

GOSPEL AS MYTH AND BEAUTY

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM
ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

April 23-26, 2008

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While evangelism and conversions are sometimes languishing in many churches, evangelism publishing is booming. There has been a virtual renaissance in the writing of books and the proposing of models to solve the contemporary church’s ineffectiveness and sense of failure in evangelism. Many of the authors are helpful, though most are claiming a greater ability to solve the problem than seems justified by the results. In moments of self doubt, I would put myself and some of my own books in that camp.

What’s more, many voices are competing with one another in claiming to have diagnosed the problem. Different authors advocate different diagnoses. Is the key problem the rise of postmodernism, or is it the end of Christendom, or is it the drift from Orthodoxy, or is it the worldliness of the Church? Are we on the verge of finding a “silver bullet” or critical insight or central strategy that can turn the situation around? Or will the sheer complexity and multi-faceted nature of the challenges we face paralyze us?

We have a growing need of a typology of possible evangelistic responses, with help for churches and ministries to discern their own calling and place on the map. I have been at work on such a typology and would love to talk with others who are also thinking that issue through. I am working with a tripartite typology of word-centered models, deed-

centered models, and sign centered models. Each set of models is in many ways a response to the weaknesses in earlier models. Unfortunately, advocates for each set of models tend to make their case by rejecting the models that have gone before (i.e. Kallenberg 2002; McLaren 2007; Stone 2007).

I am committed to a more integrative approach. It is then in the context of a diversity of valid and helpful voices that I want to be a voice, at least in this venue, to call some of us more fully to flesh out the aesthetic dimension of evangelism. Evangelicals have been extremely prolific and thoughtful and expressive about the logic of the gospel, but not nearly as creative and fruitful and expressive about the beauty of the gospel.

So I want to do two things with this paper.

1. I want to fight the endemic and polarizing reductionism that is characterizing our debates about evangelism.
2. I want to explore and further develop ways we can recover this aesthetic dimension: the beauty of the gospel and the task of evangelism and apologetics to unveil that beauty.

I will start with a question. What do the following directors have in common? Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Martin Scorsese, Frank Capra, and Francis Ford Coppola have in common? Besides that they were all great and even iconic directors? They were all from Catholic backgrounds. Add in Cecil B. DeMille, an anglo-Catholic Episcopalian, and its

quite a storied list of filmmakers who could tell stories of redemption in the gutty and grimey stuff of life. Their use of symbol and icon in film are legendary.

As Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom remark when they are talking about how Catholics view Evangelicals: as Catholics, we cannot understand how evangelicals can claim to be Christian and limit their faith to what goes on in their heads- to words, preaching, testimonies, books, more words- with no real attention to the ligaments of Christian community: no real sacraments, no real sense that Christ died for bodies as well as for heads, no real appreciation for what comes to us through the physical senses. Does it not indicate the thinness of evangelicalism that most of the good Christian literature, almost all the good Christian painting...are done by Catholics? (Noll and Nystrom 2005, 239-240)

Catholics have been at the forefront of putting forward the goodness and beauty of Christian faith, while evangelicals have focused almost solely on its truth, often, though not always, neglecting its goodness and beauty.

We have too often reduced the gospel to its logic, and reduced apologetics to its arguments. What is the gospel? For many evangelicals, the gospel is the logic that explains the necessity and meaning of the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sin, most often in the categories of penal substitution. This is the message to which people must respond to become Christian. This is the boiled down, clearest expression of the

unchanging Gospel we can make. This gospel is true. But we have often not paid adequate attention to how it is also good and even beautiful.

Catholics in contrast have often and throughout history used art and liturgy to express the gospel. Catholics tend to have a comfort and fluency in symbols and signs, icons and incense, the aesthetic and artistic. Why is that? One reason is that Catholics have had a very different dialectic at the heart of their theology and practice. Whereas Protestants have been focused on and even been obsessed with the dialectic between works and faith, Catholics have similarly been absorbed by the dialectic between grace and nature. The works vs. faith dichotomy tends to deemphasize human effort and natural revelation, focusing on the greatness of the distance between God and God's creation. For many Catholics, culminating in Aquinas, but present throughout the tradition, grace perfects nature.

