

Beholding The Beauty Of the Lord

Bible Reading:
Psalm 27

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It was a rather intricate worship service.

A number of musicians were involved. Banners were waved. Well prepared dramatic reading was done. Strong visuals were used via powerpoint. The congregation milled around during the passing of the peace. After baptism, the baby was processed through the aisles as a rite of introduction to the congregation.

After the service a worshipper asked, "*Pastor, is this necessary? Can't we do without it?*"

What would you say in response to that question?

I'd like to consider the matter with you this evening. As many of you know, this has been over the last years a living question here at Calvin Church. It has also been a matter of concern to me as I've studied and reflected at the *Institute For Worship Studies* under the guidance of Dr. Robert Webber. Tomorrow evening you are invited to join in a conversation around this question in the light of this Spring's worship survey. We'll look at the results of the survey and ask how to respond, in a biblically and reformationally appropriate manner. You're all welcome to take part in the conversation.

Back to the situation I described.

The pastor's answer to the disgruntled parishoner was..... "*You're right. It's NOT absolutely necessary.*"

All those artistic, visual, sensory elements - the worship service could well have occurred without having any of them present. In fact, many do.

The question, though, runs deeper.

You **can** get by without it.

But.....

Is that best?

Yes, worship can be very simple and God-glorifying.

A family gathered around a hospital bed of a dying loved one can celebrate Holy Communion quietly and simply, and the Spirit is present.

A group of impoverished immigrants can meet together in borrowed space, using cast-off hymn books and a tattered bible; sharing learned knowledge and singing songs - and Christ would smile.

Let **no one** ever deny or minimize such worship.

However, that doesn't mean that all worship should be on that level, or stay on that "survival rations" sort of level.

Much as diet on most of our dinner tables includes more than basic beans, corn and water, so the diet of liturgy can also be varied and enriched.

Part of that enrichment comes through exploration of the arts; worship with concern and sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension of life;
worship that cares about beauty.

In that context, then, we hear Psalm 27:4:

*One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.*

...to behold the beauty of the LORD.

Have you ever stopped to think of God as *beautiful*?

He, as Creator, is the originator of all that is good and right and beautiful. Created beauty on earth is a reflection of His holy beauty.

Our Confessions teach that. The words we recited earlier in the service from Belgic Confession article 2 say that we come to know God by two ways.

The greatest way is through His holy and divine Word. It is the ultimate guide for our salvation and for living a life to His glory.

Supporting the Bible is another means for knowing God.

*We know God..... by the creation, preservation and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a **beautiful** book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God... (Belgic Confession article 2)*

The beauty of Creation points to the perfectly beautiful Creator.

Listen to Psalm 19, words we used to begin the service:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

*Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge. (v.1-2)*

The majesty and beauty of creation bear witness to the greater majesty and beauty of the Creator.

Beauty -

Beginning with God.

Granted as a gift to creation and to created humanity.

In creation becoming one of the ways we can know God.

The whole area of exploring the world of beauty is part of what we know as the sphere of life called "*the arts.*" It is one of the spheres that God calls us to explore and develop as stewards of creation. It beautifies and enriches life. Life without the beauty of art, said Abraham Kuyper in his fifth Stone Lecture, is an atrophied existence.

("Lectures On Calvinism - Calvinism And Art" p.143)

Art can also mysteriously point to truths and realities deeper than itself; ones that mere words sometimes cannot express. And *that*, more than anything else, is where art and worship connect.

The Master Artist Himself gave that proclaiming function to art. Beginning with the beautiful artwork called Creation, which points to the Creator. And extending to other forms of art, such as painting, sculpting, dance, drama and the like, which can also point to Him.

I believe that this is what is being referred to in Psalm 27. The Psalmist sees the great beauty of God in the context of worshiping at the temple.

One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.
(v.4)

What would the psalmist mean by “*gaze upon the beauty of the Lord*”?

What would he be looking at as he enters the temple to worship?

What does he see that draws him into the presence of God?

When you survey the Old Testament for references to artists, you may be surprised to find that the vast majority of them come in the context of building and decorating the worship spaces of Israel - first the tabernacle, and later the temple. Exodus 31 recounts the commissioning of the Holy Spirit-filled Bezalel as the chief artisan of the tabernacle. The filling of the Spirit was very rare in the Old Testament, reserved for those with special missions, such as judges, priests and prophets. Bezalel receives that filling to do metalwork, gemwork, woodwork and other crafts. Furniture, decorations, coverings, carvings - all Holy Spirit-inspired.

In that Old Testament era, God calls His people to worship with beauty, worship in an artistic setting, and He equipped them to make it possible.

The worship space, the rituals, even the clothing worn by the priests all had artistic functions:

- they showed great beauty
- they pointed to the God of Beauty

Look at Exodus 28, where it speaks of the clothing Aaron and his sons would wear in their role as priests. They could have functioned as priests in their “civies”, so to speak. But hear what God commands:

V.40 - “For Aaron’s sons you shall make tunics and sashes and headdresses; you shall make them for their glorious adornment.”

Years, later, when Solomon built the temple - same thing. Overwhelming, artistically done, and divinely mandated architecture, rituals and implements that pointed the worshippers to God and unleash from them a collective, worshipful “*wow*” at the majesty, beauty and creativity of God. That would greet the writer of Psalm 27 when he came to worship.

The priest could simply have lectured the people in the Law and Word of God - much in the manner that Ezra read God’s law to the people after the return from exile (Nehemiah 8). It would have functioned quite adequately in that aural culture.

But he doesn’t - because God commanded that there be more to the worship experience of Israel than just that. As Psalm 34 calls out, “*O taste and see that the LORD is good.*” (v.8) The glory and praise of God goes far beyond talking and listening.

