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Our Journey into the Truth, Beauty, and Holiness of the Gospel

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IS THE GOSPEL TRUE? That is the question that the modern non-believer asks. Of course, it is true, but the truth of the gospel is really revealed only as we enter into this faith journey which is the Christian life. Jesus says, follow me, and, as we do, the truth of the gospel is revealed. Likewise, as we begin to follow Jesus, the beauty and holiness of the gospel is revealed as well.

Of course, the concepts of truth, beauty, and holiness that are revealed in the Gospels are very different from our cultural concepts of such things. For one thing, our cultural ideas of truth, beauty, and holiness are static. They resemble Platonic forms or fixed dictionary definitions, rather than the dynamic and progressive concepts that emerge as we experience the revelations that are set forth in the Gospels. Sadly, many who profess to be follow-

ers of Jesus retain their static, cultural concepts and refuse to have them changed by what they find in the Gospels. That is because, for many of us, the conceptual understanding we received at our mother's knee is sacred and not to be questioned. As a consequence, our experience is always moulded by that cultural understanding, rather than our understanding being moulded by our experience.

It is possible, however, to have our experience mould our concepts if we treat our concepts with a certain suspicion and equally yield authority to what we experience. Teens often reject the conceptual understanding they acquired at their mother's knee and have their understanding changed by what they experience from their peers or the media. Such changes are not always good. Of course, neither is it good always to insist that our experience conform to our conceptual understanding rather than having our concepts changed by our experience. The question is to which experiences are

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we to give authority and power to change our conceptual understanding. Upon deciding to follow Jesus, Christians give that authority to the Gospels and the God that Jesus reveals. As we do, our experience of the gospel begins to change our concepts, especially our concepts of truth, beauty, and holiness.

I 'What Is Truth?'

'What is truth?'¹ So asks Pontus Pilate. Of course, Jesus says, 'I am the way, and the truth' (Jn. 14:6). The idea of Jesus being the truth is very different from the cultural notion of truth into which we have been educated. Our cultural concept of truth comes to us from the Enlightenment thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Their concept was that truth should be objective, certain, and based upon evidence. In order to avoid error, they insisted that we believe only that for which we had evidence. This idea that we must have evidence or warrant to support the truth of our beliefs became so prevalent that modern thinkers came to believe that it was immoral to believe anything if it were not supported by the kind of evidence of which modern science would approve.

Such a moral position provided a solid ground for modern atheism. When the gospel is shared with people who have been taught to think in the way of modernity, their response often is, 'How do I know if it is true?' They want evidence before they will believe, but the idea that evidence must pre-

cede a belief is unreasonable. A century ago William James had pointed out that many times in order to acquire evidence, we must first hold a belief with very little or no evidence. That is because it is often the case that faith in a particular belief is the very thing that opens the possibility for evidence.

Where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!²

James seems correct in his criticism of a scientific mentality that says we must have warrant for the truth of our beliefs before we are entitled to hold those beliefs. Indeed, the very nature of a scientific hypothesis is that we accept a belief prior to evidence. Of course, the defenders of the modern, scientific mentality would argue that a scientific hypothesis is only loosely held and will be abandoned if evidence to support the belief does not immediately follow. But the history of science is full of examples of scientific hypotheses being held without evidence long past the point of being reasonable, only eventually to be proven true. Although we may romanticize such tenacity and see it as courage, it is frequently the case that such obsti-

¹ John 18:38. All references are to the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

² William James, 'The Will to Believe', *New World*, June (1896): Rpt. in *The Will to Believe/Human Immortality and Other Essays on Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 25.

nacy is more a matter of ego. Often it is simply pride and an inability to admit one's error that supports a belief in the absence of evidence.

