanted world of buffered selves."[618] These occasional encounters with mysticism substantiate neither a full re-enchantment nor do they provide a stable bridge to orthodox faith capable of sustaining belief and community.

Using Taylor's thesis of the buffered self, I also argue that modern spiritual experiences do not transcend the immanent frame. In other words, these experiences are situated within a modern moral order and are not governed by an external transcendent reality, which has the authority to challenge individual preferences. Jacobs acknowledges that modern individuals desire supernatural experiences and appropriately characterizes them as "peer[ing] over the fence," at the superstitious activity of those who seem to connect with transcendent realities.

Despite the increasing variety of spiritual interests, Western culture continues to operate within an immanent framework. I agree with Ed, whose doctoral research examined Taylor's concepts of immanence and transcendence, that our cultural moment is not as enchanted as it was before the Enlightenment. He argued, "Human flourishing is framed within this world," even in the context of rising spiritual interest. Noble effectively argued in *Disruptive Witness* that modern spiritual experiences focus on personal transformation rather than on a deity who transcends the material world with authority to order reality. Instead, Western spirituality is best understood as curated experiences tailored to one's personal interests. These experiences serve as an enchanted veneer overlaying the immanent frame rather than a decisive return to pre-Enlightenment enchantment.

---

[618] Jacobs, "On the Myth of Disenchantment."

A Wonderful World

Almost all the pastors acknowledged the corrosive effects of the immanent frame in their own lives and within their congregations. My analysis revealed that pastors consistently struggle to maintain a sense of awe in a culture that resists looking beyond itself. Therefore, rekindling wonder in the metaphysical is not optional but imperative for pastors in a world that habitually turns inward.

Some highlighted the importance of regular immersion in the natural world to experience creation's beauty—going for walks, noticing flowers, insects, and trees—as a discipline to reawaken wonder. One participant assigned an immersive pedagogical exercise to his theology students: he asked them to put away their devices and spend the first twenty minutes of class walking around the grounds of campus. The students discovered new types of flowers or insects and experienced the awe and divine artistry hidden in plain view.

Several participants recalled the renewing effects of experiencing God's creation. As Will noted, numerous studies confirmed that encounters with natural beauty—especially when combined with meaningful dialogue—can elicit transcendent experiences beyond the self. These encounters are as simple as beholding the majesty of a towering tree or the tranquility of a placid lake. Combining such an encounter with the gospel can be particularly enchanting. The natural world and the biblical world have a way of inviting people into unexpected transcendent experiences, revealing how beauty plays a critical role in experiencing and communicating divine truth.

By prioritizing encounters with the beauty of creation, pastors underscore that the divine is not a distant abstraction but a present reality. One pastor spoke candidly about how the effects of spending too much time in the city surrounded by modern technology

and human achievement drained his spiritual vitality. Without regular exposure to beauty for extended periods of time, even experienced pastors can lose sight of the enchanted world they aim to represent and proclaim.

Psalm 19 proves how the psalter itself directs readers back into creation as a corrective to disenchantment. The claim that "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" is a powerful consolation for believers and an apologetic for skeptics—capable of re-establishing a sense of wonder and awakening the doubter to the abundant goodness of God.[619] While general revelation alone will not suffice to effect conversion to Christ, the aesthetic force of creation still works as a non-negotiable precursor. Beauty demands attention, it arrests the skeptical mind, and invites observers to consider its transcendent source.

Pastors who cultivate an attentiveness to creation are actively countering the modern instinct to limit reality within an immanent frame. By prioritizing wonder, pastors equip congregations to perceive the real world as a revelation of divine beauty.

The Bible Begins and Ends with Beauty

Beauty bookends the biblical narrative. This narrative structure reveals God's delight from creation to consummation. My analysis of Genesis 1:31 shows that the refrain "it was good" (found in verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) conveys not so much moral virtue but an aesthetic pleasure in creation. Drawing on Collins's insight that "good" signifies that creation was "pleasing to [God]" and that "God takes delight in it and that man at his best will do so as well," I argue that the term "good" encompasses

[619] Ps. 19:1.

beauty.[620] This idea is echoed in Mohler's rendering of the final statement in Gen. 1 as "It was beautiful. It was very beautiful."[621] Therefore, the goodness theme in Genesis 1 highlights the beautiful nature of God, which spills over into all his creative work.

Furthermore, the consummation of redemptive history culminates in a renewed beauty that surpasses the original state of creation. Revelation 19 describes the church in bridal imagery, adorned in "fine linen, bright and pure."[622] It also depicts the New Jerusalem descending from the heavens, radiant "like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."[623] Both images serve as divine affirmations of beauty restored. Johnson observes that every architectural feature of the heavenly city "illustrate[s] aspects of the church's loveliness in the eyes of God."[624] Biblical eschatology presents beauty not merely as ornamentation but as the pedagogical means through which God displays the fulfillment of his redemptive artistry.

Gospel Engagement Begins with Beauty

The interplay between beauty and truth is a longstanding discussion going back to Greek philosophy. The medieval transcendentals—truth, goodness, and beauty—were explored by influential Western thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine. Both Plato and Aristotle believed the world was imbued with meaning and purpose, a

---

[620] Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 70.

[621] Mohler, "Will Beauty Save the World?"

[622] Rev. 19:8.

[623] Rev. 21:10-11.

[624] Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 309.

perspective that contrasts sharply with the views of many modern people living in a secular age. Samples argues, "The cosmic values of truth (that which defines reality), goodness (that which fulfills its purpose), and beauty (that which is lovely) were considered objective in nature and knowable" in the premodern world.[625] Beauty was seen as an intrinsic feature of reality, alongside goodness and truth. Nonetheless, von Balthasar proposed a pedagogical order in which the aesthetic takes precedence, with the will being informed by beauty and the intellect following goodness.

Von Balthasar makes a compelling case that beauty should be "first" in the order of the transcendentals, rather than the last.[626] This marks a significant shift. He insists that God "does not come primarily as a teacher for us ('true'), as a useful 'redeemer' for us ('good'), but to display and to radiate himself, the splendor of his eternal triune love in that 'disinterestedness' that true love has in common with true beauty."[627] In this sense, aesthetic *beauty* is not desired as a means to another end; it has no utility other than to be enjoyed.

Drawing on interviews with pastors across denominational and cultural lines, Reformed churches distill preaching and teaching down to a set of propositional truths, overlooking the inherent beauty of the biblical narrative. Allen notes, "Reformed circles often make the gospel message a kind of set of facts, which are very transactional. … I'm constantly referring to the beauty of the story, including how things get so messed up in the middle of the story." He emphasized, "If you're going to appeal to the power of story,

---

[625] Samples, "The 3 Transcendentals."

[626] von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 1:18.

[627] von Balthasar, *My Work*, 80.

you've got to somehow [tell] that story as beautiful." Will added that a beauty-first approach "hits us at the level of our desires" in a way that raw propositions cannot.

Prioritizing beauty in apologetics reshapes the way the gospel is presented and received. Beauty should not be thought of as a technique to attract listeners; rather, it is the fertile soil from which desire for God grows. Humanity was never created simply to know facts about God but to enjoy him. No relationship flourishes when it is based on acquiring knowledge about one another. Therefore, positioning beauty as the entry point to theological understanding prepares listeners to engage the gospel as a cosmic story that unfolds from beginning to end. This approach elevates beauty as a necessary priority as it intricately weaves together doctrine with delight and invites hearers into a holistic encounter with the divine.