The work of God and the person of God is, to use the language of 1 Cor 2:9, beyond what the eye can see and the ear can hear and the mind can conceive. As 1 Corinthians 13:12 tells us, we have only a dim grasp of God's truth.

And that is where the **allusory** function of art is called into action;
in other words, art's ability to exercise the human imagination to begin to plumb truths that in fullness lay beyond our sin-tainted grasp.

I don't mean imagination as in dreaming made-up fairy tales or wispy myths.
I mean that deep part inside our souls that can reach beyond ourselves and begin to taste and see the truth for which we reach and long when we pray,
"Maranatha - come quickly, Lord Jesus."

The Old Testament describes God mandating His people to worship in an imagination-stimulated setting;
an artistic setting of symbol through architecture, furniture, clothing, decoration and ritual.

None of these God-mandated worship art forms are the end product.
They are but servants.
They are messengers, pointing to the Lord Himself.

This is the realm where art and worship intersect.
A realm that we do well to explore.
And so, brothers and sisters at Calvin CRC, let us avail ourselves of that skill of art in visual and dramatic and hands-on forms.

AND YET

As we explore and grow liturgically in this way, let's be diligent to keep it all in context. As our Reformed forebearers are quick to point out, Don't forget Exodus 20 and the prohibition against idolatry.
Don't make graven images.

For the Reformers this meant absolutely no visual imagery or symbolism was allowed in their churches, not even bare crosses. Only the preaching of the cross.

To understand their position we need to understand the times in which they lived. The Medieval period saw worshippers focused on images, carved or painted or relic, venerating and worshipping them, not the One to whom they were meant to point.

"NO!" say the Reformers, very correctly.

And because of the rank abuses all around them, and how easy it would be for new converts to revert to idolatry, the Reformers swung the pendulum towards worship in very stark settings.

In fact, while Calvin appreciated the place of the arts in creation, he was strongly against using it in worship. Worship was, for him, about words - words centred around God's Word of Truth.

And that is our heritage.

That is the historic setting within which Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 35 was written, with its unabashed call to plain, word-driven worship.

We do well to understand this setting. In the *Institutes*, Calvin introduces a principle called *necessitas Ecclesiae*, or *The Needs Of The Church*. (*Inst. 4.10.30*) Unlike many who followed after him, John Calvin himself was remarkable open and flexible on worship practices. Few things were absolutes to Calvin. What guided him was Christian love, and the pastoral needs of the Church. If it was helpful, and caused the growth of the faith and obedient response of the believers, then it could be considered. If it hindered obedient faith, it should be avoided.

That principle can be understood to have been good reason for being so harshly against the use of visual or dramatic imagery in the churches of the Reformation. It would have been harmful.

We also need to appreciate that, like anyone, the Reformers wrote in their particular context. In addition to the idolatrous challenges which they faced, they lived in the age shaped by the printing press and the thinking of the Renaissance. Words were treasured. Reason was valued. There was also a movement towards valuing inner faith and commitment. That movement happened in a way which fostered a separation between the physical and the spiritual - a leftover of Platonic influence. It said that the physical realm could never really attain truth. Only the inner, the spiritual, could reach to truth.

Today, centuries later, and removed from that dynamic, we can pause and reconsider whether anything visual is indeed idolatry. We can remember that Exodus 28-31, the design of the beautiful worship space in the Tabernacle, come **after** Exodus 20's prohibition against idolatry. And God's Word will never contradict itself. God won't first prohibit idolatry, and then a few chapters later command his people to commit idolatry. Having art-filled, visually stimulating worship is **not** idolatrous.

The second commandment means,

"Don't confuse beauty with the Author of all Beauty."

"Don't confuse the symbol with the one to whom the symbol points."

Which, by the way, can easily happen! If you read Exodus 32, **one** mere chapter after the description of the Tabernacle's design, you can see how quickly and easily the people did exactly that. They created a golden calf and worshipped it.

It's a short step from artistic obedience to heretical idolatry!

That short step was also taken in the time of Hezekiah, when the bronze serpent, which God had commanded Moses to make, was worshipped. (2 Ki 18:4) Nehushtan, as it was called, had to be destroyed.

The warning of the Reformers against taking that step needs to be carefully heeded. Always! As we seek to steward the gift of artistry in liturgical settings we need to be careful that this gift be used in pure ways.

Brothers and sisters, God has granted us the gift of beauty. God has empowered that beauty to point beyond itself to Him, the Beautiful One. We see that at work in Old Testament worship. And while the festivals and temple of the Old Testament are considered fulfilled in Christ, no where does the New Testament nullify the use of the visual or the beautiful in the building of faith.

In fact, the apostle John refers to that which he has seen and touched as being in support of the Faith.

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." (1 John 1:1)

Pentecost was a very visual, experiential event.

The apostles not only preached, but performed signs and wonders as visual indicators to draw people to Christ.

The book of Revelation is chock full of imagery.

Someone once said, *"When you are trying to teach, if at all possible - point."* They were referring to the power of the visual to impact people, driving home truths that words alone simply can't convey. Walk into any classroom and you will be impacted visually - various objects and displays that the students have been working on; activities in which they are involved; controlled movement around the room as they explore and discover.

When you are trying to teach, if at all possible - point.

It's how God wired us to learn. Which is why faith activity among the people of God has always included a healthy dose of pointing;

the visual and the symbolic are seen again and again in biblical teaching and religious activity - including the activity of worship.

The fact that such pointing has been misused in past generations does not make it something to push aside. Any more than failure with prayer, or handling money, or doing mission means we should avoid those activities. Rather, prayerfully, carefully, we seek to do them well.

For the growth of the Church.

And,

most of all,

solī deo gloria

to the glory of God.

Yes.

May God be glorified in all our worship.