



### The Charm of Beauty in an Ugly Age

**M**y heart is heavy these days for the church. Are we just a religious version of our ugly age or can we actually be the alternative counterculture of Christ? Can we develop the spiritual maturity to be a Christlike community of radical love and mercy? If not, we'll become as superfluous as a Blockbuster video rental store ... and suffer the same fate.

If the church in America is to recover any relevance, it won't be through a public emphasis on **the true** (Christian apologetics) or **the good** (Christian ethics), but through an emphasis on the long-neglected third prime virtue—**the beautiful**. What we desperately need is a renaissance of Christian aesthetics. In a post-Christian culture adverse to claims of superior truth or superior morality, beauty still holds the prerogative and charm to win hearts. If we can be so formed in Christ that we begin to live beautiful lives, we will gain a new hearing; if not, we deserve to be ignored.

Yet in the midst of this era of ugliness, there is hope—the hope that Fyodor Dostoevsky's enigmatic maxim will turn out to be a prophecy:

*"Beauty will save the world."*

Why is the life of Christ universally considered beautiful? Because of his mercy, his welcoming demeanor, his tenderness toward the weak, his generous forgiveness of sinners. Everyone (except the self-righteous Pharisees) recognized the winsome beauty of Jesus. Today everyone likes Jesus. Everyone! Even atheists like Jesus. I can't think of a single serious person who is a critic of Jesus.

Friedrich Nietzsche, God bless him, tried to be a critic of Jesus, but he couldn't keep it up and seems to have actually been a grudging admirer.

My hope is that the church can be inspired to try to imitate the winsome beauty of Jesus. When the church carries the grace, the mercy, the unconditional love and radical forgiveness that characterizes Christ, that's when she bears the beauty that belongs to the bride of Christ.

In depicting a society of people intent on following the peaceful way of the Lamb, John the Revelator bounces back and forth between the twin metaphors of a bejeweled city and a beautiful bride. Then John combines them so that the Bride, in

concert with Spirit, calls to those languishing beside the burning lake to come into the beautiful and verdant city (See Revelation 21 & 22).

Whenever I think of these images from the finale of Revelation, I am reminded of the recurring line in Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm," conjuring a compassionate woman speaking to a weary and beleaguered traveler:

*Tw'as in another lifetime, one of toil and blood  
When blackness was a virtue  
and the road was full of mud  
I came in from the wilderness,  
a creature void of form  
"Come in," she said,  
"I'll give you shelter from the storm"*

All ten verses make me think of the bride of Christ as she ought to be.

"Shelter from the Storm" helps me imagine the church, not as a raging warrior, but as a gracious hostess, a hospitable innkeeper. Some metaphors serve us as better than others. Now is a time for us to lighten up on militaristic metaphors and lean into hospitality metaphors. Instead of culture-war hostility, we need radical hospitality. It's time for us to live up to the ubiquitous church marquee that claims, "Everyone welcome."

Instead of contributing to the hateful rhetoric of our ugly age, could the church instead be a shelter from the storm?

Instead of a furrowed brow of disapproval, a clenched fist of anger, or a wagging finger of condemnation, could not the church instead present to the world a compassionate countenance of grace?

Instead of being sucked into the destructive dualism of reactive people, could the church instead become a contemplative people seeking to reconcile all things in the love of Christ?

Instead of ratcheting up culture war polemics, could the church instead speak the first words of the risen Christ, "peace be with you"?

If so, we can enact the beauty of Christ in a way that will be conspicuous in an ugly age.

So together, let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us make Christianity beautiful again. □