Beauty Will Save the World

The literature and participants expressed a shared conviction: without beauty, truth fails to captivate the human heart. As von Balthasar observes, "In a world without beauty … the good loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out."[628] Without beauty, propositional truth becomes sterile—an empty shell that "will not keep anyone," as artist and pastor Jack remarked.

The statement by Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Beauty will save the world," raised two critical questions: Can beauty truly save the world? If so, what kind of beauty saves? Though the participants stopped short of Dostoevsky's grand claim, they all affirmed that beauty plays a crucial role in salvation, a role that is often overlooked.

---

[628] von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, 1:20.

Beauty inspires a profound response in people. My findings indicated that when beauty is suppressed, faith is reduced to pragmatism; conversely, when beauty is embraced, truth regains its power to enthrall and endure.

Allen's testimony illustrated this dynamic. He shared the story of a woman who, though she did not identify as a Christian, felt welcomed in a community of skeptics and believers who gathered in his home. A literary scholar by profession, she raised her hand during one of his lectures after he read the prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) and asked, "Could you read that again?" He read it a second time. Then, she inquired, "Is that the Bible?" He replied unsure how she would ultimately respond, "Yes, it's the glorious introduction to John's Gospel." Being overwhelmed by the Bible's eloquent prose and transcendent claims, she finally embraced Christianity from the heart. This interaction demonstrates the remarkable power of beautiful language coupled with the revelation of transcendent truths. It follows that if a particular kind of truth can save the world, there must also exist a corresponding beauty capable of doing the same.

Theologically, I align with Patitsas' assertion, "The *actual* Beauty that will save the world will be nothing less than the ultimate revelation of Christ and of him crucified. Such Beauty will save us because it will wipe away any trace of estrangement we have acquired towards God through the trauma in our lives."[629] I agree with Vander Lugt's conclusion, "This is the beauty that entices us to believe and to move beyond the suffocating boundaries of a buffered existence into a life of faith, grace, and joy. This is the beauty that brings hope and healing despite all the troubles and the traumas we

---

[629] Patitsas, *The Ethics of Beauty*, 619. (emphasis original)

carry."[630] This form of beauty is not sentimental; it possesses a salvific quality that draws the affections toward the crucified Christ.

The power of beauty also extends into common grace. God utilizes ordinary means to communicate hope, peace, grace, and love. The blessings found in common grace reflect the nature of a good and loving Creator. Simple blessings such as reading a good book, sharing stories, listening to a meaningful song, enjoying a beautiful landscape, laughing with a friend, playing with one's children, and experiencing artistic beauty are what Lewis describes as "the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited"—hints of a greater reality.[631] The divide between the sacred and secular, although conventional, is problematic because the divide is much smaller than assumed. Does not Psalm 19:1-2 reveal this truth? Creation itself is declaring the glorious wonders of God. Romans 1:20 asserts that God's "eternal power and divine nature" are made visible through the created order, extending an invitation to wonder.

In worship, congregational singing merges doctrinal truth with melodic beauty. Although the lyrics are true, individuals may struggle to embrace them wholeheartedly. However, Ron rightly noted that the beautiful tune of the gospel continually "engages our aesthetic sense, our sense of beauty." In other words, music works on listeners long after they leave the sanctuary. The cumulative effect of weekly encounters with beauty-infused truth shapes a congregation's identity and bears witness to the power of the gospel.

---

[630] Vander Lugt, *Beauty Is Oxygen*, 131–32.

[631] Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 31.

My findings indicate that the church must view beauty as a truth-bearing faculty and a pathway to discover what is true. This beauty can be encountered in the exalted prose of Scripture, the radiance of a sunset, or the lyrical richness of a hymn and awakens desires, moves the soul, and ultimately points to Christ, who alone provides salvation.

Purpose of the Imagination in Re-enchantment

The imagination is not merely a decorative add-on but an indispensable truth-bearing faculty. Drawing on scholar Brueggemann's diagnosis, I agree that "the key pathology of our time, which seduces us all, is the reduction of the imagination, so that we are too numbed, satiated and co-opted to do serious imaginative work."[632] Therefore, renewing imaginative capability is crucial to the process of re-enchantment. However, pastors should refrain from treating this faculty as a strategic tool for captivating an audience or softening the edges of rational arguments.

Medieval thought reveals that the imagination and reason function in tandem. The imagination furnishes sensory data and constructs images in "a form that the intellect can act on and use to understand."[633] Their relationship is not akin to "two sides of a coin;" rather, it resembles the connection between "a building's foundation" and "the structure that is built upon it."[634] Consequently, reason is dependent on the imagination—without it, the intellect is left with abstract concepts that lack the substance necessary to discern truth from falsehood.

---

[632] Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, 199.

[633] Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 87.

[634] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 23.

My analysis points out that modern perspectives which regard the imagination as optional ultimately starve reason of the necessary images it needs. This leads to sterile arguments that fail to resonate and stir the heart. By reintegrating the role of imagination into cognitive reasoning, Christians and congregations will be better equipped to recognize and articulate the beauty-laden truths that facilitate the process of re-enchantment.

Imagination Conveys Meaning

Imagination is the medium through which meaning is envisioned and communicated. Zeb, who preached regularly for decades, underwent a paradigmatic shift. His seminary training in homiletics had taught him to use illustrations, metaphors, and stories primarily to "serve reasoning," often relegating the imagination to a secondary or even optional role. This perspective fails to see the vital function of the imagination in the human experience in grasping truth. Lewis profoundly stated that imagination acts as the "organ of meaning," which gathers raw information and transforms it into vivid images that resonate with meaning.[635]

When preaching fails to address the imagination, sermons devolve into propositional statements that don't connect with human experience. In contrast, when the imagination is recognized as a truth-bearing faculty, illustrative language is generative, allowing listeners to apprehend truths beyond simple intellectual comprehension. By embracing the imagination, preachers can access the nuanced layers of transcendence.

---

[635] Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," 354.

Imagination as Reasoning

The literature review unveiled the importance and role of the imagination, but the interviews provided a deeper insight: the imagination is not only a precursor to reasoning but also an essential mode of reasoning itself. Narrative elements such as illustrations, metaphors, and images "reason with us," as Zeb noted. This perspective overturns the notion that creative communication simply paves the way for more "serious" intellectual work. Humans do not grasp truth solely through abstract calculations; they explore ideas through vivid, image-rich reasoning.

The distinction between engaging the imagination *as* a mode of reasoning versus using it merely *for* the sake of reasoning is crucial. When the imagination is recognized as having the capacity for reasoning, it enables hearers to "try on" truths rather than just agreeing to them. For example, James's epistle does not tackle the dangers of the tongue using sterile syllogisms; instead, it employs striking similes (like a fire, a rudder, and a wild beast) that effectively fulfill the reasoning task. The reader understands the urgency of self-control because the metaphorical imagery accomplished the work of logical persuasion, eliminating the need for debate.

By promoting imagination as a form of reasoning, preachers enrich theological communication. When the imagination is appreciated as co-equal with propositional content, it engages both the mind and the heart, fostering enduring conviction rather than mere temporary agreement.