Religious beliefs can also be held in pure tenacity and pride, but with religious beliefs there is another possibility. Even in the absence of evidence to support its truth, a religious belief may find support in the beauty we find in the object of our faith. Often the object of one's faith creates a sense of the sublime that is capable of providing support for the belief. There may be no bell that rings to tell us that something is true, and thus the need for evidence, but there is such a bell when we recognize something as divinely beautiful. Furthermore, it is this divine beauty that is, in a very real way, at the base of the Christian faith. Indeed, the Christian faith is not ultimately founded upon the truth of the existence of some creator and ruler of the universe, but rather upon the beauty we find in the God that Jesus reveals. Beauty is primary, not only in the sense that it is often what first draws us to the God of the gospel, but also in the sense that it is the beauty of the gospel that overwhelms us, enchants us, fascinates us, and calls us.³

II Beauty

I know a man who, as a nominal Jew, had no interest in the gospel. One day in a taxi cab ride to the airport, the cab driver asked if he had ever read the New Testament. My friend said no but took a pocket edition of the New Tes-

tament when the cab driver offered it. He eventually read it out of curiosity. After having read the Gospel account, he thought to himself, 'I don't believe a word of this, but this is exactly who I would want God to be.' He began to weep uncontrollably. It was not the truth of the gospel that began his faith journey but the beauty of the gospel.

Of course, some of us do begin by believing in the truth of the gospel, but, even in those cases, it is the beauty of the gospel that must ultimately become the foundation for our faith. If we merely accept the truth of God's sovereignty over the universe, without any real love for who he is and how he does things, we are little different from the demons. The demons know the truth. They know that the God whom Jesus reveals is the sovereign ruler of the universe, but they wish he weren't. They know the truth, but they do not love it because they fail to see the beauty of who God is.

Since the Christian faith is, at its base, a love relationship with God, we must see God's love-worthiness. God's love-worthiness is found not in the truth of his existence but the beauty of that existence. The demons know the truth of God's existence, but they fail to recognize the beauty in how he does things through love and forgiveness. They see no beauty in his meekness and mercy. In their eyes, a God who is quick to forgive and slow to anger is a poor excuse for a god, and therein is the basis for their rebellion. Many human beings are very much like those demons. They accept the fact of God's existence and sovereignty, but they do not love the way he does things.

In creating his kingdom, God is looking for a people who, as the very

3 Andrew M. Greeley, 'The Apologetics of Beauty', *America*, Vol. 183, Issue 7 (2000), p. 3.

opposite of those demonic creatures, want the God of the Gospels to be the ruler of the universe, in spite of the fact that all of the evidence seems to the contrary. In order to create a kingdom of such people, God hides himself and offers very little evidence for his existence and power. Instead, he sends his Son to reveal to us the beauty of that existence. Those who see beauty in the God that the gospel reveals fall in love with that God.

God does not desire that we simply believe that he exists and obey his commands. If that were really what God wanted, he would have made his existence and power much more evident. What God desires is a people who would fall in love with him as they see great beauty in the fact that he is the father of the prodigal,⁴ that the banquet he has prepared is for all who have no better place to be,⁵ and that the person who comes to God in the last hour gets the same reward as the one who has laboured all day.⁶ It is all about seeing the beauty in the God that Jesus reveals.

III Truth

Of course, we also need the truth of the gospel, but not necessarily the factual truth that modernity had thought was so all-important. The belief of modernity was that propositions were truth bearers, and that a proposition was true if it corresponded to some factual state of affairs. The Gospels, however, do not, for the most part, present

propositions to be deemed true or false by their correspondence to factual states of affairs. The ultimate truth of the gospel is not found in the fact that Jesus did indeed say and do the things that are recorded in the scripture. Instead, the Gospels offer images that are capable of revealing eternal truths. The truth of the gospel, therefore, is found in the meaning of those images, rather than in the fact that its propositions correspond to states of affairs that actually took place.

Of course, the Gospel story is not fiction, but its truth does not rest in the facts of the story but rather the meaning of the story. Without understanding the true meaning of the gospel, the Klansman may imagine Jesus as a racist. He may believe the fact that Jesus died on a cross and rose from the dead, but the truth of the gospel escapes him, because the truth of the Gospel is found not in its facts but in its meaning.

