

The Vicarious Beauty of Christ

The Aesthetics of the Atonement

Abstract: A theology of the vicarious humanity, not just death, of Christ provides a fresh way to ground theological aesthetics in the reconciling life of Christ. Theological aesthetics can also bring a new perspective on the atonement as including the “Godward” movement of the Son to the Father, a movement of beauty that humanity has been invited to participate in, an act of both solidarity and substitution. This response reveals the uniqueness of Christ’s beauty, a vicarious not analogous knowledge of beauty, thus creating a wholeness and openness to the beauty of the grace of God’s creation.

Aesthetics haunts Christian theology. It both promises and troubles. “One thing,” the psalmist asks: “to behold the beauty of the LORD” (Ps 27:4). Yet Yahweh chastises Jerusalem for trusting in their “beauty” by playing the whore (Ezek 16:15). Our age is a sensate age, drunk with images, feelings, and passions. Evangelical churches rush to create more-relevant worship services through both the use of incense and video projection of the latest movies. But beauty deceives, laments the weary middle-aged rocker Bob Dylan, agreeing with Plato, at least in theory. We embrace and inundate ourselves with beauty but admit, with the denouement of *King Kong*, it wasn’t the airplanes that killed him; it was “beauty that killed the beast.”

Atonement does not readily come to mind in discussion of theological aesthetics. What would be its implications if it did? Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance suggests an approach to atonement beyond the recitation of myriad atonement “theories.” While it has been common to speak of the atonement as the vicarious death of Christ, Torrance argues that the entirety of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is atoning, lived for our sake and on our behalf. Can we speak of the vicarious *humanity* of Christ?¹ If Christ’s life as well as his

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1. The most significant writings on the vicarious humanity of Christ are found in T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992); T. F. Torrance,

death is atoning, can we then understand his life as a life of *beauty*, yet also as a *vicarious* life, a life we have been unable to live? Christ, “the perfect Eucharistic being,” in Alexander Schmemmann’s words, lives a life of thanksgiving, faith, obedience, worship, and service that becomes the basis for our lives.² If Christ is beautiful, and if he has his own visions of beauty, does he then establish a critique of our ideas of beauty and aesthetics? What are the implications of the vicarious beauty of Christ for the beauty of God, creation, and redemption, and even for the unity of the true, the beautiful, and the good?

Christ Sees and Is Seen, Hears and Is Heard

Christ is the Word of God indeed, but he is the Word who was heard, seen, and touched according to 1 John (1:1), and whose “glory” was beheld, according to John’s Gospel (1:14). He is the Word, the expression of God, the Word that comes from outside, from above. This is the movement from God to humanity. But he is also the response in his faithful humanity, a response that is beautiful because of his harmony with the Father. This is the movement from humanity to God. Both are essential in our understanding of the atonement. A purely humanward movement may indeed demonstrate God’s power, yet without the perfect response, humanity is left with only forgiveness of sins and its own resources in order to respond (see fig. 1).³

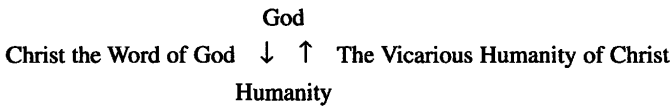


Figure 1: The Incarnation

Christ is the one who is not only beheld but also perfectly beholds. The long tradition of Christian portrayals of Christ in art, particularly in iconography, can produce a one-sided emphasis on Christ as one whom we see but who does not see himself. If the one who is pure in heart sees God (Matt 5:8), then the fulfillment of the beatific vision so longed for in theological aesthetics comes first of all in Christ. He is the only one who sees God. We can only see God through him, just as we can only hear the word of God through him. The Reformed tradition

¹“The Word of God and the Response of Man,” in *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1971), 133–64; James B. Torrance, “The Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” in T. F. Torrance, ed., *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981), 127–47; and James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

²Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 38.

