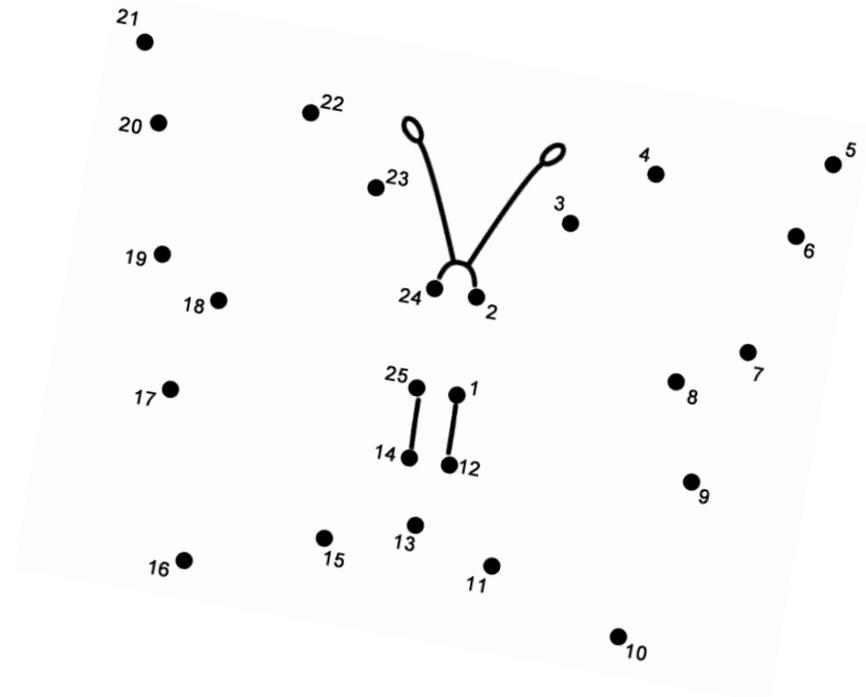


# Luther's Theology of Beauty

Dr. Mark C. Mattes, Grand View University

# Theology of Beauty

- Connecting the dots in music, architecture, poetry, painting, and sculpture
- How do the senses contribute to matters of faith?



# Luther's theology of the heart

- “To cling to God with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely.” (Book of Concord, 388:15)
- To ask what or whom you trust is to imply that you are captivated and caught up by something outside yourself
- You cannot serve God and mammon



# The delight of hearts made new



- Bondage of being curved in on ourselves: pilgrimages and fasting, spiritual disciplines
- Freedom: living outside ourselves in God and the neighbor
- Those who would save their lives must lose them and those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will find them. (Matthew 16:25)

# Post-modern view of reality and beauty

## POST-MODERNISM

- Taste is relativized: conditioned by culture
- We shouldn't favor one culture over another
- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder
- There's no metric for judging beauty
- It's all perception and opinion
- Nothing is truly beautiful

## CHRISTIANITY

- Leaving things to taste and perception sets up an elitist system, when really there is no Greek or Jew, slave or free
- The new person of faith is given new perceptions of beauty
- The entire cosmos is beautiful

# Rudolf Bultmann and Demythologization



- Find a kernel of truth under the mythology of scripture.
- Beauty has no significance for Christian living, because it distracts
- Beauty is mere veneer disguising ugliness, pain, and suffering
- To go beyond the veneer is to find true Christian faith

# Miika E. Antila on beauty

- In the cross of Christ there is supreme beauty concealed beneath the most abominable ugliness. Yet there is no ugliness in God. **The ugliness of the cross belongs to us, whereas the beauty is God's.** God is most beautiful not only when compared to us. He proves to be most beautiful when he makes us beautiful, that is, gives his beauty to us. **This is an aesthetic variation of the doctrine of justification.**

# *Theologia crucis* is a theology of beauty

- Does a theology of beauty make you a theologian of glory?
- The gospel of the Crucified and Risen One is beautiful
- God is beautiful, because there's nothing so joyous, wondrous, or sweet than what Jesus Christ bestows on sinners



# Luther's aesthetics in late-medieval context

Mind → Senses

# Beauty is *not* subjective

- Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder
- Beauty can be discovered with your reasoning abilities
- Beauty is not just about art



# How did Luther experience beauty?



- Our senses discover beauty
- Beauty pleases our senses
- Beauty is used to convince readers of the truth