The science of modernity had insisted that truth was all about facts and thus a story that was not factual could not be true. Because we have been so influenced by modernity, many of us may need to begin our faith journey with a belief in the factuality of the gospel. But although we may need to begin there, there is no necessary connection between what is factual and the truth of the gospel. Jesus tells us of parables that most likely never actually took place, but they are nevertheless true because they reveal eternal truths. Likewise, the story of the gospel is true because it reveals the ultimate truth of who God is. Whether God would reveal himself through a story or some actual facts is not important in comparison to what is revealed.

4 Luke 15:11-32.

5 Luke 14:16-24.

6 Matt. 20:1-16.

What is important—the truth of the gospel—is not found in some set of facts but in the unfolding of a meaning. Its truth, to use Heidegger's terms, is an 'unconcealment' rather than an 'already-thereness'.⁷ Modern science told us that it was about the facts (the already-thereness), but we now know that truth is not found in the facts but in their meaning. The unconcealment of the meaning is something that generally requires time.

In order to know the true meaning of the gospel, time and additional experiences are required. We can believe in the facts of the gospel in an instant, but the meaning requires further revelations that usually occur over time. Jesus tells us of God's faithfulness, but we cannot really know the truth of what that means until we have experienced numerous instances of God meeting us in our need.

Jesus may have told us who God is, but we really come to know who God is only by following Jesus and in time seeing that the God who is at work in my life is exactly who Jesus said he was. Any real meaningful knowledge of God is like our knowledge of anyone else with whom we are in relationship. Our knowledge of who that other person truly is comes only in time. At the beginning of a marriage we may think we know the other person but we really come to know them only over time. We may say we know that another person is trustworthy, but our knowledge of their faithfulness is more a hope within

us than something we really know about the other person. Real knowledge of another person's faithfulness comes only in time as the person demonstrates their faithfulness. The same is true of our knowledge of God and his faithfulness, and herein rests the true evidence for the gospel.

If I were to find out tomorrow that Jesus never really existed, that he never died on a cross, or never rose from the dead, I would still be a Christian. The reason I would still be a Christian is because the story of the Prodigal, the Sermon on the Mount, and the idea of God on a cross responding to torture and murder with forgiveness is exactly who I have come to know God to be. This is the evidence of the gospel. That is, Jesus said that if we follow him, we will find God to be just as he said. Those who truly follow Jesus find his predictions to be true—they find God to be exactly as Jesus described him. This is the evidence upon which the truth of the gospel rests.

Of course, many people never come to know the God whom Jesus reveals. They never come to know the faithfulness of the God of the gospel because either they have no personal relationship with God through which a personal knowledge of who he is could develop over time, or they never find themselves in those desperate places where they need God to reveal his faithfulness. This is the unfortunate position of the rich and famous, and it is the reason that Jesus tells us that the truly blessed ones are the poor. Poverty is essential to the development of a faith relationship with God, since without it we never get the evidence of God being our loving father

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Trans. Ralph Manheim) (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1959).

who repeatedly meets us in our need.

Without our ongoing needs being consistently and miraculously met, our talk of God and his faithfulness is just talk. This is the basis for the faith into which God is calling us. It is what gives substance to our hope.⁸ It is what substantiates the fact that God is 'our father'⁹ and nothing can separate us from his love.¹⁰ This is the faith that comes down from heaven as God consistently meets us in our need. This revelation of God's faithfulness toward us needs to be an ongoing revelation since our unbelieving minds find it easy to dismiss God's miraculous intervention in our lives as happenstance. Only as we recognize numerous instances of God meeting us in our need do we come to dwell in the fullness of life that only such awareness can provide. This is why faith is best understood as a journey.

IV Faith as Journey

The journey that is faith, however, is not merely a journey whereby we progressively get greater evidence for the truth of the gospel. It is equally a journey through which we get an ever greater revelation of God's beauty as well. As we have seen, beauty is as basic to the Christian life as is truth. Furthermore, just as the truth of the gospel comes through a progressive revelation, so too does the beauty of the gospel. The sense of beauty with which we begin our faith journey is a very human form of beauty and differ-

ent from the divine beauty which we eventually come to behold. At the beginning of our journey, we find beauty in those scriptures that promise to meet our desires. Those desires are initially very human in nature.