³Adapted from diagrams by Ray S. Anderson, “A Theology for Ministry,” in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 11; and Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God*, 30.

has rightly emphasized the importance of the word from outside of humanity (despite the “hatred” of the word in postmodern culture). However, the Incarnation is not only a word from above but also a response from below, the faithful and obedient response of the Son to the Father, a response that is essentially a vision of God. We can think of the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16–17: “He *saw* the Spirit of God descending. . . . And a *voice* from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved.’” An act of obedience to the Father, in Jesus’ baptism there is both the visual and the audial in this commissioning of his ministry, a baptism that is vicarious, on behalf of others, a *vicarious repentance*, if you will.⁴ Here we have one dramatic manifestation of the vicarious humanity of Christ in an aesthetic moment. The early Christian writing *The Odes of Solomon* presents Christ as actively speaking and even singing (31:3). This is not too distant from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s suggestion to sing the Psalms as continually prayed by Christ.⁵

Christ as seeing, speaking, praying, and singing is not foreign to Karl Barth’s insight that to say “Jesus lives . . . is at once the simplest and the most difficult christological statement.”⁶ Barth expounds the prophetic office of Christ, “the true witness” as an active subject, one who lives, not just who *has* lived.⁷ “The Glory of the Mediator” for Barth, in this section of the *Church Dogmatics*, is that Christ is “the Light of Life.” Christ’s glory is an aesthetic reality, a light filled with splendor that enlightens our light (Ps 36:9). Beauty brings *delight*, and the delight of the Son is in the revelation of the Father: “Jesus *rejoiced* in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants’” (Luke 10:21).

Christ as seen and seeing, hearing and being heard, provides a wholeness of sight and hearing, as Hans Urs von Balthasar stresses (despite his unfortunate priority of sight over hearing).⁸ The form of Christ’s beauty, “Christian optics,” in David Bentley Hart’s words, is a new way of seeing God, the world, and the self.⁹ No dualism between creation and redemption can then be

4. See Christian D. Kettler, “The Vicarious Repentance of Christ in the Theology of John McLeod and R. C. Moberly,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1986): 529–43; Kettler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 187–204.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together/Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 5, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, Geoffrey B. Kelly, James H. Burness, and Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 166.

6. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–1977), 39.

7. Barth, *CD*, IV/3.1, 44.

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, ed. Joseph Fessio, SJ, and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 119–20.

9. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 337.

accepted. Not only does Christ instate a new order of seeing (which is Hart's point), but he is also the one who continues to see.¹⁰

Atonement Is the Beauty of Solidarity and Substitution

The vicarious humanity of Christ speaks of the wholeness, the beauty of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This harmony is initiated by God's solidarity with humanity in the Incarnation. Again, the downward movement of solidarity, from God to humanity, comes first, succeeded by the upward movement from humanity to God in Christ's vicarious faith and obedience to the Father on our behalf. In this act he becomes our substitute, not only in paying the penalty for sin but also in the entirety of our humanity. Evangelicalism and pietism have long had a kind of "aesthetic" in the atonement, basing it on the shed "blood" of Christ. But this view ironically limits substitution and therefore limits the effect of Christ's atoning life, death, and resurrection on our humanity. There is no beauty in the cross by itself.¹¹ In contrast, the vicarious humanity of Christ is an aesthetic encompassing the entirety of Christ's humanity and our humanity, the "sweet exchange," suggested by the aesthetics of *The Epistle to Diognetus* (second or third century).¹²

Substitution without solidarity denies the implications of the tragic for the atonement. Hart is right to criticize the use of the tragic when it is viewed as the gospel in toto.¹³ Atonement is not to be restricted to representation—Christ representing us in solidarity with our suffering—a common theme in contemporary soteriology advocated by Jürgen Moltmann and many others. Nevertheless, atonement loses the first step, the movement from God to humanity, if the Word of God does not identify with the flesh of humanity in travail. Solidarity is an imperative because of the desperate situation of the human creature.