# Aquinas on the criteria of beauty

- Proportion
- Clarity
- Integrity



# Luther on the criteria of beauty

- Beauty is paradoxical
- Christ, the beautiful bridegroom, is “despised and rejected”
- Sinners are adorned with Jesus’ righteousness



# Beauty parallels justification



- Christians are *simul iustus et peccator*: at the same time righteous and sinful
- Christians are simultaneously ugly and beautiful

# The Happy Exchange in “Freedom of a Christian”

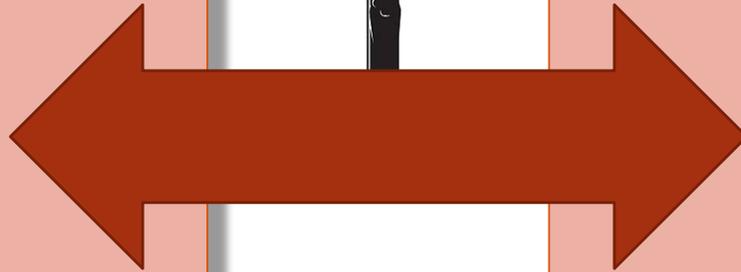


**What Christ  
brings to the  
relationship**

- Grace
- Life
- Salvation

**What the sinner  
brings to the  
relationship**

- Sins
- Death
- Damnation



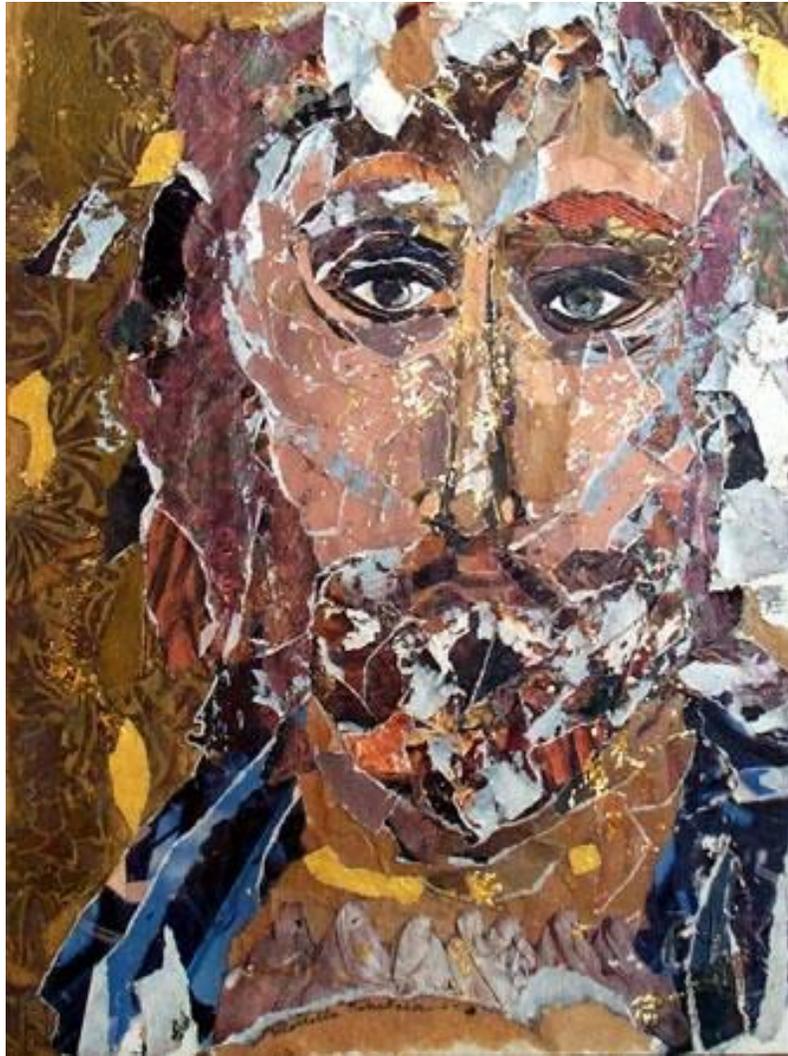
# Bernard of Clairvaux

O soul of surpassing beauty, even though dwelling in a sickly little body, heaven's own loveliness had not scorned your company, the angels on high did not cast you out, God's brightness did not repudiate you! Is this soul to be called black? It is black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem. Black in your estimation, but beautiful in the eyes of God and the angels. The blackness you observe is merely external.