Imagination as Seeing

The imagination restores the ability to see reality more fully—a remedy to what Gould identified as the modern cultural pathology, which is a "failure to see."[636] My research confirms Ordway's claim that the imagination functions as a bridge between not seeing the world as it really is and actually seeing it. It allows individuals to inhabit alternative "worlds" helping them "to see what it's like to live … with certain assumptions, certain ways of being." This exploration aids in discerning transcendent realities obscured by the immanent frame.[637]

Taylor, Bailey, and others reframe disenchantment not merely as the subtraction of belief but as a deliberate construction of a new worldview—an experience that is "a second nature, not a first," as Smith articulated.[638] Over the past 500 years, Western society has erected a vast dome that blocks out the metaphysical. Therefore, re-enchantment requires more than just logical arguments; it calls for provocative narratives and imagery that "clean our windows" to borrow Tolkien's phrase, revealing the transcendent world that persists behind secular borders.

Scripture illustrates this work of imagination as a means of seeing. In Mark 10, a blind man approaches Jesus and has his sight miraculously restored. Besides physical healing, this miracle points to spiritual perception that sees the world correctly. By curing this man's disability, Jesus presents a new reality where the spiritually blind gain sight, the lame walk, and the dead rise. It represents an entirely new way of seeing the world.

---

[636] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 58.

[637] Ordway, "Escape Is Not Escapism."

[638] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 48.

While Allen's regular practice of engaging his congregation's questions after preaching attempts to help people see more clearly, he acknowledged that a renewed perception is not synonymous with full comprehension. His reference to Guite was clarifying: "To apprehend is to see," which is an important distinction from comprehension. A finite being may never fully grasp eternal realities, but imaginative engagement provides space to apprehend the contours of biblical reality.

Stories, metaphors, and aesthetic encounters enable believers and skeptics to perceive the world as it is. Apologetics must "help people recover a fresh view of the truth," as Ordway insists, so that they "see Jesus for the first time and really see him; to actually see the reality of sin, and the beauty and brokenness of the world."[639] In doing so, the church dismantles the self-constructed dome of modern disenchantment and recaptures a vision of creation and redemption beyond the immanent into the rich reality of biblical transcendence.

Power of the Arts

The arts stir the imagination, uncovering truths that elude purely intellectual or ethical arguments. I agree with Kreeft, who concludes that aesthetic experiences are "more, not less, adequate than intellectual or moral analogies."[640] Through storytelling, poetry, music, and visual art, the deepest human longings find a portal to the transcendent, reawakening the heart toward the divine.

---

[639] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 88–89.

[640] Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty," 30.

For three decades, Jack has integrated the arts into his ministry—an unconventional approach in his tradition—hosting regular art nights that explored themes such as longing, beauty, love, and happiness through drama, film, music, comedy, paintings, and poetry. The studio's mission was "to share beauty through art, books, and film." While many of the pastors I interviewed expressed their disenchantment within modern life, Jack reported no such struggle; his dual role as an artist and a pastor sustained him through continual encounters in the transcendent realm. Beyond gallery walls, he also found transcendence on the pickleball court—not "art and beauty, but [through] … community and friendship and connection." He skillfully wove those diverse communities together, comprised of "a quarter from the church … half from [the] pickleball community … another quarter from the art community." He remarked, "I'm trying to live a beautiful life."

One of Jack's painting projects featured an impressive series of 365 bridges stretching across the river in his community. His vision was "to build bridges between the different cultures and religions, between generations, between the history of the place and people." The commission he initiated celebrated communal spaces and cultivated meaningful relationships throughout the city. Reflecting on the project, he stated, "Is it pastoral? Yes. … Is it the arts? Well, yes. Is it apologetic? Yes, it's completely integrated." His project exemplifies the subtle apologetic power of the arts.

Uncontainability

Beauty resists easy definition. Von Balthasar describes it as an "uncontained splendor" surrounded by the dual concepts of the "true and the good."[641] When encountering the arts, responses are inevitably unpredictable. A single piece of artwork can elicit vastly different reactions. Yet, when beauty touches the soul, it hints at a reality beyond itself toward the infinite. Will rightly concluded that art's uncontainability produces a sublime experience that "can't be reduced to the things we're used to reducing life to" in a secular age.

Art generates more questions than answers, which stirs the imagination to wonder and sparks conversations that wrestle with its significance. Aesthetic experiences are analogous to understanding the divine, moments that transcend words while remaining inspirational and thought-provoking. These encounters illuminate the ways God is at work, even when such manifestations are not immediately apparent. The arts contain an apologetic uncontainability driven by a provocative impulse that extends beyond the bounds of the immanent frame.

Reorientation

Film, music, and literature reshape and re-enchant lives around a new set of narratives. As Zeb pointed out, storytellers like Tolkien "tell us that our best fiction enables us to see the real world," ultimately reorienting one's understanding of reality.

---

[641] von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 1:18.

Escape, Recovery, Consolation

Tolkien famously identified three transformative powers in well-told stories: escape, recovery, and consolation.[642] Stories invite readers to leave behind (or "escape") the familiar terrain of the "primary world" and immerse themselves in a "secondary belief" within a fictional realm.[643] However, the most profound gift of narrative lies not in suspending belief or presenting philosophical ideas; rather, it explores concepts from within, enabling readers to experience them in an alternative world. Escape is not an end in itself; it introduces renewal, transforming the reader so that when they return to the primary world, they are changed. As Ordway argues in *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, "Good stories and poetry help us to see more clearly when we close the book and re-enter ordinary life."[644]

In Tolkien's schema for powerful storytelling, "recovery" refers to the reader's reintegration into reality after being transformed. This re-entry is marked by a new way of seeing reality in God's world. The dynamics are captured Nathan's parable in 2 Samuel 12. King David, caught in the alluring trap of consequence-free power, killed Uriah, claimed Bathsheba as his own, and covered up his transgressions. Contrary to what one might expect, Nathan confronted David with a rousing story. David was convinced that his immanent reality constituted the "real" world, but Nathan's perfectly tailored story disarmed David's defenses, allowing him to escape his self-constructed "fantasy." Upon re-entering into reality, David undergoes a spiritual recovery. Although his circumstances

---

[642] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 66–76.

[643] Tolkien, 61.

[644] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 89.

remain fraught, he confesses, "I have sinned against the LORD."[645] In that pivotal moment, an awakening occurred, lifting him beyond mere acknowledgment of moral wrongdoing and leading him into a transformative experience of divine grace.

Grant observed, "One of the beautiful things about a story is it takes you out of your ego." Enjoying a captivating novel or film requires viewers to step into the lives of other characters, temporarily setting aside their own sense of being the protagonist in their own lives. This rare opportunity, when "someone stops playing the main character," opens the door to see the world with new eyes.

Finally, consolation offers a reversal that reveals the inherent beauty and order of the world, even in the face of sorrow. Tolkien coined the term "eucatastrophe" to describe the "sudden joyous turn … a sudden and miraculous grace."[646] This term, derived from the Greek words *eu* ("good") and *katastrophe* ("overturning"), refers not to a cliché redemption but to a glimpse of "a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world" that denies universal defeat.[647] It represents "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world," a vision suggesting that resolution exists beyond individual grief.[648]

The interplay of escape, recovery, and consolation form a powerful apologetic framework for ministry in a culture often feeling "jaded and ignorant about Christianity."[649] Apologists must invite Christians and skeptics to encounter Jesus anew:

---

[645] 2 Sam. 12:13.

[646] Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 75 (emphasis original).

[647] Tolkien, 77 (emphasis original).

[648] Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 75 (emphasis original).