Solidarity without substitution, however, is simply empty empathy and not salvation, as Hart reminds us. What is needed is the inclusion of the vicarious faith and obedience of Christ that leads us through the Holy Spirit on the way to *theosis*, the exaltation of human life emphasized by the Greek fathers, the participation in "the divine nature" in 2 Peter 1:4, because, in the "double movement" of Christ's humiliation and exaltation (Phil 2:5–11), the second movement "Godward" is the act of the vicarious humanity of Christ, his perfect faithfulness and obedience on our behalf toward the Father in the Spirit, reflected in "the ministry of the faithful" (Chrysostom's liturgy), particularly in the Eucharist. In this upward movement, the church joins in the continual

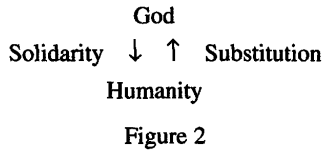
10. *Ibid.*, 343.

11. Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 191.

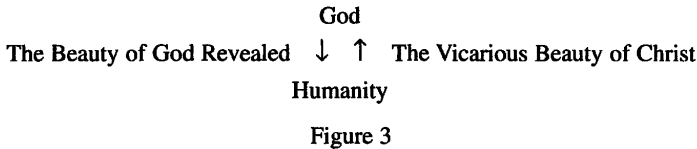
12. *The Epistle to Diognetus*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Bart D. Ehrman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 9.

13. Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 373–76.

song of Christ, a richly aesthetic action (see fig. 2). Most theological aesthetics will readily begin with the tangibility of the Incarnation but often ignore the aesthetic of the “Godward” movement.



The vicarious humanity of Christ, unlike some theories of the atonement, avoids isolating the death of Christ from his life and resurrection. C. S. Lewis speaks of the importance of the artist in enlarging another’s vision: “My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others.”¹⁴ There is a *vicarious* act in art and beauty, doing something that we cannot do by ourselves (see fig. 3). The beauty of the unity of the vicarious life, death, and resurrection of Christ enters the totality of our experience, including the death on Holy Saturday as advocated by Hans Urs von Balthasar and Alan Lewis, despite the criticism of David Bentley Hart that this is another example of “tragic” theology.¹⁵ The vicarious humanity of Christ does not ignore tragedy at the expense of victory (atonement is both solidarity and substitution) because it is realistic about our desperate plight.



The totality and comprehensiveness of the human situation demonstrates the judgment of beauty. “You cannot see my face,” Yahweh pronounces to Moses, “for no one shall see me and live” (Exod 33:20). It is Christ who removes the veil of Moses (2 Cor 3:12–18). The spiritual blindness of humanity is particularly emphasized by Jesus in his controversies with the Pharisees and as a critique of unbelief. They are “blind guides of the blind” (Matt 15:14). They see but do not perceive (Matt 13:14). “Do you have eyes, and fail to see?” Jesus asks the disciples (Mark 8:18). In effect, he is asking, “Are we to limit the beautiful to what we perceive beauty to be?”¹⁶ We need to remember that the Fall was precipitated by an object that was “a delight to the eyes” (Gen 3:6).

14. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 140.

15. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 44; and Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 373.

16. William Dyrness, *Visual Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 75.

Tragedy or human need corresponds well to the preoccupation of modern art with despair. If the tragic is but part of the first movement of the atonement, from God to humanity, then despair should not be ruled out in a Christian appreciation of art. The lament psalms are brought to dramatic climax in the cry of abandonment on the cross (Matt 27:46). Atonement may be more than this, but it is not less. The vicarious humanity of Christ guarantees a second movement as well: from humanity to God, from the Son to the Father, a movement of victory and joy, joy that comes out from despair but does not avoid it.

The problems of aesthetics are many, both philosophical and practical. The vicarious beauty of Christ provides a possible different way of considering the puzzle of what is true beauty and what is genuine art, as well as a critique of the failure of the church to develop a robust theological aesthetic. If the true, the beautiful, and the good have been united in the vicarious beauty of Christ, then the traditional burdens in aesthetics of Aristotelian knowledge (a supreme confidence that we can know objective beauty) or Nietzschean power (the creative act as self-worship) are relativized by Christ the vicarious Artist, Musician, Poet, and Dancer. True, some traditions have been tempted to exalt the humanward movement of the spoken word at the expense of the Godward movement of a sensory response. But a theology of the vicarious beauty of Christ stands against such a one-sided gospel and affirms the beauty of the Son's response as the one who indeed is pure in heart and therefore sees and hears God for us and in our place.