*Commentary on the Song of Songs*

# The paradoxical beauty of Christ



He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Isaiah 53:2

# Thesis 28: Heidelberg Disputation

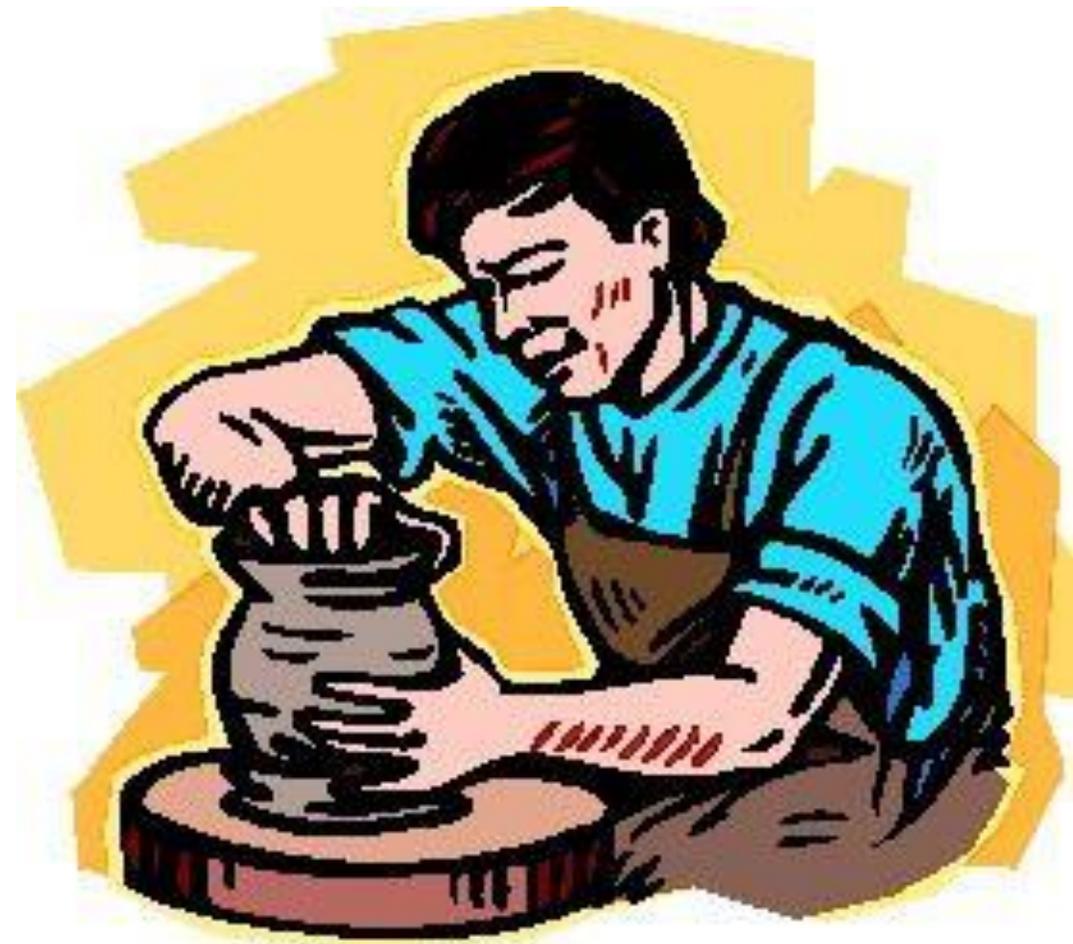
God's love does not find,  
but creates, that which is  
pleasing to it. Human  
love comes into being  
through that which is  
pleasing to it.



University of  
Heidelberg

# God creates what is beautiful

- There's nothing inherently attractive about the object of God's love
- We're the raw material God's love shapes into beauty
- God's forensic justification makes us into masterpieces (effective justification)



# God's alien and proper work

## **Alien work**

- Judgment
- Reduces us to nothing
- Declares ugly
- Law
- Demand
- “I kill...”