[649] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 88.

escaping false assumptions, recovering a renewed perspective on reality, and experiencing the consoling effects of knowing God as good and gracious. Disregarding these narrative categories ignores the heart of human experience, choosing instead to rely solely on logic. However, genuine transformation can take root in the heart when the imagination is engaged to reason meaningfully with listeners.

Power of Music

In my interactions with practitioners, it became clear that music possessed an extraordinary ability to reawaken transcendence in parishioners and skeptics. Martin Luther, a still-popular hymn-writer himself, famously ranked music as second only to the Word of God in apologetic power. His claim resonates in other modern experiences in art and worship as well. For example, Grant, a creative pastor and apologist, devoted time to writing a poem centered around a widely celebrated cultural holiday to subversively address the distinction between a secular viewpoint and a Christian perspective. He set the poem to music and posted the song online, which unexpectedly went viral. Reflecting on this achievement, Grant described music as the "most awesome art form" because of its ability to communicate meaning in ways prose simply cannot.

The academic literature reinforces the testimonies of these pastors. The most evocative music often includes classical pieces or lyrically rich songs that draw out a deep longing for something beyond immanent experiences. The apologist Kreeft shares his encounter with Bach's music as evidence of divine existence, stating, "There is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Therefore, there must be a God. You either see this or

you don't."[650] Similarly, an Iranian science professor at a prominent university credits Bach's artistic work with opening his heart to Christianity.[651] Although he appreciated Bach's music throughout his life, it wasn't until he attended a church worship service that he recognized the same "Christian fabric" intricately woven into Bach's musical compositions, which allowed the gospel to finally come home to his heart.

The apologetic power of music is fundamentally rooted in the gospel narrative. Throughout Scripture, major keys (themes) illuminate the brilliance and hope of the Father's covenantal love, while minor keys capture the Son's journey into suffering and his ultimate sacrifice on the cross. As expressed in Hebrews 12:2, Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him"—embodying the tension between sorrow and joy that music often expresses best.

Zeb, who led a sizeable congregation of skeptics and dechurched individuals, observed, "For people who are skeptical and hurting, the minor chord really matters. If there are too many major chords and no minor chord anywhere, there's no dissonance, and they don't trust it." When worship includes both major and minor keys, it captures the gospel message. The pastor does not merely proclaim a message of hope based on Christ's redeeming work on the cross but situates it in the pervasive brokenness of a fallen world. Churches that embrace both chords display the depth of Christianity's redemption, which takes what is meant for evil and turns it into good, transforming loss into hope, and turning death into life.

---

[650] Kreeft, “Twenty Arguments God’s Existence.”

[651] McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*, 47.

Power of Poetry

Jesus repeatedly employed illustrative language in his teachings, using similes, metaphors, and parables to communicate eternal truths. His practice should be instructive for pastors today. A careful examination of Jesus' ministry demonstrates that propositions alone are insufficient for reaching the human heart, mind, and will with the gospel. Instead, it implies the importance of alternative means to communicate gospel truths beyond straightforward didactic approaches. Relying exclusively on propositional statements risks flattening the gospel to cold, abstract doctrines. In contrast, poetic language invites listeners into a more imaginative and experiential encounter with truth.

Poetry, however, should never be just a creative attention-getter or gimmick to make sermons more appealing. As Grant candidly admitted: “I just thought [poetry] was a trick of the mind … a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down.” The gospel is not a bitter truth that needs to be disguised. Instead, poetry—through its use of meter, metaphor, and allusion—engages the whole person (mind, emotions, and imagination) and communicates profound meaning and truth. When art is treated as a seductive technique, it is “reduce[d] to outcomes.”[652] This misapplication strips poetry of its depth, relegating it to mere “paraphernalia,” as Grant put it, rather than allowing individuals to experience its transformative power.

Emily Dickinson's poem "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant" highlights the ability of poetry to unveil truth indirectly in a way that dazzles but doesn't blind by offering the truth "gradually." This perspective is echoed by Will, who noted that truth presented in an indirect manner—"by virtue of allusivity" or "slant" through

---

[652] Meynell, “A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise,” 144.

"metaphor"—often proves to be more persuasive and impactful. Moreover, Dickinson's poem suggests that the power of poetic language is due to its subversive, unexpected, provocative, and even unsettling approach to communicate what is fundamentally true.

This is reminiscent of Jesus' parables, which rarely reveal their full meaning upon first reading. The true significance comes into focus only when contemplated obliquely or from different angles, then the layers of meaning become apparent. The apologist must learn to skillfully craft language that strikes at the deepest longings of the soul, which supplies listeners with a more nuanced understanding of reality that can be applied in any cultural moment.

Problems Engaging a Disenchanted Age with the Gospel

Addressing people with the good news of Christ, whether enchanted or disenchanted, has always presented significant challenges because the battle is not against flesh and blood, but rather against dark cosmic forces. Paul's approach in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) offers a helpful model for ministers in late modernity. As he explored the Areopagus, he took time to listen to local poets and study the city's traditions and objects of worship. It was only after recognizing their spiritual hunger and addressing their futile worship of an "unknown god" (Acts 17:23) that he presented the gospel as the narrative capable of fulfilling every human longing.

Christians must actively explore the stories and beliefs within their cultural context. Engaging with secular narratives identifies gaps where these faith systems fall short and shows how the gospel fulfills what the world can never satisfy.

Blinded by the Self

A defining marker of Jesus' ministry was his ability to restore physical and spiritual sight. In Mark 10, when Jesus healed the blind man, he accomplished far more than simply restoring the man's vision; he transformed the man's entire perception of the world and unveiled himself as the long-awaited Messiah promised to give sight to the blind (Isaiah 61). However, life within the immanent frame has traded that expansive vision for a limited one. As a result of elevating the autonomous self, the mystery of the sacred and the meaning of life itself are abandoned. Gould warned that ignoring God's involvement in the world distorts the ability to see, which is "the first step of our descent into disenchantment."[653]

I agree with Allen's insight that the "key" to life is "how we see the world." The late modern West, being the first culture to base reality on a rejection of a sacred order, reduces life to subjective experience, deriving purpose and meaning solely from within the self. Thus, satisfying personal desires becomes the primary focus of existence. Although academic, artistic, and entertainment institutions often promote the idea that sacred depths lie solely within—implying that moral values are determined by the self—there remains a haunting suspicion that there must be something more. A world devoid of transcendence is a meaningless and empty existence. Yet, the assertion that a personal God provides meaning and defines what is true, good, and beautiful in a disenchanted age is often viewed as oppressive. I affirm Keller's assessment: the central modern belief is

[653] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 46.

the right to "choose [your] own values and create [your] own meaning"—a freedom that, paradoxically, often leaves people sightless.[654]

Crisis of Meaning

In the West, the absence of transcendence has led to a deliberate removal of God, which has untethered meaning and purpose from the modern world. Unlike pre-modern societies, which found meaning "outside of time, or in higher time or eternity," and rooted identity within a cosmic narrative that connected it to a sacred order, contemporary individuals often search for meaning within themselves.[655] This shift is radical: it exposes the difference between a young child being told that she is made in God's image and an adult who constructs their own purpose based on personal desires.

Allen, an apologist in the UK, correctly assesses the primary issue in the West as a "chronic meaning crisis." The rise of secularism has atomized humanity, reducing life to individual preferences and leaving communities disjointed. Psychological research supports this observation, and as Allen notes, "Suicide rates are directly correlated to the loss of meaning." In a culture where individuals do what is right in their own eyes, loneliness and despair become endemic.

