

MARTIN
LUTHER'S
THEOLOGY
of
BEAUTY

» A REAPPRAISAL «

MARK C. MATTES

B
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Dedicated to the memory of my father,
Donald Athalbert Mattes,
and to the honor of my mother,
Betty Joan Nyquist Mattes,
who both nurtured me in the faith

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Abbreviations

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–87. 10 vols. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BC	<i>The Book of Concord</i> . Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000. Passages are cited by page and margin number.
BSELK	<i>Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche</i> . Edited by Irene Dingel et al. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014. Passages are cited by page and margin number.
CH	<i>Church History</i>
Colloq	<i>Colloquium</i>
CTQ	<i>Concordia Theological Quarterly</i>
CurTM	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
JMEMS	<i>Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies</i>
KD	<i>Kerygma und Dogma</i>
LBW	<i>Lutheran Book of Worship</i> . Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978.
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LQ	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i> (American edition). Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86. New series, vols. 56–82. St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–.
MQ	<i>Musical Quarterly</i>
NPNF ¹	<i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> . 1st series. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. New York: Christian Literature, 1886–89. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
NZSTh	<i>Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie</i>
PL	Patrologia Latina. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–64.
SRR	<i>Seminary Ridge Review</i>
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>

- WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Schriften.* 73 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009. Passages are cited according to volume, page, and line.
- WA BR *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Briefwechsel.* 18 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–85.
- WA DB *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Bibel.* 12 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906–61.
- WA TR *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Tischreden.* 6 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–21.

» 1 «

Introduction

In modern Luther research there has been a steady stream of articles and books devoted to Luther's appreciation for music and his defense of icons and the visual arts in the face of the iconoclastic protests of other Reformers. Likewise, there have been numerous studies devoted to Luther's view of worship and the liturgy. But the topic of beauty in Luther has rarely been examined.¹ This study seeks to cover new ground on a theme that was important for Luther but that we would not anticipate. After all, how can a thinker who struggled so much with God, who distinguished a "hidden" or an "absconded" God from a revealed God, and who differentiated a "theology of the cross" from that of "glory" possibly have anything to contribute to a theology of beauty? Beauty conveys a tranquility that hardly seems to square with the Reformer's spirituality, marked so often by chronic conflict with God, which he actually understood as assault (*tentatio*) from God. Among all the major Reformers, Luther would seem the least likely source for finding anything of significance for beauty. Indeed, *prima facie* we might think of Luther as the enemy of beauty. After all, the medieval Catholic system was apt to see union with beauty itself in the beatific vision as a reward for cultivating the habits of faith, hope, and love, provided that grace initiated this cultivation. In his quest to challenge and abolish the tradition of interpreting grace through the lens of merit, it would seem that Luther is the great foe of beauty. This study indicates otherwise. In many respects, the gospel as Luther understood

1. An important exception is Miiikka Anttila, "Die Ästhetik Luthers," *KD* 58 (2012): 244–55.

it opens a horizon that gives sinners access to beauty and a message that is itself so beautiful that desperate, repentant sinners crave it. The God who is like the waiting father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) or who stands with Jesus as he defends the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2–11) is exactly the one whom sinners can identify as beauty itself, because nothing is quite as wondrous or joyful as the full and free forgiveness given through Jesus Christ and the new life it imparts. This study aims to present a different image of Luther—one in which the Reformer has not only “existentialist” depth but also cosmic and eschatological breadth.²

Insofar as it accomplishes that goal, it is indebted to newer Luther research that refuses to limit the Reformer's insights solely to an “existentialist” interpretation of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. I put “existentialist” in quotation marks because it is anachronistic to peg Luther as an existentialist.³ The intent behind that label is to acknowledge that Luther's theology is highly experiential but without experience serving as a criterion of truth. Justification by grace alone through faith alone, so central for Luther, also bears on how we are to understand creation (since creation exists after all apart from human worthiness or merit), and eschatology, how God is bringing about a new creation. Increasingly, Luther scholars have been dissatisfied with a “thin” description of Luther that reduces the Reformer's teachings to the doctrine of justification interpreted in existentialist terms. Instead, they have brought to the fore a “thick” description⁴ that shows how the doctrine articulates a social dimension such as the “three estates” (the church, the household, and the civil government),⁵ as well as