The myths and ideals of pagan culture are "a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination." (Downing, 2000) Thus nature perfected is the aim of grace, and therefore the sacraments are the redeemed use of nature to communicate Christ. So there is more room in Catholic theology for natural revelation and for the potentiality of unredeemed human beings to think and create and work for good. There is more room for a reconciliation between Athens and Jerusalem.

Nature, music, art, literature, and human bodies are better pointers to the goodness and glory and grace of God for many Catholic theologians than for most Protestant

theologians. Interestingly, as Noll and Nystrom point out, this more positive view of nature and human achievement does not necessarily lead to a belief in being justified by our works. Catholics and Evangelicals today are far closer to one another on these issues than we realized and probably then we were in the past. The main difference between Protestants and Catholics today is in their view of the place and role of the Church and the hierarchy in salvation and sanctification more than in our differences on the Reformation essentials (Noll and Nystrom 2005, 229-237).

As a result of this more robust view of nature and its potentiality when claimed by grace, many Catholics have had a fundamentally more positive and creative view toward the power of film specifically and art in general to enact reality and engender rapture. I want to point out two ways that evangelicals have mined Catholic and Anglican sources for artistic resources to comprehend and communicate the gospel in the contemporary world. These two impulses might be summarized as follows:

1. Gospel as Myth
2. Gospel as Beauty

Gospel as Myth

I want first to examine what Evangelicals have drawn from the work of the Catholic J.R.R. Tolkien, and of the Anglican C.S. Lewis, Tolkien's most influential "convert." It is very striking that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was the blockbuster fantasy film trilogy of

the first half of the 1st decade of the new millennium, and Lewis' Narnia Chronicles are emerging as a fantasy blockbuster for the second half of the decade and beyond.

Tolkien called his fantasy work "subcreation". A subcreative world is a secondary world created by a human author with its own rules and logic and beauty and "reality". Tolkien used the prefix "sub" to indicate the primacy of God as Creator, and therefore the derivative work of human subcreators (Tolkien 1989).

Tolkien helped Lewis reconcile the imaginative and analytical modes that had caused such tension for Lewis, and by so doing, helped Lewis commit himself to Christ. Lewis had believed that the myths, Norse, Greek and Irish, that he had grown up loving, were "lies breathed through silver" (Downing 2002). In contrast, Tolkien believed like many other Roman Catholics that God was to be found everywhere and in every culture and place, however distorted the vision of God had become. Myths were better understood as "real though unfocused gleams of divine truth falling on human imagination." (Downing 2002) Tolkien and their mutual friend, Hugo Dyson, talked with Lewis in a decisive conversation on the evening of September 19th, 1931, arguing (Downing 2002)

that one of the great and universal myths, that of the dying God who sacrifices himself for the people, shows an innate awareness of the need for redemption not by one's own works, but as a gift from some higher realm. For them, the incarnation was the pivotal point at which myth became history. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ not only fulfilled Old Testament types but also embodied- literally- central motifs found in all the world's mythologies.

From then on, Lewis experienced in his faith an integration between his analytical and his imaginative selves. He would later say that his imagination was baptized and converted

first, when he at an early age read *Phantastes* by George MacDonald. He called the imagination the “organ of meaning”, generating pictures, metaphors and myths by which we (emotionally and experientially) understand and grasp the world. The intellect was the “organ of truth” which weighs, sifts and analyzes which pictures correspond most closely with reality (Lewis and Hooper 1969, 265).

I personally would not make this distinction quite so starkly between meaning and truth, imagination and intellect. They are both functions of our minds, and together help us both comprehend and communicate truth.