While rational arguments may resonate with some, they are generally more helpful for those who already align with the Christian story. In today's context, many are less concerned with the truth of Christianity and more interested in questions of meaning. Late moderns express skepticism about the goodness and beauty of Christianity, yet they

---

[654] Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter*, 6.

[655] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716.

seek to understand whether the church is compassionate towards those with differing worldviews or sexual ethics, especially in relation to their struggles. As Ortlund cautions, "If we commend only the truth of Christianity and neglect the appeal to beauty and goodness, we are actually not hitting the central, animating concerns of our culture," which revolve around an intense aching for meaning.[656]

Suspicion of the Arts

The Reformation of the sixteenth century brought about a markedly different perspective on life compared to the enchanted medieval period. A key change was the practice of rejecting icons in religious spaces because of their perceived mediatory powers, which resulted in what Bailey described as a "theocentric shift." This corrective decision aimed to protect against the magical associations tied to icons that were believed to grant direct access to God. This shift reaffirmed Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity; however, the effort toward iconoclasm unintentionally imparted a "disenchanting edge" toward modern society.[657]

In their attempt to purify the church through iconoclasm, many Protestant communities went too far and became overly concerned about violating the second commandment. This overreaction bred a distrust of the arts within many Reformed, Puritan, and evangelical traditions, driven by a fear that visual images would overshadow divine revelation. Interestingly, neither the literature nor the interviews mentioned the distinct aesthetic approach of the Dutch Reformation, which welcomed the visual arts.

---

[656] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't*, 9.

[657] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 33.

This openness to the apologetic role of beauty ultimately gave rise to Rembrandt, one of the few renowned Protestant painters.

Several participants indicated that some congregants prefer just "the facts," fearing that the imagination could lead to speculation and distortions of biblical teachings. Yet, when communication is restricted to propositions alone, the church risks losing its "persuasive power."[658] I agree with Ortlund that the current state of disenchantment in Western culture stems from a time of "apathy about the truth," which undermines trust in biblical claims. The cultural authority of biblical truth has waned significantly. Consequently, it is crucial to return to a much older approach that recognizes beauty as a vital resource capable of "cutting through disenchantment and apathy"—one that can bypass intellectual defenses and reach "down to the heart."[659] Including the arts is an important pedagogical resource that broadens the church's ability to connect with late modern people for meaningful gospel interaction.

Provocative Methods to Engage a Disenchanted Age

My research and pastoral experience affirm that metaphors, illustrations, and stories serve as powerful methods to engage the imagination and convey the meaning of Scripture to Christians and skeptics. The goal of cultural apologetics, especially in the late modern context, is to provide glimpses of transcendence—moments that pierce through a worldview ordered within an imminent frame and allow individuals to behold the beauty and goodness of Jesus. These experiences tap into a profound yearning for

---

[658] Ortlund, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't*, 7.

[659] Ortlund, 7.

something greater, which mere rational information cannot satisfy. Such encounters invite listeners to embrace a transformed understanding of reality.

Slowing Down to Pay Attention

All the participants expressed, without any prompting, that a deliberate slowness is essential to re-enchantment. A profound sense of beauty requires sustained attention. Gus illustrated the difference between a rich and a hollow Sabbath experience. He discovered spiritual renewal not through binge-watching Netflix but by "watching a [thought-provoking] film," lingering in world-class "galleries and museums," or enjoying a "John Coltrane" album. Thoughtful immersion in the arts can restore a sense of order and peace, calming the soul and allowing God and the world to be seen with fresh eyes.

The practice of attentiveness aligns with Fujimura's assertion that a Christian posture toward God and the world goes beyond simply acquiring academic knowledge. Slowing down allows individuals to savor what might easily go unnoticed and trace those newfound insights back to their divine source. For example, in Matthew 6, Jesus illustrated God's faithfulness by referring to a blade of grass. The Creator who "clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven" implies what Jesus made explicit—that he will "clothe you" (Mat. 6:30).[660] Spiritual insight is attained not only by rigorous study of the Scriptures but also through embodied experiences that evoke wonder. Space is needed to fully appreciate the world's splendor, which ultimately reflects the character of the divine artist who made it.

---

[660] Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, xv.

Engaging Poetry and Fables

When writing short stories or poetry, an author must cultivate an attentiveness to the surrounding beauty that often goes unnoticed. This beauty must first be perceived, then carefully observed, and ultimately savored—only then can its true essence be understood and shared. As Zeb shared about his own creative process, he mentioned that writing fables taught him "to look for [beauty] as a way of life."

The same level of attentiveness is needed when engaging with the Bible. The mode in which biblical content is delivered is just as valuable and deliberate as the doctrine itself. For example, in the book of Isaiah, God invites the reader into a dialogue: "Come now, let us reason together … though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red, they shall become like wool."[661] It is crucial that pastors realize that God speaks like a poet—describing sin *like* scarlet, *like* crimson, and portraying forgiveness *as* white *as* snow, and *like* wool. God reasons with his listeners using vivid metaphors and imagery to penetrate the heart and provoke the mind.

This approach continues into the New Testament, even after Jesus' earthly ministry is complete. One example is found in James' epistle: he employs a series of similes and metaphors to describe the dangers of the tongue, favoring this evocative method rather than propositional logic. He explains that a small bit can control a wild beast, a small rudder can steer a ship, and a small fire can consume an entire forest (James 3:3-5). Such imagery is more than ornamental; it expresses the gravity and complexity of spiritual realities in ways logic alone cannot achieve.

---

[661] Isa. 1:18.

These examples underscore an essential truth: figurative language cannot be avoided when articulating transcendent truths. Literal language falls short, especially when attempting to describe God, who is a Spirit without a physical form. In this delicate dance of communication, metaphors and similes bridge the gap between finite language and infinite realities.

Contrasting Worldviews

Modernity has attempted to replace the enchanted world for a disenchanted one, insisting that a disenchanted "reality" represents the true nature of existence. In an age determined to substitute wonder with reductionism, Christians would benefit from drawing on Jesus' method of communication in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5). Jesus juxtaposes the familiar and accepted religious assumptions of the Pharisees against the unexpected and more profound biblical reality by repeatedly stating, "You have heard that it was said … but I say to you" (Mat. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).

Incorporating this apologetic framework in encounters with neighbors or sermon writing engages listeners' baseline assumptions by comparing opposing faith systems. Inserting a pivotal "but" to emphasize contrast points out the inadequacy of these prevailing misperceptions, indicating that the world does not work as they assumed. Distinguishing secular and religious ideologies using the redemptive words of Jesus Christ awakens listeners to a better reality and facilitates an encounter with the beauty of the biblical narrative, which can fundamentally reorient people's lives toward transcendent meaning and eternal joy.

A similar concept is what Grant described as "finding the edge"—the intersection where the gospel cuts against the dominant cultural narratives that shape "how people

normally think." This edge not only subverts secular ideologies but also challenges the comfortable "stained-glass sensibilities" prevalent within the Christian community. I agree with Grant that until Scripture is shown to be "subversive, unconventional, and disruptive," it will struggle to effectively counter the false cultural assumptions of late modernity as well as the unbiblical traditions present within Christianity.