The "Wholly Other" Beauty of Christ

The one who is pure in heart, who possesses the vision of God, is not beautiful as we would expect: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2); or, listen to Bernard of Clairvaux: "How beautiful you are to me, my Lord, even in the very discarding of your beauty!"¹⁷ Such a view of beauty may take us far from the ideal of Plato or the symmetry of Aristotle. Sentimentality in religious art is also roundly criticized for promoting an innocuous, placid Jesus, for example. Yet it is equally problematic to portray Jesus as nothing but pain, perhaps implying a view of atonement virtually separating the wrathful Father from the innocent Son. Criticisms of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* come to mind. The grotesque may lead us to grace (see Flannery O'Connor's fiction), but it must not be glorified in itself. Mother Teresa saw the beauty of Christ in the sick and unattractive of the world and thus was able to minister to them: "Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the

17. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 239.

exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you, and say: ‘Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to see you.’”¹⁸

Our sentiments about what is beautiful and what is art are certainly culturally and psychologically relative. This is not surprising to the vicarious beauty of Christ, which comes with its own definition of what beauty is—in the form of the Suffering Servant, as one example. Barth’s criticism of religion can also be transferred to a criticism of our ideas of beauty: Like our preconceived ideas of religion, our preconceived ideas of beauty must be displaced and replaced by Christ.¹⁹ In no other place is there such a bounty of beauty. Despite our love for creaturely beauty, that creaturely beauty inspires us to search for *a beauty we have never experienced*, says C. S. Lewis.²⁰ This is a “wisdom” hidden for ages, “for our glory” that the rulers of this age did not understand, “for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of *glory* [beauty!] (1 Cor 2:7–8). Is this not the “wholly other” beauty of Christ? The form of Christ brings its own beauty not by thoughts or words about beauty but by this beauty itself. The form of Christ is his splendor, a unity between beauty and being, in von Balthasar’s words.²¹ The beauty of God takes the place of our ideas of beauty. But does this mean that there is no analogy of being between Christ’s beauty and the beauty of this world, between uncreated beauty and created beauty, or Christ’s response to God and the need for our response?

The Vicarious Knowledge of Beauty

Is the analogy of being (*analogia entis*), famously denounced by Karl Barth as the Roman Catholic teaching that was “the invention of the antichrist” and recently resurrected by the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, really the best language to express the relationship between uncreated beauty and created beauty, between and God and his creation?²² The admirable intention of the *analogia*’s followers is to maintain a continuity between God, the source of all being, and being itself, and therefore, God and creation. Hart criticizes Barth’s “radical rupture” between the latter.²³ But if Christ is the vicarious beauty that takes the place of our preconceived ideas of beauty, then does not this vicarious, substitutionary reality better address the radical nature of our problem and provide the equally radical solution? Is Christ’s beauty first of all a vicarious, not analogous, knowledge?

True, God as the source of all can be said to overflow in sharing being with others (Pseudo-Dionysius). God may seem more “available” in an analogy of

18. Mother Teresa, quoted in Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 75.

19. Barth, *CD*, I/2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 280–361.

20. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 4.

21. Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:119. See also Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 90.

22. Barth, *CD*, I/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2nd ed., xiii.

23. Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 408.

being, but at what price? According to Alexander Schmemmann, the analogy of being (as well as his critique of “Barthianism”) fails to relate the natural and the supernatural, thereby encouraging secularization.²⁴ The supernatural will eventually collapse into the natural. Is there a better way?