Lewis and Tolkien then went on to develop a literary philosophy of mythopoeics or the art of mythmaking. Myths are stories that often involve gods or the divine that answer why things are the way they are. Historically, myths were created in traditional cultures by anonymous sources to explain how the world got started and to mark off sacred time from historical time (Eliade 1958, 1). But today, we understand such “founding and world establishing myths” can be created by individuals, as Tolkien and Lewis demonstrate.

Tolkien and Lewis didn’t always agree about the art of mythmaking. Tolkien felt Lewis sometimes crossed the line into allegory and instruction, chiding Lewis for trying to dress Christ up in the lion suit of Aslan (Boffetti 2001). For Tolkien, the integrity of the subcreated world needed to be guarded from all incursions of allegory and moralizing, or else the spell would be broken and people would leave the subcreated world, realizing it

was all “just a story.” Tolkien wanted to subcreate a world that readers would feel was real, and that would be for the praise of God’s glory in its reality and values and moral universe. I know that was my response when I first read *Lord of the Rings*, and when I have read it several times since. It is all so real. When I was lost imaginatively in Middle Earth, and pulled myself away to go about my life, I walked around feeling like I could meet an Ent or a hobbit at any moment. Tolkien is significantly more effective in subcreating a “real” alternate world than Lewis. Of course, Lewis was much more of a Christian apologist than Tolkien.

In this tension between Lewis and Tolkien, the Catholic and evangelical tendencies are again evident. Lewis is the Anglican evangelical, seeking to instruct and engage and evangelize, while Tolkien is the Catholic, satisfied with the rapture and wonder of the glories of the subcreated world as a good and an end in themselves. In that sense, Tolkien might have agreed with Keats that truth is beauty and beauty truth, though he never would have gone on with Keats to say that beauty is the only truth we can and need to know (*Ode to a Grecian Urn*).

Kevin Vanhoozer, quoting Lewis, points out the function of myth to help us not only gain information and learn a story, but to actually experience it.

The narrative imagination is also the bearer of modes of judging, experience, even being. C. S. Lewis says that myths enable us both to see and taste as-to experience “as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction” (Lewis 1970, 66) in such way that what gets conveyed is not simply a proposition but something of the reality itself (Vanhoozer 2005, 284).

Here is why I consider the mythic dimension of the gospel as part of its quality as sign. It carries and communicates the reality it points to. It draws the hearer into the experience of what it describes. Mircea Eliade developed this understanding of myth, calling it the “eternal return” because through enacting and re-telling myth, people stepped outside historical time and entered sacred time, re-actualizing the story the myth tells (Eliade 1959, 68-69).

So how do we appropriate an understanding of the gospel as the myth that is true? How can that appropriation help us in our attempt to recover a more robust and compelling comprehension and communication of the gospel?

We need a new generation of writers and producers and visionaries who will take up the mantle from this earlier generation of mythmakers. Look at the power these myth makers are having today in our culture, both in the Church and far beyond the Church, to every nation on earth. Tolkien was a Catholic who communicated a moral universe related to power and humility, truth and beauty. Lewis was an Anglican, and an apologist for Christian faith, and his Narnian myths are travelling the globe. Where are the Christian myth makers today? Where are the people who will subcreate with humility and insight, generosity of spirit and breadth of vision?

We live in a culture in which we are increasingly marginalized. Duane Litfin recently talked to the Wheaton faculty about the future of Christian higher education. He asserted that things are going to get worse and that the battles around sexuality are the tip of the

iceberg. The tolerance value can only increase, and those who argue for their way as the one way will only face greater degrees of persecution in the future. Litfin claimed those who think this massive momentum in our society can be turned around are fooling themselves. In such a society, we will need courageous martyrs again. But we will also need artists, mythmakers, who can capture the conversation about values and truth. As Willie Jennings, a professor at Duke Divinity School, remarked (Jennings 2000):

How do we do our work of creating a compelling moral and spiritual vision in our day? There is now an immense interest in the university in art and its relation to truth, goodness and beauty. There is a growing commitment to art as the primary way for re-making the moral and spiritual imagination. The arts are becoming the arena in which moral vision is being made and re-made. The arts create moral value. If you want to capture the moral and spiritual imagination, you invite in the poets and musicians.