Inviting Listeners into a Strange, New World

Even in the midst of the disenchanted condition of modern life, people remain, at their core, spiritual beings. Most of the pastors interviewed were aware that their parishioners functioned within an immanent frame. However, the gospel story continually invites them to look beyond the familiar. Given the cultural shifts, Zeb wisely broadened his preaching palette from a simple dualism, contrasting the natural and spiritual realms, to a more nuanced triad encompassing the natural, spiritual, and biblical worlds.

The natural world is understood through the lens of human morality and ethics—distinguishing between those who act according to acceptable moral standards and those who do not. On the other hand, the supernatural realm is inhabited by spiritual beings: some are in a loving relationship with God and aligned with his purposes, but others stand in opposition to the divine. Lastly, the third world is the mysterious and unfamiliar world of the Bible, where ultimate reality is revealed.

Contrasting the biblical story with other faith narratives exposes the unique qualities of the Christian view of life and the world, including how the gospel offers resources not found in other religions. One suggested strategy for sermon writing is to create introductions that are not limited to presenting the message's theme but paints a compelling vision of the biblical world.

This experience can feel like being transported into a strange new realm with prophetic visions, honest depictions of depravity, and also unexpected acts of redemption. The introduction may resemble more of an invitation to embark on an adventure than just a lesson to learn or an argument to contend with. Grant put it this way: "You think [the world is] like this, but actually, [the real world is] like that." Challenging cultural narratives in this manner presents the biblical vision of reality as a better alternative rather than just one of many. Describing the modern spiritual journey as a "wild and crazy ride" is not meant to intimidate but to inspire exploration of the sacred wonders of biblical reality. This perspective reawakens disenchanted people to transcendence and assists their apprehension of the beautiful truths of the gospel of Christ.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings from the literature reviewed and interviews conducted, a few pastoral recommendations emerged.

First, pastors should learn to speak to the imagination. As the “organ of meaning,” the imagination plays a crucial role in communicating truth, particularly in an age facing a crisis of meaning. Pastors who purposefully incorporate the arts into their personal lives and public ministries—whether through storytelling, music, poetry, film, or visual arts—enrich their apologetic palette to connect with the core concerns of people today. When pastors recognize the arts as a reflection of the divine artist, they can tap into the deep recesses of the soul and build a culture of engagement that acknowledges parishioners as more than just rational beings.

Second, pastors should help individuals recognize the distinction between a secular worldview and a biblical one. This ability involves adopting “biblical lenses” that

reveal the benefits of a personal God who created the world as a gift, came to redeem all that is broken, and promises to make all things new. It is not about a nostalgic return to ancient rituals but about viewing the world as it truly is. When the secular narratives of individualism, materialism, and pragmatic reductionism are set alongside the transcendent hope in Scripture, the emptiness of these secular stories becomes evident.

Jesus illustrates this point in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "You have heard that *it* was said … *but* I say to you." This contrast stresses the authority of Jesus over against the authority of the scribes and Pharisees. Although Jesus' context differs from late modern culture, making cultural connections while pointing out the transcendent biblical reality is a faithful approach. When pastors point out the richer and more fulfilling reality of God's kingdom, individuals can break free from shallow beliefs and redirect their affections toward Christ and his promises.

Third, preachers should engage the arts personally and within their communities. Pastors ought to prioritize practices such as reading novels, poetry, or fables, as well as visiting art galleries. These pursuits nurture a renewed imagination and inspire leaders to appreciate the arts for their ministry life. Ultimately, leaders can assist others in exploring re-enchantment in the real world.

The arts are undeniably evocative, yet their effect is not always guaranteed. Because imaginative works may sometimes fail to impress when consumed privately, group reflection should be a regular part of the Christian experience. After watching a film, reading poetry, or a experiencing a musical performance, it's essential to allocate time for discussion. Collaborative processing is especially important in an individualistic culture that determines meaning from within. Engaging in these discussions encourages

congregants to consider how artistic experiences connect with biblical themes and to contemplate their implications for modern life.

From the inception of creation in Genesis to the vision of the heavenly city in Revelation, the Bible paints a rich tapestry of beauty as the beginning and the ultimate destination of all things. Before immediately jumping into ministry responsibilities, pastors ought to take a moment to reflect: "Where do we see glimpses of beauty?" Looking for beauty opens up space for wonder, which, in turn, fuels delight in ministry. Whether through enchanting experiences in nature, a worship service that stirs the heart and speaks to human longings, or an encounter with an artistic piece that unveils the splendor of creation, these moments are striking reminders that humanity was made for more—a greater beauty and greater truth. When pastors prioritize an apologetic understanding of beauty rather than just adopting truth claims, resilience in hardship is nurtured, joy in worship is experienced, and a deeper thankfulness for God's unfolding grace becomes the typical Christian experience.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on the experiences of nine pastors who creatively engaged secular people with the gospel. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuing the following areas of study could be helpful for those interested in the apologetic importance of beauty and the imagination in a disenchanted age.

First, in traditions that emphasize the primacy of the preached Word, particularly in Reformed churches, there is often hesitation regarding the use of visual arts in corporate worship. Can a carefully chosen painting enhance the understanding of a

biblical text without crossing into idolatry or violating the Second Commandment? While visual images are accepted in Christian educational settings such as classrooms or small groups, research could further investigate congregations that have integrated tasteful visual art into sermons or liturgies. These studies should identify best practices that maintain theological fidelity and pedagogical clarity while also considering the risk of sensory overload in an image-saturated society.

Second, although this dissertation focused on the apologetic power of beauty, it did not explore the art of persuasion. What evidence supports the notion that aesthetics and imaginative engagement encourage epistemic openness? How do carefully crafted narratives, metaphors, and artistic encounters disarm cognitive defenses and invite skeptics to view the biblical world as a plausible reality?

Third, many churches treat the arts as secondary, often limiting them to children's classrooms. What might it look like for a theologically conservative church committed to traditional ecclesiastical practices to fully embrace the arts—such as poetry readings, film nights, or other artistic gatherings—as meaningful components of discipleship and outreach? Studying Christan communities that have taken such bold steps to engage the unchurched or nominally religious could uncover practical insights and best practices. As Meynell points out, "The church needs a conviction that the arts have intrinsic power which God can use to present people with spiritual reality in non-rationalistic ways."[662] Engaging this cultural moment requires a freedom to innovate and a willingness to fail to reclaim beauty as apologetic truth and awaken a generation lulled to sleep by secularism.

---

[662] Meynell, "A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise," 260.

Pursuing further research could equip scholars and pastors to recover the imagination as a locus of meaning, refine engagement with the arts, and embrace creative risk for the sake of the gospel. Dostoevsky's assertion that "Beauty will save the world" suggests that a deeper exploration of beauty's role in communication might enable a new generation to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the most extraordinary beauty of all.

Final Thoughts

The literature indicated that the world is fundamentally enchanted; however, it was Grant's interview that clarified the significance of this claim. At a time when secularizing currents have lulled many into a state of spiritual amnesia and blinded modern people to the notion of transcendence, the pastor's mission is not to re-enchant the world as if it wasn't already enchanted. Instead, it is to awaken those trapped under the spell of disenchantment and invite them back to the wonder and truth that modernity has attempted to conceal.