Atonement involves both solidarity and substitution. This is claimed by the vicarious humanity of Christ. In terms of theological epistemology, this double movement partakes of our language yet immediately gives it new meaning. It may have analogous elements (solidarity with our humanity), but ultimately this is a part of the vicarious language of the Word made flesh. Should this not be true in terms of beauty?

The judgment of the vicarious humanity of Christ is that Christ takes our place at every point. Our need is that total. The “radical rupture” in salvation history that Hart criticizes is a result of our radical need. The need made manifest by the vicarious humanity is not, however, in contrast to some Protestant views, predicated upon the depth of the Fall but on the aesthetic riches of his excellency (Jonathan Edwards), a harmony between the Father and the Son revealed in the Incarnation, that is, in the vicarious beauty of Christ.²⁵

The biblical exhortation to walk by faith and not by sight and the description of faith as the conviction of things not seen (2 Cor 5:7; Heb 11:1) do not have to be embarrassing to theological aesthetics, for a subset of the vicarious humanity of Christ is his vicarious faith. The faith of Jesus is vicarious, replacing and establishing our faith so that our sight does not become detrimental to faith, so that our perception of beauty as only physical (whether we think of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie or Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman) does not deceive. Faith becomes irrelevant if our being and God’s being are not distinguished. Unlike with us, in Christ, faith and sight are in a beautiful harmony. We need his ears and his eyes. Our response is made possible by his response. In this way we are the share in his “glory” (John 17:22).

Jesus’ faith is in God the Father (see the Lord’s Prayer). His glory is that of “a father’s only son” (John 1:14). God is Father for Jesus. However, Jesus names God as his Father according to his own definition.²⁶ If the language of analogy is to be used, the analogy of relations, as suggested by Barth and Bonhoeffer, seems preferable, for language of God as Father is personal and relational.²⁷ The Son gives definition to what it means for God to be Father, not our preconceived ideas or experiences. Otherwise, we are hopelessly projecting our experiences upon God. Grace is a personal and relational reality.²⁸

24. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 129.

25. See Louis J. Mitchell, *Jonathan Edwards on the Experience of Beauty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003), 4–7, 35–38.

26. J. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God*, 123.

27. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 3, ed. Martin Rüter, Ilse Tödt, John W. De Gruchy, and Douglas Stephan Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 65; and Barth, *CD*, III/1, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 228–30, and III/2, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 220–21.

28. Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 145–48. See also Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 97.

Beauty can also become impersonal if it is simply related to the commonality of being. The vicarious act of the Son is a personal action, motivated by unconditional love. In fact, is the beauty of Christ any more majestic, any more a reflection of the triune life, than in his relations with the Father and with humanity (Gal 4:4–5)?

The personal action of the movement of the Son to the Father in the Spirit is a movement of harmonious beauty that we cannot make, a knowledge of God that is an event, not a principle or a doctrine. This beautified event is Christ as the Light of life, in whose light we see light (John 1:4; Ps 36:9). As in the Nicene Creed, Christ is “Light from Light,” the giver of grace who is the gift of grace (T. F. Torrance).²⁹ The present life of the resurrected, ascended Jesus is also a profound testament to Christ as the Light by whom *vicariously* we see light, by which we can see in a new and wonderful way creation as God intended, the beauty of the Light of life in Christ that can only be given to us.³⁰

The Vicarious Beauty of Christ and Creation, Old and New

The aesthetics of the atonement involve the re-creation, the redemption of that which was broken, the reconciliation of God, humanity, and the cosmos into a new harmony. We behold the glory of Christ, Christ seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard.

However, our notions of beauty can be notoriously limited. The contemporary (though hardly novel) obsession over physical beauty is a problem of the isolation of physical beauty from a wider and deeper purpose (recall David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11:2).³¹ Barth is right that, frankly, we perceive ourselves as primarily sensual.³² Yet Jesus has eyes that are far superior to the powers of my other “heroes”: Superman’s X-ray vision or the ability of the Shadow to know what lurks in the hearts of men. The Fourth Gospel tells of Jesus’ refusal to entrust himself to those who believed because of the signs, “for he himself knew what was in everyone” (John 2:24–25). On the positive side, Nathanael is amazed that Jesus knows him as “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” (John 1:48). “Where did you get to know me?” he asks. Indeed, Jesus also sees beauty beyond simply the physical.