In our own little way, a small group of us has begun to meet monthly to be friends and to write and read stories. We call them the Mead Men, because we initiated our first gathering with mead and because at present, we're all men. Mead certainly plays a prominent role in many myths! And if women become part of the group, we will need to change the alliterative second term! Because of this group, I will spend some portion of this summer writing fiction. I have longed to. I have needed communal support.

There is also a group of students on the Wheaton campus that are similarly meeting and reading and writing fantasy and science fiction. I have high hopes that they may indeed become on some level future mythmakers, higher hopes for them than for our professorial gathering. Might a new and fresh and powerful work of myth making emerge from these groups or others like them? How could we encourage one another, and help one another

into greater depth in weaving together beauty, truth and goodness in the new myths that we make?

One caveat: Myth making is not easy, and I realize this challenge is not aimed at everyone. Tolkien spent his whole life creating the world of Middle Earth, working on languages and histories and depth. Lewis spent many years in Narnia. My publisher once told me when I was anxiously trying to meet a publishing deadline and fill the book I was writing with every good idea I had ever had as quickly as I possibly could: a good book, Rick, is better than a quick book. May I paraphrase: A good myth is better than a quick myth.

Aesthetic Theology: Balthasar

We have briefly explored the gospel as myth. What about the gospel as Beauty? For my thoughts here, I will draw on the work of Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar. He is getting more and more attention from Evangelical theologians and cultural critics. Take for example Kevin Vanhoozer's latest book on Doctrine as Drama. This book attempts a significant rethinking of the nature and authority of Scripture, and takes as its fundamental approach recovering the dramatic nature of theology and doctrine looked at through the metaphor of the stage.

The culmination of Balthasar's work as a theologian was his 15 volume theology in which he developed theology under the rubrics of beauty, goodness and truth.

Theology must distinguish three moments, which in one essay Balthasar calls the three faces of theology. These are respectively, the contemplative (aesthetics), the kerygmatic (dramatics), and the dialogical (logic) (Oakes 1994, 152).

But these three are always interrelated and must always be seen together to get a full and accurate picture (Balthasar *Theo-drama: Theological dramatic theory*, vol. 1 1988, vol. 1, 13).

As Vanhoozer drew on Balthasar's dramatics, I am drawing on his aesthetics.

This exploration of the gospel as Beauty or Art is probably the most foreign to an evangelical sensibility, and I must admit, I know of few evangelicals who have attempted to integrate this aspect of Von Balthasar's theological approach. The closest Protestant theologian that I have studied who explores aesthetic theology is Karl Barth, who was a friend of Balthasar's. Both lived in Basil and often interacted.

Both were drawn toward friendship by their love for great music. For Barth, his musical muse was Mozart. Balthasar was a deeply gifted musician and pianist. Edward T. Oakes asserts that it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of music in the construction of Balthasar's theology (Oakes 1994,133). Balthasar's experience of the rapture engendered by great music led him to a theology of aesthetics that focused on the love-worthiness of the beauty found above all in God and his revelation. In true beauty, the one who gazes upon it becomes lost in the Object, self forgetful and absorbed. For Balthasar, the beautiful brings with it a self-evidence that enlightens without mediation.

Balthasar felt that the exclusion of the aesthetic dimension of revelation led to a utilitarian and critical engagement with Scripture and with theology that had left both bereft of the qualities that engender wonder, awe and rapture. Instead our theological language, and sometimes our evangelistic language, “is correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid” (Nussbaum 1990, 19, quoted by; Vanhoozer 2005, 281). It is inadequate as a vehicle for the languages of love, rapture, and beauty.