A paradigmatic example of this is found in Nathan's confrontation with David (2 Sam. 12). David perceives, in that moment, reality as an immanent existence, convinced there is no possibility of transcendent interference. He believes he is free, yet he is imprisoned within the self. Instead of directly condemning the king for his adultery and murder, Nathan takes an unexpected approach by telling him a parable: "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor" (2 Sam. 12:1). Through this story, Nathan invites David to inhabit an alternative moral world. In that narrative space, David's outrage at the rich man's injustice breaks through his self-deception. Here, Tolkien's threefold function of story is illustrated: escape, as David steps outside his own

immanent assumptions and spiritual blindness; recovery, as he gains renewed insight into his sin; and consolation, when Nathan declares, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam. 12:13). Tolkien defines consolation as the "sudden joyous turn … a sudden and miraculous grace. … Joy beyond the walls of the world." [663] Through this "secondary belief," David is drawn into the true world of God's justice and mercy.

Nathan's subversive parable does more than secure David's confession—"I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:13)—but also reshapes his imagination, prompting the heartfelt psalms that follow. Most notably Psalm 51, illustrates how David's contrition is eclipsed by the greater reality that God delights in sinners who approach him with a "broken" heart (Ps. 51:17). In that moment, the biblical world became David's authentic reality. He discovered that forgiveness, renewal, and hope are not abstract concepts but the essence of life in God's presence.

Just as Nathan's story brought David back to a place of clarity, pastors today must consistently employ subversive narratives, striking metaphors, and purposeful contrasts to jar the disenchanted back into the world of gospel reality. When sermons, films, poems, or hymns are offered as an "echo of *evangelium*," listeners can begin to taste and see the true world—the world that was, is, and always will be—an enchanted, inexhaustible reality of God's redeeming love for even the most undeserving.[664] As Herbert portrayed this profound love in “Love (III),” the agnostic Simone Weil was awakened, encountering God through a poem.

“Truth, Lord, but I have marr’d them; let my shame

---

[663] Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 75 (emphasis original).

[664] Tolkien, 77 (emphasis original).

Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"

"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."

So I did sit and eat.[665]

[665] Herbert, "Love (III)."

Bibliography

Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University, 2008.

Bailey, Justin Ariel. *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022.

———. *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020.

———. "Thinking about Disenchantment: An Assist from C.S. Lewis for Understanding Charles Taylor." *Justin Ariel Bailey* (blog), October 26, 2016. https://pjustin.com/thinking-about-disenchantment-an-assist-from-c-s-lewis-for-understanding-charles-taylor/.

Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *My Work: In Retrospect*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1993.

———. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Seeing the Form. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2009.

———. *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*. Translated by Adrian J. Walker. Vol. 1. Truth of the World. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2001.

Barfield, Owen. *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*. 2nd ed. Wesleyan Paperback. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1987.

Barnes, Julian. "'Nothing to Be Frightened Of.'" *The New York Times*, October 4, 2008, sec. Books. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/books/chapters/chap-nothing-to-be-frightened-of.html.

Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999.

Bingham, Matthew C. "Brains, Bodies, and the Task of Discipleship: Re-Aligning Anthropology and Ministry." *Themelios* 46, no. 1 (April 2021). https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/brains-bodies-and-the-task-of-discipleship-re-aligning-anthropology-and-ministry/.

Boersma, Hans. *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.

Bono. "Even Better Than the Real Thing (Single Version)." U2 Songs, 1992. https://www.u2songs.com/songs/even_better_than_the_real_thing_single_version_340.

Brierley, Justin, and Tindall Belle. “Middle Earth - Holly Ordway.” Re-Enchanting, May 29, 2024. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/re-enchanting-middle-earth-holly-ordway/id1682867001?i=1000657124824.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991.

Burton, Tara Isabella. *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. New York: Public Affairs, 2020.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John Thomas McNeill. The Library of Christian Classics. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006.

Capps, Matt. “In Christian Theology, Beauty Demands to Be Noticed.” The Gospel Coalition, July 23, 2018. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christian-theology-beauty-demands-noticed/.

Chapell, Bryan. *Ephesians*. Reformed Expository Commentaries Ser. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009.

Chatraw, Josh. *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk about God in a Skeptical Age*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020.

Chesterton, G.K. “Ethics of Elfland.” In *Orthodoxy*. Chicago, IL: Moody Classics, 2009.

Chiu, Enrique. “The Mural of Brotherhood by Enrique Chiu (Mexico).” WorldCitizenArtists, May 8, 2022. https://www.worldcitizenartists.org/post/the-mural-of-brotherhood-by-enrique-chiu-mexico.

Ciuba, Gary M. “‘To the Hard of Hearing You Shout’: Flannery O’Connor and the Imagination of Deafness.” *Flannery O’Connor Review* 10 (July 2012): 1–18.

Clarkson, Sarah. *This Beautiful Truth: How God’s Goodness Breaks into Our Darkness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. New York, NY: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1834.

———. *The Statesman’s Manual; or, The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon, Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society, with an Appendix, Containing Comments and Essays Connected with the Study of the Inspired Writings*. London: Gale and Fenner, 1816.

Collins, C. John. *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006.

Cosper, Mike. *Recapturing the Wonder: Transcendent Faith in a Disenchanted World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017.

Currid, John D. *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning?* Leyland, England: EP Books, 2015.

Davison, Andrew. "Christian Reason and Christian Community." In *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition*, edited by Andrew Davison, 12–28. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

Dickinson, Emily. "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant." The Poetry Foundation, 1865. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*. Translated by Henry Carlisle and Olga Carlisle. East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin, 2010.

Einstein, Albert. "What Life Means to Einstein." *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929. https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/wp-content/uploads/satevepost/einstein.pdf.

Eswine, Zack. *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*. Gospel According to the Old Testament Series. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014.

Ferry, Luc. *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*. Translated by Theo Cuffe. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2011.

Gioia, Dana. "The Catholic Writer Today." *First Things*, December 1, 2013. https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/12/the-catholic-writer-today.

Goheen, Michael W. *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

Gould, Paul M. *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019.

Green, Chris E. W. *All Things Beautiful: An Aesthetic Christology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021.

Guite, Malcolm. *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God*. Baltimore, MD: Square Halo, 2021.

Hansen, Collin. "Hope in Our Secular Age." In *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*. Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017.

Hardy, Thomas. "The Oxen." The Poetry Foundation, 1915. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53215/the-oxen-56d232503c32d.

Hedley, Douglas. *The Iconic Imagination*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Herbert, George. “Love (III).” The Poetry Foundation, 1633. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44367/love-iii.

Jacobs, Alan. “On the Myth of Disenchantment.” *The New Atlantis*, May 9, 2018. https://www.thenewatlantis.com/text-patterns/on-myth-of-disenchantment.

Johnson, Dennis E. *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001.

Johnson, Junius. *The Father of Lights: A Theology of Beauty*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020.

Josephson-Storm, Jason Ā. *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 2017.

———. “Why Do We Think We Are Disenchanted?” *The New Atlantis*, Summer/Fall 2018. https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/why-do-we-think-we-are-disenchanted.

Karnes, Michelle. *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2017.

Keller, Timothy. *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter*. New York, NY: Redeemer City to City, 2020.

———. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. New York, NY: Viking, 2015.

Kidner, Derek. *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2023.

King, Jonathan. *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018.

Kreeft, Peter. “Lewis’s Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty.” In *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, edited by David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls, 23–36. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.

———. “Twenty Arguments God’s Existence,” 1994. https://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20_arguments-gods-existence.htm#17.

———. *Wisdom of the Heart: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful at the Center of Us All*. Gastonia, NC: TAN Books, 2020.

Lakin, Max. “What’s a Banksy Museum Without Banksy?” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2024, sec. Arts. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/30/arts/design/banksy-museum-review.html.