2. Clearly this approach is indebted to the work of Oswald Bayer. See Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. Jeffrey Silcock and Mark Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

3. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) developed existentialism as a response to the totalizing tendencies in G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) and other idealists. In all existentialism, it is the individual who wrests a meaning out of life grounded either in a leap of faith in an allegedly irrational paradox, such as the God-man Jesus Christ, as with Kierkegaard, or in the face of irrational meaninglessness, as with atheist existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre. But Kierkegaard's view of faith as affirming life in the face of meaninglessness is a different context than Luther's believing in the promise in the face of the accusing law. There is no religion-neutral, secular space for Luther as there is in theory for Kierkegaard. Luther's world is not secular. The public realm's three estates are channels where God works, albeit in a hidden way. Nor is the paradox of God becoming human in Jesus Christ wholly irrational: its inner logic is the development of “for us and for our salvation.”

4. Admittedly, I am playing fast and loose with Clifford Geertz's categories of “thick” and “thin” description, since for Geertz thick description acknowledges that all description comes with interpretation; there is no neutral objectivity per se. But the parallel between my use here and Geertz's is that adequate interpretation is not reductionistic. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5–6, 9–10.

5. See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 120–53.

an acknowledgment of the Word of God as embodied, administered in the sacraments or in preaching. This latter teaching—the embodiment of the Word—is rich in significance for our work since it acknowledges that faith at its core is markedly aesthetic, awakening the senses, opening receptivity, kindling wonder, and evoking gratitude. Such an aesthetic core to the faith is expressed in worship that is sensitive not only to ecstatic joy but also to complaint or accusation against God when life seems terribly unfair, seen for instance in the laments in the Psalter, and even spiritual attack or *Anfechtung* when God appears to be against us. The latter is an inevitable result of Luther's threefold spirituality of prayer, meditation, and attack (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*).⁶ Current Luther research is attuned to the fact that it cannot be reductionistic; it must acknowledge that justification bears on all the articles of faith and, just as importantly, on daily life. It also seeks to situate Luther within his late medieval context.⁷ Luther was not primarily the herald of the modern era as much as a medieval thinker seeking truth. His work inexorably changed the future—whether through intended or unintended consequences. But it is deeply embedded within the mystical piety of the monastery, the nominalist approaches to logic he learned at the university, humanism's call to return to primary sources, and his deep engagement with the Scriptures through teaching, prayer, and study.⁸ He reworked all these and other matters and made them conform to evangelical faith.

In a word, what we learn from Luther about beauty is that while God's alien work (wrath) is indeed terrifying, not beautiful, God's proper work (mercy) is most beautiful indeed. And that proper work of granting Jesus Christ as gift⁹ or sacrament to all who believe regenerates believers such that their senses are renewed and they experience the world more aware of the beauty that God has worked into it. As wasted by sinners, Jesus Christ had "no form nor comeliness" (Isa. 53:2 KJV), but the ugliness that sinners imprint upon him is the basis on which God works to remake such sinners as beautiful in his eyes. God does not find sinners to be attractive. Instead, in the gospel, God makes these sinners to be attractive and beautiful for Jesus's

6. See *ibid.*, 30–36.

7. In this regard I am indebted to Finnish scholar Miikka E. Anttila. See Anttila, *Luther's Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013). Obviously Anttila and I are not on the same page concerning forensic justification, but his work, more than any other, has helped me work through Luther's approach to beauty, and I am grateful for it.