Balthasar wants to recapture revelation’s intrinsic beauty and the language that can express that beauty:

If revelation’s quality of beaming fourth joy is not adequately appreciated, where exactly then would be the gladness of the glad tidings (Balthasar 1983, vol. 1, 54-55)? TG 1, 54-55.

Balthasar, though, is not looking to the Greek categories of goodness, truth and beauty for his concepts of the beauty of revelation (Balthasar 1983, vol. 1, 117):

We mean a theology which does not primarily work with the extra-theological categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetic—above all poetry—, but which develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself with genuinely theological methods.

So what might an aesthetic lens reveal as we gaze upon the gospel? Above all, the aesthetic would be determined by the form of Jesus Christ. This is the form in revelation that it can be said (Balthasar 1983, vol. 1, 151):

The beautiful is above all (this) form, and the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the form's interior.

So what form fills out a truly Christian aesthetic? It is the form of the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus Christ.

In his birth: we gaze on the beauty of the incarnation, God in human flesh, and human flesh in all its potentiality. God fills the womb of Mary, who assents to the union with the Spirit and so gives birth to the Son. He is a baby, heaven's glory wrapped in swaddling cloths, vulnerable and cute and adorable.

In his life: we gaze on the life of the suffering servant, the penetrant prophet, the humblest of all authoritarians. This life has been mirrored for us down the centuries in the lives of the saints, of Francis, of Ignatius, of Mother Theresa, dare I say of Billy Graham, of Hudson Taylor, of Shane Claiborne. Balthasar reminds us that the saints are the true interpreters of the drama and aesthetic of the life of Christ.

The saints are the authentic interpreters of theo-drama (Balthasar's word for the dramatic action of God in Christ). Their knowledge, lived out in dramatic existence, must be regarded as setting a standard of interpretation not only for the life-dramas of individuals but ultimately for the history of freedom of all the nations and all humankind (Balthasar *Theo-drama: Theological dramatic theory*, vol. 2 1988, vol. 2, 14).

We love the saints among other reasons because the resplendent image of their life is so love-worthy and engaging (Balthasar 1983, vol.1, 28).

It is not just that our exemplars are heroic. It is that combination of heroism and humility, greatness and servanthood, suffering and nobility that is so very arresting and

compelling. And as Kevin Vanhoozer reminds us, it is not just the beauty of the holiness of individuals that is so compelling and love-worthy. It is also the beauty and love worthiness of communities rendering the drama of the kingdom of God in the pursuit of compassion and justice in the world (Vanhoozer 2005, 102-103).

This living out of the gospel is a contemporary revelation, however feeble and obscured sometimes, of the beauty of the form of Christ.

And it is not just in his life, but also...

In his death: we gaze on the ultimate sacrifice of love, the man who gave himself for others, overcoming evil with good, absorbing violence through a surrender that exposed the impotence of violence, taking sin and sickness and death and hell into himself in an agony of sheer suffering that redeems the whole world.

In the self revelation of the crucified, God's beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call ugly as well as what we call beautiful (Balthasar 1983, vol. 1, 56).

In his resurrection: we gaze upon the beauty of restored glory, now shared with the whole world. We see the glorified future of humanity in the resurrected form of Jesus, humanity lifted up into the very being of God who is Beauty beyond comprehension.

And in his return: we gaze on the reconciliation of all things under one head, and the city that comes down from heaven, the New Jerusalem, with God as its light and the nations' glories as its ornaments.

Comprehending and communicating the gospel has to do with gazing on the sheer beauty and being caught up in the rapture of this Jesus Christ, whose form we can share because we are now part of the new creation. His script is our script. His form becomes our form, as we gaze on his face and are changed and transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

And it is not only in our evangelistic proclamation, but just as much in our apologetics. Our apologetics would also immeasurably be enriched by a transcending of mere logic, emphasizing the beauty of the Christian faith, summed up in the form of Jesus Christ.