Lemmel, Helen Howarth. “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus,” 1922. https://hymnary.org/text/o_soul_are_you_weary_and_troubled.

Lewis, C. S. “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare.” In *Selected Literary Essays*, edited by Walter Hooper, 335–55. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2013.

———. “Learning in War-Time.” In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001.

———. “Meditation in a Toolshed.” In *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, edited by Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

———. *Mere Christianity*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001.

———. “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said.” *The New York Times*, November 18, 1956, sec. Archives. https://www.nytimes.com/1956/11/18/archives/sometimes-fairy-stories-may-say-best-whats-to-be-said.html.

———. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1984.

———. *The Abolition of Man*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2015.

———. *The Chronicles of Narnia. Book 6: The Silver Chair*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy, 2005.

———. *The Chronicles of Narnia. Book 7: The Last Battle*. New York: HarperTrophy, 2005.

———. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*. Edited by Walter Hooper. Vol. 1: Family letters 1905-1931. London: HarperCollins, 2005.

———. “The Empty Universe.” In *Present Concerns*, edited by Walter Hooper, 81–86. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2002.

———. *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001.

Lose, David J. *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World and Our Preaching Is Changing*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.

Mathis, David. “Divine Glory & the Daily Grind.” In *With Calvin in the Theater of God: The Glory of Christ and Everyday Life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

Mathis, David, John Piper, and Julius Kim, eds. *With Calvin in the Theater of God: The Glory of Christ and Everyday Life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

McDonald, Nicholas. *The Light in Our Eyes: Rediscovering the Love, Beauty, and Freedom of Jesus in an Age of Disillusionment*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2025.

McGinn, Colin. *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2006.

McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

Merriam, Sharan B., and Elizabeth J. Tisdell. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. Fourth edition. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016.

Meynell, Mark. "A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise: Harnessing the Arts to Restore the Plausibility of Transcendence within the Immanent Frame." DMin diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2022. https://www.covenantlibrary.org/etd/2022/Meynell_Mark_DMin_2022.pdf.

———. "War Changes Everything—and Nothing." Christianity Today, January 8, 2025. https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/01/war-changes-everything-nothing-ukraine-cs-lewis/.

Milbank, Alison. "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange." In *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition*, edited by Andrew Davison. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

Mohler, Albert. "Will Beauty Save the World?" Ligonier Ministries, April 25, 2017. https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/will-beauty-save-world.

Motyer, J. Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah. An Introduction & Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993.

Mounk, Yascha. "The Doom Spiral of Pernicious Polarization." *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2022. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/us-democrat-republican-partisan-polarization/629925/.

Myers, Jimmy. "Is It True That 'the World Will Be Saved by Beauty'?" First Things, July 25, 2015. https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/07/student-essay-contest-winner-first-place.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Chicago, IL: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995.

Noble, Alan. *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018.

O'Connor, Flannery. "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. New York, NY: Mariner Books, 1977.

O'Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Ecclesiastes*. Reformed Expository Commentary. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014.

Oliver, Mary. Mary Oliver with Krista Tippett. Interview by Krista Tippett, February 5, 2015. https://open.spotify.com/episode/47fnWgpfIPSvjwPRqJkEuq.

Ordway, Holly. *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017.

———. "Escape Is Not Escapism." *Word on Fire*, September 13, 2024. https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/escape-is-not-escapism/.

Ortlund, Gavin. *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't: The Beauty of Christian Theism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Translated by A. J. Krailsheimer. Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

Patitsas, Timothy G. *The Ethics of Beauty*. Maysville, MO: St. Nicholas, 2020.

Piper, John. *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. 10th Anniversary ed. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996.

———. *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully: The Power of Poetic Effort in the Work of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis*. The Swans Are Not Silent, v. 6. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.

"Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey, 505 U.S. 833 (1992)." Accessed October 9, 2024. https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/505/833/.

Popova, Maria. "How Naming Confers Dignity Upon Life and Gives Meaning to Existence." *The Marginalian* (blog), July 23, 2015. https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/07/23/robin-wall-kimmerer-gathering-moss-naming/.

Postrel, Virginia. "The Truth About Beauty." *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2007. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/03/the-truth-about-beauty/305620/.

Prior, Karen Swallow. *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2023.

Ramsey, Russ. *Rembrandt Is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art through the Eyes of Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022.

Riffel, Karissa. “Beauty Matters—A Short Theology of Beauty.” The Rabbit Room, October 3, 2024. https://www.rabbitroom.com/post/beauty-matters-a-short-theology-of-beauty.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” Poets.org, 1995. https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo.

Rishmawy, Derek. “Millennial Belief in the Super-Nova.” In *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*, edited by Collin Hansen. Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017.

Ryken, Leland, ed. *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

Ryken, Philip Graham. *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory*. Edited by R. Kent Hughes. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.

Samples, Kenneth. “The 3 Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, & Beauty.” Reasons to Believe, February 2, 2021. https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/reflections/the-3-transcendentals-truth-goodness-beauty.

Santos, Carl. “Preaching to the Imagination.” The Gospel Coalition | Canada, July 4, 2023. https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/preaching-to-the-imagination/.

Schnell, Tatjana, Rebekka Gerstner, and Henning Krampe. “Crisis of Meaning Predicts Suicidality in Youth Independently of Depression.” *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 39, no. 4 (2018): 294–303. https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910/a000503.

Sevier, Christopher Scott. “Thomas Aquinas on the Nature and Experience of Beauty.” PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2012. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7d25w3x9.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

Silverstein, Shel. “Whatif.” All Poetry, 1981. https://allpoetry.com/Whatif.

Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Vol. 1. Cultural Liturgies. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

———. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014.

———. “Redeeming Ritual: Penance Takes Practice.” Biola University: Center for Christian Thought, March 27, 2014. https://cct.biola.edu/redeeming-ritual-penance-takes-practice/.

———. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016.

Steiner, George. The Art of Criticism No. 2. Interview by Ronald A. Sharp, 1995. https://theparisreview.org/interviews/1506/the-art-of-criticism-no-2-george-steiner.

Stiller, Eric. "A Picture Set Us Free Preaching to the Imagination in a Secular Age." DMin diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2022. https://www.covenantlibrary.org/etd/2022/Stiller_Eric_DMin_2022.pdf.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2018.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *On Fairy-Stories*. Edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson. London: HarperCollins, 2014.

Turnau, Ted. *Oasis of Imagination: Engaging Our World Through a Better Creativity*. La Vergne, TN: InterVarsity, 2023.

———. "Review Article: Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works (James K. A. Smith)." *Foundations*, no. 65 (Autumn 2013). https://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations/issue-65/issue-65-article-5-review-article-imagining-the-kingdom-how-worship-works-james-k-a-smith/.

Vander Lugt, Wesley. *Beauty Is Oxygen: Finding a Faith That Breathes*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2024.

Vanhoozer, Kevin. "Forward." In *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018.

———. "In Bright Shadow: C.S. Lewis on the Imagination for Theology and Discipleship." September 28, 2013. https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/in-bright-shadow-c-s-lewis-on-the-imagination-for-theology-and-discipleship.

Ward, Michael. "The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C.S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics." In *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition*, edited by Andrew Davison. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

Wilbourne, Rankin. *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2016.

Wilcox, Helen. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007.

Wilson, Douglas. *Future Men*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001.

Wright, N. T. *Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2020.

———. *New Testament and the People of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992.