When I first became aware of God's presence in my life, I thought the most beautiful scripture was: 'For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:11 KJV). I found that scripture so beautiful because it gave me what I desired. It was beautiful because it revealed to me a God who would save me from a meaningless existence. As I stayed in relationship with God, however, that relationship changed me and my sense of beauty. In time, the beauty I found in the scripture was no longer a beauty based upon the fact that it promised to satisfy some desire in me. Rather, what I eventually came to see as beautiful were those scriptures that revealed something of the holiness of God. Of course, like my concept of beauty, my concept of holiness was also being changed over time through my ongoing conversion. Change in our conceptual understanding is certainly part of the conversion process, and our idea of holiness is as critical to our understanding of who God is as are our concepts of truth and beauty.

V Holiness

Our initial concept of holiness is a cultural one passed on to us by our language community. As we come to know Jesus, however, we see that his idea of holiness is quite different from our cultural concept. Our initial concept of holiness is remarkably similar to the Pharisees' notion of holiness. It is a

⁸ Heb. 11:1.

⁹ Matt. 6:9.

¹⁰ Rom. 8:39.

very human notion and is tied to the religious idea that God hates sin and therefore loves people who avoid sin and remain pure or sinless. A holy person is a morally righteous person who obeys God's law. But that is a very human concept of holiness—a very Pharisaical notion of holiness. It is a notion of holiness very different from the one that Jesus presents. In fact, the concept of holiness that Jesus presents is in many ways the very opposite of such a human, Pharisaical notion. The Pharisees believed that God must be like them. That is, that, like them, God loves good people and does not love bad people. The God that Jesus reveals, however, is very different from anything human. What Jesus reveals is that God is able to love the unlovely that are neither good nor beautiful in our sight. This is the true holiness of God, and we are called to be holy, as he is holy.¹¹

The words, *holy* and *holiness* 'in their primitive meaning imply a separation or setting apart from the secular and profane'.¹² The Pharisees thought that meant to keep the law and thereby be set apart from most people who were not so devout concerning the law, but God's holiness seems much more radical. From what Jesus reveals in the gospel, God is not merely different or set apart from the vast sea of humanity because he is better at keeping his own law. Rather, God is set apart and different from human beings in that what

he values and sees as good is very different from what we human beings generally value and see as good. He loves the unlovely and 'is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked'.¹³ In spite of everything, they are his creation and he loves them with the love of a father for his child.

Jesus knew that God was able to love the unlovely sinners and that moral purity was not a condition for receiving God's love. Jesus tells us that we are to love sinners as God loves them. From the cross, Jesus responds to his torturers by praying for them to be restored to an awareness that the God of the universe was a loving father who longed for their return. How unlike anything human! In fact, it is so unlike anything human that at first we do not see how divinely beautiful it is. It is hard to recognize the true beauty of the gospel until we have experienced a good deal of transformation. Without being changed and made more into his likeness, we desire a God who is like us. That is, a God who rewards good people like ourselves and punishes evil people who are not like us. This is one of the things that need to be changed by the transformative journey that is the Christian life. We need to come to see that God loves his creation. He loves the people of Nineveh in a way that Jonah does not understand.¹⁴ This is why we, like Jonah, need to be changed, and as we are, we will begin to see a beauty that was not visible to our all-too-human eyes.

With our all-too-human eyes we see

¹¹ 1 Peter 1:16.

¹² Philip Schaff, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1885), p. 388.

¹³ Luke 6:35.

¹⁴ Jonah 3:1-4:11.

nothing beautiful about the last coming first and the first coming last, or that the one who worked only one hour received the same as those who laboured all day.¹⁵ We must be changed in order to see the beauty in that. If we are not changed, and never come to see that as beautiful, Heaven will not be very heavenly.

I think most people imagine that Heaven will be what they think is beautiful, but the truth is that Heaven will be what God thinks is beautiful, and what God thinks is beautiful is often very different from what we think is beautiful. This is why transformation is at the base of the Christian life.

