

Introduction

The Most Beautiful Man Ever to Exist

Too few people today consider Jesus to be beautiful. The deficit of admirers of the loveliness of Christ is not merely a phenomenon among unbelievers. Many Christians today would struggle to articulate how or why their unbelieving friends should consider Jesus not merely powerful or trustworthy or good but irreducibly *beautiful*. Should the average evangelical Christian today read a quote from a church father like Augustine or a Puritan like Samuel Rutherford about the loveliness of Christ, he might scratch his head and wonder at the affective and evocative descriptions. The reasons for this lamentable state of affairs are legion. Some Christians struggle to articulate the beauty of Christ because they struggle to articulate the beauty of *anything*. Such a struggle is downstream from a wider cultural situation that the late philosopher Roger Scruton called the “uglification of culture.” If there is no such thing as objective beauty, and all that we are urged by our culture to call beautiful is patently ugly, it is understandable that we might struggle to describe the beauty of Christ. Another reason why Christians today fail to be moved by the beauty

of Christ, however, is that their idea of Christ is simply deficient. The Christology operative among some Christians today is impoverished compared to Christians of yesteryear. In other words, too many Christians today are missing out: they fail to see the beauty of Christ because the Christ they conceptualize is a diminished version of the Jesus revealed in Holy Scripture and proclaimed throughout Christianity's Great Tradition.

In the face of such threats, this book insists on making the startling claim: Jesus Christ is the most beautiful man ever to exist. How can I make such a declaration? The answer is two-pronged: one side theoretical, one side experiential. Theoretically, I know he is the most beautiful man to ever exist because he is no *mere* man. He is the God-man. The man in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). All that is in God is in the person of the Son—the Word—who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). And *beauty* is included in this "all" that is in God. God is not beautiful in the sense that beauty is some external characteristic that he happens to have, as if he could dispense of his beauty and still be God. He *is* ultimate Beauty. In this book, I will try to erect a structurally sound building, with architectural craftsmanship and artistry to showcase and adorn the beauty of Jesus. But crucial to the integrity of the building is a strong foundation. It will do the reader no good if I construct an impressive edifice on sand. I believe the endeavor to do little more than stare at the beauty of Jesus is fully justified—we build upon stone. The rest of this book builds upon the foundation of the doctrine of God: I will argue here that beauty is an essential attribute of God. If this is the case, the God-man therefore *must* be the most beautiful man ever to exist.

What of my second “prong”—the experiential one? Simply put, I know Jesus to be the most beautiful man ever to exist because I’ve *experienced* him to be so. I believe that habitually gazing at Jesus through the Scriptures proves him to be the most beautiful man ever to exist. Gaze at any other human being long enough, and you will find sin. That is, you will find true *ugliness*. Not so with Jesus. If you stare at him—if you read his Scriptures and you fixate on his person and work—all you will find are reasons to admire him. All you will find are reasons to adore him.

This experiential “prong” is the purpose of this book. What you find here is an invitation to put my claim to the test. Chapter by chapter, I look at Jesus’s person and work in consideration of his beauty. Chapter by chapter, I invite you to stare at this man, and see for yourself if he truly is the most beautiful man ever to exist.

Before I offer you a roadmap for the rest of this book, let me head off a potential misunderstanding (a point I will clarify throughout as well). It would be wrong automatically to associate the divine beauty we find in Christ with, how shall we say ... *daintiness*. In other words, the beauty I invite readers to behold in Christ is not sentimental. I will go a step further and insist that the beauty we see in Christ is not even, strictly speaking, feminine—as glorious as feminine beauty is. Indeed, far be it from me to disparage true feminine beauty. Man and woman are made in the image of God, both reflecting his glory in *gendered* ways. Masculine virtue and feminine virtue overlap at many points, but they are beautifully distinct and complementary. In this way, the harmonious beauty of man and woman is paradigmatic of all creational beauty, which is (much to the chagrin of our age) irreducibly orderly and structured. And within this fabric of orderly creational beauty, the Word became flesh not as an

androgynous, genderless human. The Word became a man. This fact means that Christ exemplifies masculine virtue and thereby affirms and showcases feminine virtue as its fitting counterpoint.