8. See Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

9. For an excellent article showing the nonreciprocity of exchange in Luther's notion of gift, see Berndt Hamm, "Martin Luther's Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift without Reciprocation," *LQ* 29 (2015): 125–61.

sake. As an “innocent delight,”¹⁰ music by nature points to this joy. Icons or visual imagery can be an acceptable aid in worship since the Word of God is itself already embodied. Idolatry in any case is a matter of the heart, not the eye. Hence, for Luther, through the gospel the creation can be a place of innocent delight, things that can be enjoyed. As Oswald Bayer describes one of Luther's sermons:

The ungrateful nature of the human being is depicted in a multifaceted repetition—drastically, distinctly, concretely: if we had our eyes and ears open, then the flowers would speak to us, as would our possessions and money: “even the grain would talk to us: ‘Be joyful in God, eat, drink, use me and serve your neighbor with me.’” But what comes instead of this: ingratitude and covetousness. “Thus we ruin the joy for ourselves with cares and coveting, so that we shame our Lord, God.” “Your cares and coveting” do not run their full course because of God's long-suffering nature and patience, because of “his profound goodness,” not because of us. “We are not worthy [that even] a bird should sing and that we should hear a sow grunt.”¹¹

If humans were attuned to God's generosity, they could quite innocently enjoy creation for what it is and from that enjoyment be empowered to serve others in need. While beauty might not be the first of Luther's priorities, it is important, and it provides access to a new perspective on Luther, one that gives cosmic, historical, and social breadth as a counterweight or balance to the “existential” depth that earlier generations of scholars have so ably described. Beauty is one way that those alive in Christ appreciate the world. Believers undergo not only dying with Christ but also rising with Christ (Rom. 6:1–11). Appreciating beauty is one way that sinners have it confirmed for them that God's creation is good, that they can be at home in the world, that the world or life is not only or even primarily task, but also and especially gift. Now it is obviously not the case that only believers appreciate beauty. But it is not clear that, in the long run, nonbelievers' appreciation for beauty leads to their salvation. Rather, just as not honoring God's goodness condemns, so likewise not appreciating beauty.

Luther lived in a time of transition for aesthetic sensibilities, in which Europeans increasingly looked away from the tradition stemming from Augustine (354–430), which tended to intellectualize beauty, seeing it as a way to ascend beyond the senses, and instead looked toward sense experience itself as

10. WA 30/2:696.8; translated in Robin Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 86.

11. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 109–10. For the Luther sermon, see WA 46:494.

pleasing the affects, and the mind as acknowledging such with appreciation. Luther himself contributed to this trend. Likewise, Luther shared important convictions of German humanists that also shaped his aesthetics. Concerned with educating civil servants, early Italian Renaissance humanists perceived the medieval model of learning (the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*) as inadequate to prepare courtiers and diplomats. As an alternative, they focused on the *ars dictaminis* (elegant writing), Latin grammar, and classical Greek to cultivate persuasive leaders.¹² This milieu influenced northern Europe and provided a context for Erasmus to develop his critical edition of the New Testament (1516), a move crucial for Luther's translation of the New Testament (1521).

The early Luther was fond of associating his work with the likes of Lorenzo Valla and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.¹³ Renaissance humanism, emphasizing formal Latin rhetoric and elegance in style by means of mastering linguistic skills and textual criticism, and critiquing Scholastic method, influenced Luther's approach to composing treatises, devotional literature, letters, and his translation of the Bible. Humanists employed erudition and ornament in their writings precisely in order to evoke an affective and ethical response in readers. This was not beauty for its own sake, but instead attractiveness as a means to persuade. It is noteworthy that Renaissance humanists, like their medieval predecessors, did not associate beauty with the arts per se but instead based their views of beauty on ancient or classical models.¹⁴

But in order to properly situate him, it is valuable to understand the continuities and discontinuities between Luther and the previous medieval tradition on beauty, which, as identified by Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), included proportion, clarity, and integrity as criteria for beauty. As we shall see, Luther's understanding of the gospel significantly altered that tradition. Likewise, in a sense, those three standards fall short of God's creativity, which is much more wondrous and delightful than even these three standards could ever fully assess.