The high priesthood of Christ (Heb 8:1) and the church as the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 3:9; Rev 1:9), however, proclaim the giftedness of creation as its beauty, which includes physical beauty (see the Song of Solomon and Revelation). Simone Weil famously teaches that beauty may be the only way that we can allow God to penetrate us, yet adds the caveat, “*If it were made true and*

29. T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 138.

30. Barth, *CD*, II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, 665.

31. Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 82.

32. Barth, *CD*, III/2, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 91.

pure, it would sweep all secular life in a body to the feet of God.”³³ Weil reflects a “natural inclination to love beauty” in much the same way the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition presents creation as the first step in ascent to God (Plotinus, Gregory of Nyssa). Yet are these inclinations necessary if Christ sees creation in all of its splendor for us with the eyes of his faith? In fact, is there not the necessity for his vision of creation? The physical world is not only benign; it can be diseased and chaotic as well. Christ prays the psalm of the heavens declaring the glory of God (Ps 19:1) when it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to do so in a world that we see of the transitory, the random, and the absurd, as in the existence of disease and chaos. The grace of Christ’s vicarious prayers is needed, wedding together the atonement and creation. The atonement is by grace alone, as creation is out of nothing, by grace alone.

The psalmist sees “the beauty of the Lord” in “the house of the Lord,” in the context of worship (Ps 27:4). In terms of worship, perhaps the category of witness can be applied to the icon as well as is done to holy scripture, for example, by the theology of Karl Barth. The Fourth General Council of Constantinople (869–870), in its response to the iconoclasm controversy, argued that icons are to be given the same honor as “the book of the Holy Gospels.”³⁴ At this point, all Christian worship, simple or ornate, can see the arts in worship as a witness to Jesus Christ, or even as participating in Christ, in his vicarious humanity, bearing witness to God (see Christ as “the True Witness” in Barth).³⁵

This is a witness that unites the beautiful with the true, in terms of knowledge of God, but also unites the beautiful with the good by seeing a beauty in the rejected, the ugly, and the grotesque of society. The beauty of Christ ignites a compassion for those of little account in society, including the fallen, the poor, children, and the elderly.

The theology of the atonement often suffers when both aspects of the double movement of the Incarnation have not been recognized: the humanward act of descent in solidarity with humanity and the Godward act of ascent in substitution for humanity by the vicarious humanity, even beauty, of Christ. Christ’s beauty is an atoning response as well as a contemplation of God. Karl Barth speaks of his renowned love for the music of Mozart not in terms of the humanward movement of the Word but the Godward movement of faith, obedience, and worship: “Mozart does not wish to say anything; he just sings and sounds.”³⁶ Is this not a reflection of the act of the vicarious beauty of Christ, an atoning response in his life, death, and resurrection, a beauty found in his perfect relationship of harmony with the Father in the Spirit?

33. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 102–3; emphasis mine.

34. The Fourth General Council of Constantinople, cited in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed. *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 65.

35. Barth, CD, IV/3.1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 368–434.

36. Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 37.

In the end, beauty appears to be gratuitous in the same way that grace is.³⁷ And so one can respond either with gratefulness or with indifference. His glory was “full of grace and truth,” yet “the world did not know him” (John 1:14, 10). The vicarious beauty of Christ is his continuing response to the Father, a place for grace to ascend as well as descend, in continuing worship and obedience. This is a beautiful response that humanity can join in together with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Christ, like art and beauty, is revealed by grace. Art and beauty, as Dostoevsky claims, meet a hunger that we accept unconditionally.³⁸ This is grace recognized and received: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). *Theosis* will one day be completed, for “when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2), that is, when we fully share in the vision and hearing of Christ.

37. Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 438.

38. Dostoevsky, cited in Geir Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Writer's Life* (New York: Viking, 1987), 139.



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