My purpose in saying all of this is to avoid problematic ideas we tend to carry about beauty in general, and the beauty of Jesus in particular. One is the notion that beauty is the same as “girly.” It isn’t. Beauty is certainly a category big enough for “girliness” to fit within it (provided that it is girliness exemplified by a *girl*), but it is big enough also to encompass manly beauty. We live in a world in which people are increasingly uppity about “gender” talk, and in which the world of aesthetics and art do not prioritize *beauty*. Louis Markos describes this present state of affairs in this way:

Thus in the name of the egalitarian idol (for that is what it is), beauty pageants are outlawed, fairy tales are distorted, femininity and masculinity are either denied or conflated, the canon is purged of anything that is deemed (by modern standards) to be racist, sexist, or homophobic, and Christians (who should know better) allow their syntax and rhetoric—not to mention their hymns and Bible translations—to be neutered and “uglified” through the use of gender-inclusive language ... equality no longer means what it meant to the virtuous pagans, to the writers of the Bible, to our own founding fathers ... but a dull and colorless sameness that, if it ever were achieved, would make the old Soviet Union look like a fairyland.¹

If Markos is right (and I really think he is), then we should want nothing to do with the mistake of either associating beauty strictly with femininity, or of erasing the distinction between femininity and masculinity and calling beauty

1. Louis Markos, *Restoring Beauty: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful in the Writings of C.S. Lewis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), p. 18.

a wash. Rather, we should embrace the complementarity of masculine and feminine expressions of beauty and acknowledge that Jesus Christ is a man. That evangelicals have an odd penchant for writing and singing praise songs whose lyrics could have been written by a pop artist for her boyfriend is a well-known cliché, but clichés *become* clichés for a reason. So, Christians who tire of this kind of thing should be relieved to know that emphasizing the beauty of Christ does not consign us to a “Jesus is my boyfriend” kind of sentimentality.

Another related bad idea about the beauty of Christ is the fatal assumption that it is *tame*. It isn't. Granted, a small flower is beautiful. So is the gentle music of a summer breeze softly breathing on windchimes. But standing on top of Mt. Everest and feeling small and vulnerable and terrified is *also* beautiful. So is the way the midwestern sky lights up with lightning, raging to the heavy-metal-like music of a thunderstorm. Beauty can put you at rest and calm your heart. But beauty can also cause you to fall on your face in fear and trembling, terrified and awestruck and moved with gratitude and overwhelmed by wonder at the thought of God's holiness and grace. All the shades of created beauty are beautiful by virtue of their participation in divine Beauty: the highs and the lows, the peaceful and the thrilling, the subtle and the startling. And it's *all* found in Jesus.

Which is simply to say, the claim that Jesus is the most beautiful man to ever exist is not to deny that he is a male and not a female, that he is Lord and not boyfriend, that he is masculine and strong and not effeminate, and that he is sovereignly free and not tame.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that my description here implies that Jesus's beauty is the “beauty” of a lawless and angry biker who is rough around the edges.

The counterfeit Christs described above have duped so many because within them there is some truth: he really *is* “gentle and lowly” (Matt. 11:29); he really *does* invite “the little children” to come to him (Matt. 19:14); he really *does* weep at his friend’s tomb (John 11:35). We would do no one any favors by swinging the pendulum of our conception of Christ from one extreme to another; Christ is no more the cold, crass, angry macho-man than he is the effeminate pushover. His arms are to be greatly desired by his flock, and greatly feared by his enemies. His embrace is to be sought after as rapture for the souls of his disciples, and dreaded as impending judgment for those who rage against him. And the invitation to receive him as a delight, as opposed to a danger, is to be extended from sea to sea: anyone can get in on his gentle and lowly kindness. “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. *Blessed are all who take refuge in him*” (Ps. 2:12). So much for the caveats. Now, for the roadmap.

In chapter one, we will begin by laying down some theological foundation for the rest of the book. This will position us well to begin looking at Jesus directly in chapter two, in consideration of his arrival. In the incarnation, Jesus reveals God—Beauty himself—to us. In chapter three, we will examine his earthly ministry in consideration of his beautiful obedience. Then, in chapter four, we will continue focusing on his earthly ministry, considering the beauty of his sacrificial death on the cross. In chapter five, the beautiful sunrise of his resurrection will occupy our attention. Chapter six will focus on the beauty of his intercessory work, as he sits at the right hand of the Father in his ascended state, awaiting his glorious return and the restoration of all things. Chapter after chapter, we will see what Holy Scripture teaches about various aspects of Christ’s

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person and work—from the incarnation and the hypostatic union of his two natures, to his atoning death on the cross and descent to the dead, to his victorious resurrection and ascension, and the promise of his glorious return—and, with the help of the greatest minds in the history of the Church, we will see how the unvarnished Jesus radiates with a beauty that renders all his rivals pitifully grotesque.