Luther's own great artistic achievement, even more than his beautiful hymns, was his translation of both the Old and New Testaments into German.¹⁵ His translation had a profound and lasting impact on the German language, providing not only a standard language, in contrast to the many dialects, but also turns of phrase without which it would be impossible to imagine German today. Through such verbal artistry, Luther has shaped almost a half millennium of

12. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 4–5.

13. Erika Rummel, *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 4.

14. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II*, 186.

15. See Birgit Stolt, "Luther's Translation of the Bible," *LQ* 27 (2014): 373–400.

German spirituality, not only in Protestant churches but among Roman Catholics as well. This achievement, in turn, has influenced Protestant musicians, artists, poets, and architects not only in Germany but also throughout the world—and again, not only self-identified Lutherans but also Roman Catholics, Reformed, and even fairly secular people. Minimally such a list would include musicians such as Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672), Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47), F. Melius Christianson (1871–1955), Hugo Distler (1908–42), and Heinz Werner Zimmermann (born 1930);¹⁶ painters such as Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and his pupil Hans Balding (1484–1545), Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), and Franz Timmermann (1515–40), but also Reformed painters whose work testifies to and is rooted in Luther's understanding of the gospel and his appreciation of ordinary life, such as Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) and Vincent van Gogh (1853–90). Naturally, other artists to include are Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1764–1841), and sculptors Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1846) and Paul Granlund (1925–2003).¹⁷ Hymn writers influenced by Luther's approach to faith include Paul Gerhardt (1607–76), Thomas Hansen Kingo (1634–1703), and N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), and writers such as Thomas Mann (1875–1955), Conrad Richter (1890–1968), Ole Edvard Rølvaag (1876–1931), and John Updike (1932–2009). Such lists could be greatly amplified.

Foundation in Scripture

In many ways, Luther's approach to beauty is commentary on Scripture. Isaiah notes, "Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty; / they will see a land that stretches afar" (Isa. 33:17). Believers' faith is evoked by God's beauty:

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. (Ps. 27:4)

16. For the impact of Luther's valuation of music among Protestants, see J. Andreas Loewe, "Why Do Lutherans Sing? Lutherans, Music, and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation," *CH* 82 (2013): 69–89; and Paul Helmer, "The Catholic Luther and Worship Music," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 151–72.

17. For an extensive discussion, see Werner Hofmann, ed., *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst* (Munich: Prestel, 1983).

The gospel lays out a stance on beauty that transgresses the tendency to encompass beauty within matters such as proportion (so important for Augustine) or light (the basis of beauty for Pseudo-Dionysius [late fifth to early sixth centuries]) or integrity (crucial for Aquinas, who also adopted the views of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius). Instead, in the biblical view of atonement, in the servant who has “no form nor comeliness” and the cross that seems the very embodiment of impotence and foolishness, beauty is to be found. This truth is not apparent to fallen human aesthetics but is the beauty-in-giving that is God’s ultimate beauty. Likewise, the question of proportion is also a question of order and disorder, and thus genuine ugliness, nothing other than the adversary’s disruption of our proper perception of how God orders the world, and so a part of the eschatological battle unavoidable for all people.¹⁸ That “all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28) is a promise for those now walking by faith and not sight germane to the outcome of such cosmic conflict. Through Christ believers in the face of the adversary’s attack claim not only goodness but also beauty: that is not only their birthright but also their inheritance.

The creation as good is beautiful. “Eden” is a garden of “delight.” For God’s covenant people, the concept of beauty is enfolded into that of abundance or “blessing,” the assurance that God will provide sustenance, abundance, and safety for his people. Likewise the new creation (expressed as the new Jerusalem in Rev. 21–22) is beautiful, a place of consolation, harmony, and fulfillment. Indeed, in the Old Testament, beauty is often enclosed within goodness, particularly the goodness of God’s abundance. Echoing the theme of a delightful garden of plenty as the dénouement after Judah’s trials due to rebellion and idolatry, Jeremiah writes:

For the LORD has ransomed Jacob
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall be like a watered garden,
and they shall languish no more.
Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy;
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.
(Jer. 31:11–13)

18. For this insight I am indebted to Robert Kolb.

Echoing the prophet's appreciation of abundance or blessing as an eschatological promise, other biblical authors are not silent about the wonder and grandeur of creation (Gen. 1–2; Job 38–39; Ps. 8).¹⁹

Naturally, Israel's cycle of rebellion and punishment depicted throughout Scripture is not beautiful, but the fact that God remains faithful to his people is. This is the truth that situates beauty at the core of the gospel. This truth is typified in the command that Hosea marry a harlot and find beauty in her. Hence, in Scripture, we have a view of beauty that would catch ancient Greeks and Romans totally off guard: beauty is the offshoot of love, and not vice versa. In God's dealings with his covenant people, it is not that like is attracted to like, but that the ugly is covered with the beautiful garment of God's love. In that embrace, those who are ugly, distorted, or sinful are granted new life, a new identity. In such a view, God is committed to be faithful to his people in spite of the ugliness of their idolatry and injustice.²⁰ We hear its pathos in Hosea 11:8–9, where God announces:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboim?
 My heart recoils within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender.
 I will not execute my burning anger;
 I will not again destroy Ephraim;
 for I am God and not a man,
 the Holy One in your midst,
 and I will not come in wrath.

Gospel beauty is found in the fidelity of love, which “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). This is the basis for the attractiveness of the suffering servant. It is beautiful that he remained faithful to his vocation leading to the salvation of sinners in spite of the fact that he was wasted and made ugly at the very hands of sinners.

God's theophanies, whether to Moses (Exod. 3) or Isaiah (Isa. 6) or Ezekiel (Ezek. 1), are not beautiful but instead numinously overpowering, as is also the transfiguration (Mark 9:2–13) or John's encounter with the risen

19. For Luther's view of creation as a place of wonder and mystery, see Charles Arand, “God's World of Daily Wonders,” in *Dona Gratis Donata: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Ninetieth Birthday*, ed. Jon Vieker, Bart Day, and Albert Collver III (Manchester, MO: The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 2015), 197–215.

20. See Anttila, “Die Ästhetik Luthers,” 245.

and glorified Jesus (Rev. 1:9–20). Again, such matters are not “sublime” in any Burkean or Kantian sense because by no means can the beholder withstand God. The beholder remains alive through sheer grace before God, whom no one can see and still live (Exod. 33:20). But the Bible witnesses to beauty—for instance, in the Song of Solomon’s love poems and even in the formal structures of the Hebrew language (i.e., the parallelism and chiasms found throughout Scripture). Likewise, the Bible appeals to the importance of fine craftsmanship when it discusses the making of the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:10–22), the appointments and furnishing for the tabernacle (Exod. 25–27) and the temple (2 Chron. 4), the clothes of the priests (Exod. 28), and the like. Such furnishings reinforce Luther’s conviction that God ever and only works through specific and concrete means, offering humans something tangible through which faith can steady itself and apprehend or hold onto Christ.

Overview of the Book

As noted, Luther’s views of beauty are deeply indebted to Scripture, especially the Psalter, which he prayed regularly in the friary as a young man and so knew by heart. But the theology of beauty that developed in the Middle Ages was also deeply informed by philosophical views of beauty stemming from the ancient Greeks, especially Plato. The three criteria for beauty defined by Thomas Aquinas—proportion, light or color, and integrity or perfection—find their roots in Plato’s thinking. Along with Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Aquinas reworked these themes, and they became a standard part of his theology.

Late medieval nominalists and mystics were not interested in the theme of beauty as such. Obviously these two approaches to faith deeply influenced Luther. His university professors trained him in rigorous methods of nominalist logic, while Luther the friar, in conversation with his mentor Johann von Staupitz (1460–1524), had an appreciation for and thoroughly studied mystics such as Johannes Tauler (ca. 1300–1361) and the anonymous author of the *Theologia Germanica*. Even if beauty was not a central topic of discussion in Luther’s milieu, the related topic of desire was never far from medieval theologians, since they believed that God worked through desire to reorder the human heart and focus its interests in the eternal, divine matters to be enjoyed, as opposed to the temporal, earthly matters to be used. Sin effaces this proper ordering and causes people to enjoy the temporal and use the eternal, just the opposite of how they should behave.