Apologetics is the task of stressing the credibility and truth of the Christian revelation in terms accessible to the culture it is addressing. But what could be more suited to this daunting task than a theology that sees revelation in terms of its inherent attractiveness? And not to see this elementary fact-that apologetics and aesthetics go together-has been ruinous to apologetics (Balthasar 1983, vol. 1, 173).

How might we recapture the aesthetic dimension of the gospel, the gospel as Beauty, and so deepen gospel comprehension and communication in our day? I will make a few initial suggestions:

1. Recover the power of the stories of exemplars of the form of Christ, whether Mother Theresa or Francis or Shane Claiborne or whoever. It is not necessarily heroically successful and attractive people, but those who had no form or beauty that drew us, and yet that gave their lives as an offering in service. It is interesting that Tolkien's form of Christ was Frodo, while Lewis' was a lion. Frodo was an actual historical figure in all likelihood, a king that lived close to the time of Christ among the ancient ancestors of the British, the scattered Norse and Anglo-Saxon peoples in the pre-Christian British past. Frodo gave his life for his people. Frodo the hobbit gave his life, though not through immediate death, but nevertheless through the loss of the Shire that he loved. Frodo is not a type. But he is a form. When we communicate the gospel, or seek to understand it more deeply ourselves, we need to regularly gaze on the beauty of Jesus, and the beauty of saints and communities that manifest his form in the life of the world.
2. When we tell of the birth and life and death and resurrection and return of Jesus, whenever we communicate the good news, we must first comprehend and be moved by its beauty. If we are lost in wonder, moved by passion, inspired by beauty, we will tell the news differently, with different attitude and intonation. We will tell it as describing someone and something that is precious, beautiful, and more to be desired than gold. We will communicate love and rapture, which themselves will move those who are searching. We have often comprehended and communicated with compelling logic and passionate urgency for people to turn to Christ to be forgiven and saved. But we have much more rarely been

captured and consumed by the utterly simple beauty of all that God has done in the birth, life, death, resurrection and return of Jesus.

3. In our apologetics, we can add the dimension of beauty, of aesthetic sensibility, again not as defined by the culture but as defined by Scripture. When people ask me questions today, I have a certain conversational process and approach in mind. If they ask me “How can you believe you are right and everybody else is wrong and that Jesus is the only way?” Or when they ask, “Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? Where was God when I was raped, or when my Dad died, or when the planes ran into the two towers?” Here’s my process, including how this aesthetic perspective has changed the way I respond.

First, whatever the question, I ask why they ask. I don’t want to respond to a question they don’t even have. Then I identify with their questions or the cry of their hearts. But I also seek to speak some truth. Lately, as I have been reflecting on this paper, I have added a dimension to my apologetic conversational approach. I have added an aesthetic perspective. I ask myself, “Where is the beauty in the truth that I need to stand up for?”

Sam story: I met Sam at Einstein Bagels, and he asked me, “You aren’t one of those people who think you’re right and everybody else is wrong, and that you have the only way, are you?” And he asked in a tone of voice that communicated great antipathy toward anyone who might think like that. I asked Sam why he

asked. I identified with his fears. But I challenged him out of my personal experience that I didn't need a ladder or set of steps to climb to get to God. I needed God to climb down the ladder to get me. That is why Jesus is uniquely the way back to God, for me, and for Sam.

But I needed something more. I needed the aesthetic dimension: Jesus cares that much to come and get me. He is that compassionate, and that caring. I look into his eyes and find no condemnation and judgment but only invitation and compassion and warmth. Have you ever seen eyes that were full of such welcome and warmth and understanding? That's what I found. That's how he's unique. And that's what I needed. I have begun to add this dimension to my apologetics, and it has made me hungry to grow here in seeing and communicating the beauty of Jesus and his gospel.

Well, George Hunter will pick it up where I leave off, and take us all the way to the sublime. But this is as far as I can go.

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