The fact that there was born a Saviour in the city of David¹⁶ is something that still strikes me as beautiful, but it is surpassed in beauty by the fact that the last thing Jesus did with his disciples was to wash their feet. He says, 'I am among you as one who serves.'¹⁷ Jesus, as the complete and ultimate revelation of who God is, is among us as a servant. He is a servant even to Judas—a servant to his enemy. If that is not the most beautiful thing you have ever heard, you are not yet fully converted, and not ready for heaven.

Other scriptures are also good indicators of just how far we have gone in this journey into the beauty of God's holiness, and how much further we still have to go. Jesus tells us that he is 'meek and lowly in heart' (Mt. 11:29 KJV). What a shocking revelation of the holiness of God. God as 'meek and

lowly in heart' is certainly not what we imagine as a characteristic of God's holiness. Our idea of God's holiness, or the fact that God is so utterly other than anything human, lies in the fact that God is all-powerful. We imagine that he is sovereign in a way that we wish we were. This is how we imagine the holiness of God, but Jesus reveals a God very different from what we imagine. Jesus reveals a God who is 'meek and lowly in heart'—whose response to evil is to suffer it rather than simply destroy it, as we would if we were God.

Unlike ourselves, God loves the evil-doer. God is holy and is always willing to seek the restoration of the sinner. While we would make sure that the guilty pay for their offence, God seeks to forgive and suffer the offence for the sake of restoration. Unlike us human beings who see power as beautiful because it enables us to realize the pleasures we desire, God's holiness is found in the fact that he chooses to work not through power but through forgiveness and suffering—he is 'meek and lowly in heart'.

This is very different from who I am and who I would be if I were God. If I were God, I would not be 'meek and lowly in heart'. Amazingly, however, if I were the God of the universe, I would be more 'meek and lowly in heart' than I would have been ten years ago. Hence, the real evidence for the truth of the gospel. Through some mysterious process, I am being changed and made ever more into the likeness of the God that Jesus reveals.

Of course, there is much more to God's holiness. The best we can do is to get glimpses from time to time of the beauty of his holiness and thereby have our concept of holiness changed. One

¹⁵ Matt. 20:1-16.

¹⁶ Luke 2:11.

¹⁷ Luke 22:27.

such glimpse recently came to me through the words of Jesus when he says, 'I am not alone' (Jn. 16:32) How unlike anything human! Most human beings are always alone and suffer the consequences of it. I heard a psychologist, who had been in practice for many years, say that he had come to believe that a vast amount of psychological disorders were the result of loneliness. Even when we are in the company of others, we often feel alone since no one really knows us and we are not free to be ourselves with anyone. Of course, Jesus was never alone. The God that Jesus reveals is a triune God. The Christian Godhead is a relationship between three divine persons who are eternally in one another's presence—three persons who eternally know, and are known by, one another. We are invited to enter into that relationship and thus never be alone again.

Jesus knew that nothing could separate him from his Father's love. He was never alone, and he tells us that we need not ever be alone. 'He has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you"' (Heb. 13:5). Isn't that the most beautiful thing you ever heard? Even in the hour of our death, when many peo-

ple feel most alone, we need not be alone.

A doctor recently told me a story about a hospice patient of his who was dying of cancer. He had seen the patient a few days before and thought the patient had a few months to live. He was a bit surprised when the hospice nurse called and told him that the patient had died. He was especially surprised because the nurse seemed extremely shocked about the death. When the doctor questioned why she was so surprised, she told him that she wasn't telling him the entire story. It seems that she had been with the patient that morning and he looked quite healthy. While she was tending to him, however, he told her that he was going home that day. She asked if his family was coming for him? He told her, no. He then went on to explain that his captain had just come and told him that he would be going home that day. She left the room only momentarily to get something, but when she returned he was dead. Even in the hour of our death, we need not be alone. Isn't that the most beautiful thing you have ever heard?

Leadership Expectations

How Executive Expectations are Created and Used in a Non-Profit Setting

Gene Early

The author creates an Expectation Enactment Analysis to study the role of the Chancellor of the University of the Nations-Kona, Hawaii, and is grounded in the field of managerial work, jobs, and behaviour, drawing on symbolic interactionism, role theory, role identity theory, and enactment theory. The result is a conceptual framework for further developing an understanding of managerial roles.

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