Chapter 2, then, examines Luther's use of philosophy. Since the biblical concepts of beauty employed by medieval thinkers had been shaped by philosophy, it is important to discern how Luther approached philosophy and the value that he found in it for theology. Luther's approach, we will see, is best designated as eclectic. That is, his first loyalty was not to a philosophical school, although he claimed to belong to the Ockhamist or "terminist" school. While indebted to nominalism in important ways, such as in his use of supposition theory in logic or his view of the divine will apart from or outside of Christ as voluntaristic, Luther was no lackey of this school. Instead, after his discovery that law and gospel are not the same word of God but two different words, one conveying expectations or demands and the other a promise, the Reformer evaluated philosophical tools and perspectives in light of the law-and-gospel distinction. Certainly there is nothing arbitrary about the "proper work" of God; it exists precisely to create and nurture faith in men and women. While not a realist, Luther however did affirm a view of participation, believers' dying and rising daily with Christ, shorn of Platonic assumptions of a hierarchical ascent into the divine.²¹ Thus Luther's theology undermines the "analogy of being" as the best description of the relation between beings and Being or between good works and the Good. Plato, who knows only an eternal law but no eternal gospel, would never comprehend such death to the "old being." But by the same token the new life in Christ is no merely nominal designation that Christians as individuals belong to the set of those who have appropriated Christ. Instead, in a sense, the reality of the new being, the basis for a new clean heart in the Christian, is Christ himself, the ultimate agent working in and through Christians, renewing their very being, identity, or "form." While philosophy does not set the conditions for how theology is to be done, it still retains its status as a "handmaid," as medieval thinkers put it, a servant of theology, helping to provide logical consistency and rigor for terms whose meaning ultimately is situated within the grammar of faith.

Like chapter 2, chapter 3 also prepares the reader for the heart of Luther's views of beauty by dealing with Luther's views of goodness. Medieval thinkers of various schools tended to associate beauty with goodness. For some, this was because both goodness and beauty were "transcendentals" describing the structure of being as such. The transcendentals included oneness, goodness, being, and truth. For many medieval thinkers, beauty was added to this list because even if not a transcendental it was still closely associated with goodness. In general, for medieval thinkers, goodness was descriptive of all realities participating in God as Goodness itself. However, the gravitational force of

21. See "Nominalism and Realism" in chap. 2 (pp. 20–26) for further discussion.

this truth was to be found more at the top of the hierarchy, in being itself as self-sufficient and not transient, the ultimate desire or goal for all *viatores*, pilgrims on their journey to God as their ultimate good.

Luther's approach to goodness departs from this Platonic itinerary and instead resituates goodness as God's favor, granted surprisingly to sinners who neither earn nor deserve it. He exposes the itinerary itself as reinforcing incurvation, since sinners underpin their own attempts to achieve status before God as opposed to simply receiving mercy from God. Hence, Luther identifies an alien work of God, which painfully slays the old Adam or Eve (who think that grace is at most supplementary) so that a new being completely dependent on God's mercy emerges. God's genuine beauty then is to be found in the word as "clothed," granted sacramentally in the embodied word of promise, in baptism, the Lord's Supper, the absolution, and preaching. Beauty is confirmed not through metaphysics but through Jesus Christ, paradoxically seen *sub contrario* (under the sign of the opposite) as the one who had "no form nor comeliness" at least in sinners' eyes but who is the chosen servant of God.

The heart of this book as an essay in historical theology is to be found in chapters 4 and 5, which deal with Luther's specific views of beauty both early and late in his career. There is marked consistency in Luther's views of beauty throughout his life. At one level, human existence before God, including the three criteria articulated by Aquinas, is demolished, and at another level, human existence before the world is maintained. From early in his career and sustaining him throughout, Luther claimed that God creates out of nothing. Even the new creation that God begins within believers through regeneration is dependent on God re-creating a new humanity out of the nothingness of sin and death. Hence, those who refuse to acknowledge their dependence on God at all times and places, who think that they can claim some turf or independence as their own, something that they could offer God in exchange for mercy, will be brought to nothing. They will experience the alien work of God, reducing them to despair of themselves, proving to them that faith alone is the only posture that makes sense when humans deal with God, since on their own they truly have nothing to offer God.

This view will put Luther at odds with the stance known as "pancalism"—meaning that *all things* (pan-) to one degree or another are beautiful (*kalos* in Greek)—maintained by many medieval thinkers. We can find hints of such pancalism in Luther at the earliest stage of his career, but as he matures, this view is increasingly challenged. It aids and abets the notion that humans could have something to offer God, but that is nothing other than an illusion. It feeds a cruelty that hammers at people, crushing them with its demands. But God's

hidden or alien work is precisely to challenge that supposition so that sinners might look to God's mercy found in Christ alone and find God's goodness and beauty established in Christ alone as God's favor granted to sinners—an absolving word that effectuates new life through apprehending Christ. So, while panicism is ruled out as leverage for old beings, a basis from which to justify themselves through works, the new being in Christ enjoys creation as God's gift and appreciates the beauty that is in fact crafted in it throughout. Indeed, Christ himself is beautiful because he assures sinful men and women that for his sake they are embraced by God. Sinners in fact cannot get enough of this beautiful message in worship and so crave gospel proclamation, and not just the expectations of law. Again, beauty is established not on a metaphysical basis, as in the legacy of Plato appropriated in the medieval church, but on the basis of Christ, who right-wises sinners and assures them of God's mercy. This absolving word also regenerates, brings about new beings alongside the old who appreciate the wonder and mystery apparent in all created things. We can distinguish a creation beauty, particularly in seeing how Luther assumes proportion, color or clarity, and integrity or perfection in his portrayal of the creation of Adam, from a gospel beauty in which God's love does not find a beauty to which it is attracted but instead as regenerative love creates a new being as an object of its attraction. Again, this new being can experience the world as an environment of delight or innocent pleasure.

Chapters 6 and 7 show how Luther's view of beauty can be seen in his love of music and his appreciation of visual imaging. Luther belonged to an era that was in the process of appreciating music not because it was a "science" akin to mathematics, as Augustine, and Plato before him, maintained, but because it was an art that alters human moods and affects, builds up community, and expresses delight. In the stance arising from late antiquity, performing music was actually considered a lower appreciation of music than studying the mathematics of its harmonies and rhythms. Luther was not totally opposed to this early musical tradition since he saw value in a cosmic approach to music—that is, that the heavenly spheres themselves produce harmonies as they traverse their circular patterns—but overall with respect to music he did not pit emotion against intellect. Indeed, he felt that not just the words but even the notes conveyed meaning and truth. For Christians, Christ himself is the *cantus firmus* or melody that makes sense of life.

In Luther on visual imaging, we see how the Reformer was aware that icons and visual depictions of the faith were vulnerable to being misused in late medieval piety. Luther's concern was less over the biblical injunction against "graven images" and more about whether such images would become idols within the heart. For Luther, it is not the eyes but the heart where genuine

worship or idolatry takes place. Images or pictures can be valuable not only in educating the illiterate and spreading the faith but also—and even more importantly, given that humans are creatures who inescapably image—in providing a tangible, concrete reminder that God grants his mercy in sacramental forms, such as water, bread and wine, and the preached, oral word. Icons certainly do not mediate grace, but they are on a continuum with all reality, which masks God. Only in the promise is God’s mercy unmasked, made available for sinners. Luther thus does not support the strict dichotomy between word and image of which Protestants are usually accused. For Luther, there is no God to be had apart from some “covering” or “wrapper,” whether that wrapper is God masking himself in created, material realities or giving himself sacramentally in the church.

Finally, in chapters 8 and 9, I seek to move beyond historical theology and draw out the implications of Luther’s view of beauty for contemporary theology. The most important ventures into theological aesthetics in the last several decades are the voluminous works of Hans Urs von Balthasar and those of the apologist David Bentley Hart. Both thinkers’ works are grounded in the *nouvelle théologie* spearheaded by Henri de Lubac (1896–1991). Both thinkers retrieve the analogy of being in order to help secular humanity reason from beauty evident in the world to Beauty itself as the foundation for beautiful things. The analogy of being honors a “still greater dissimilarity”²² in the midst of such significant similarity between God and the world. Hence, one can talk of real similarities between God and creatures all the while honoring the apophatic dimension of God. Hart employs the analogy of being to show that the seemingly irreconcilable, violent power struggles identified by postmodern thinkers ultimately find their place or peace in infinity, which is metaphysically construed as beauty itself. Likewise, von Balthasar identifies all creaturely realities as shaped by some form or another that grants them a luminosity that points them beyond themselves to the divine, which accords them their ultimate meaning and significance. Both thinkers, quite rightly, challenge secularism’s “disenchantment” of the cosmos.²³ Such disenchantment sees no deeper meaning in material reality other than how humans can exploit it for their own purposes.

Luther’s thinking in no way contributes to a disenchanted or secular perspective. True enough, his thinking undermines the realist approach, which layers

22. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 288.

23. See Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth (London: Routledge, 2009), 139.

reality as a series of ascending spiritual spheres that participate more accurately and fully in truth, goodness, and beauty. Instead, for Luther, Jesus Christ is the fulcrum through which life, and most specifically truth, goodness, and beauty, are to be understood. The itinerary established through Christ does not see the creation as the lowest step on a ladder ascending to the eternal. Rather, if the ladder metaphor is at all appropriate, it is a downward staircase. Due to Christ's humility and death, and later resurrection and exaltation (Phil. 2), we have a downward staircase, one that Christ descends to rescue smug, self-satisfied sinners and thereby refocus them in faith to live from love and service, like Christ, in the world. One can have an enchanted world without the Platonic itinerary leading one beyond the senses to the intellect, and from the intellect to the soul, and from the soul to the divine. Luther does not rule out analogy altogether, but analogy is best established *ex post facto*: through the light of Christ's resurrection such analogies become obvious in nature and human relations. Otherwise one is apt to develop an aesthetics fueling a theology of glory instead of an aesthetics shaped by the theology of the cross. The cross offers a *strange beauty* in that it is defined through Christ as deliverer, one who absorbs our sins bodily on the tree of the cross in opposition to propelling sinners to ascend into heaven through merit. Hence, genuine participation in God is baptismally configured as dying and rising in Christ and not as greater degrees of mimetically embodying beauty or goodness.

Finally, in chapter 9, Luther outlines for us an aesthetics not of perfection but of freedom. It is gospel beauty, in which Christ absorbs the ugliness and impurity of sin and bears it away never to be found, that opens the horizon of appreciating creation beauty and restoring humans to creation as gift, the paradise that God intends this good earth to be. Therefore, in the gospel, God can be acknowledged as beautiful based on the goodness of his gifts of creation and salvation. Secular views of beauty are shown to be inadequate because they fail to account for the wonder and mystery in reality that people actually experience. In contrast to contemporary aesthetics, which have a hard time discerning a wider purpose to life and the world, gospel beauty permits believers to feel at home in the world. This comfort with creation is iterated each time the gospel is preached.

Perhaps the most treasured hymn of American Lutherans of whatever synodical affiliation is "Beautiful Savior." Hopefully, this study will indicate why it is natural that that hymn would be so beloved. To associate beauty with the risen Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord, is part and parcel of Lutheran identity, encoded within the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. The following study seeks to draw out the theological and spiritual implications of that truth.