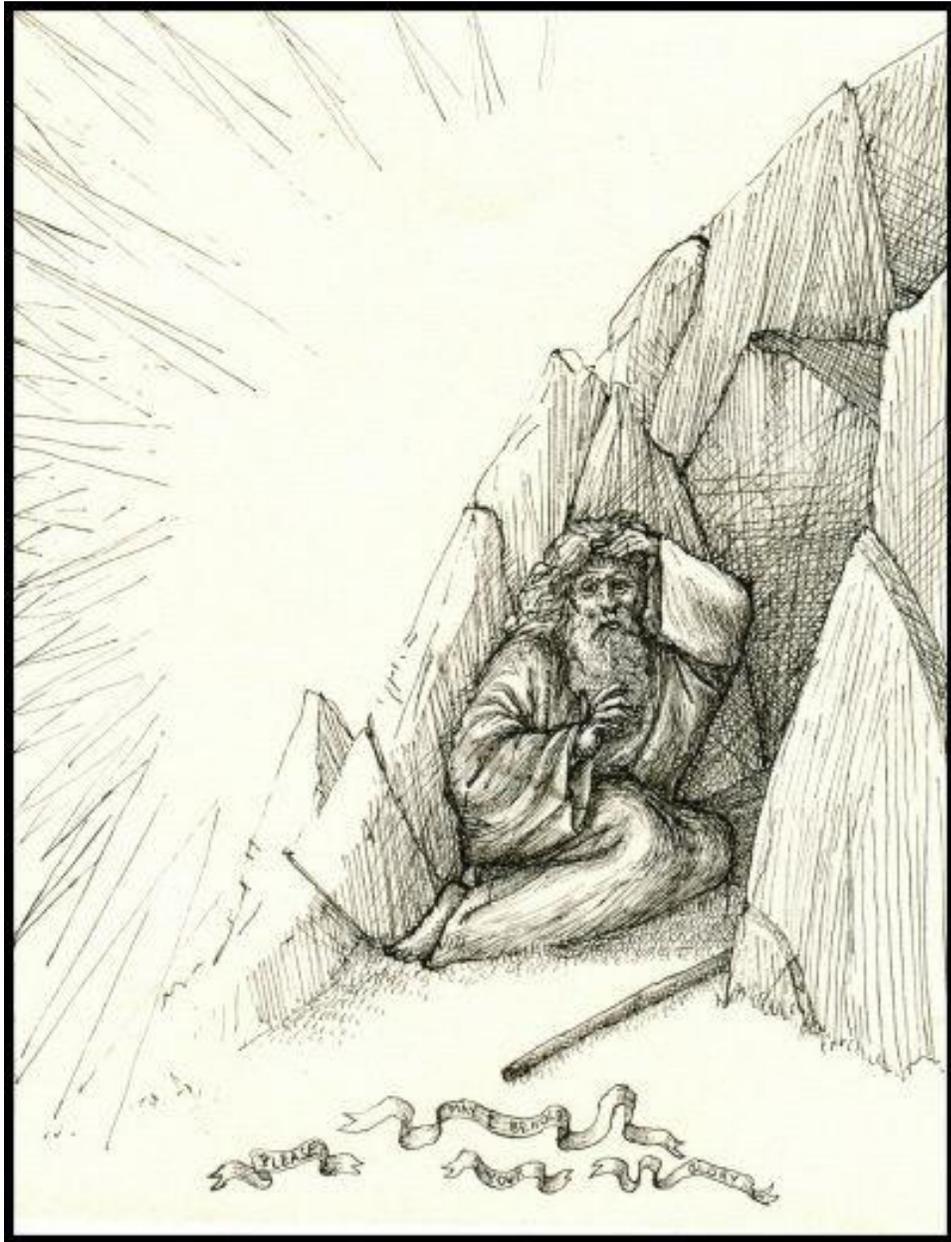
## **Proper work**

- Mercy
- Raises us to new life
- Declares beautiful
- Gospel
- Promise
- “that I might make alive.”

# Luther's lectures on the Psalms

Whoever is most beautiful in the sight of God is the most ugly, and vice versa, whoever is the ugliest is the most beautiful. ...Therefore it is true: The one who is most **depraved** in his own eyes is the most **handsome** before God and, on the contrary, the one who sees himself as **handsome** is thoroughly **ugly** before God, because he lacks the light with which to see himself.

LW 10:239



# Deus absconditus

- To those who vainly search for God's inner nature, God reveals only his backside (*posteriora dei*)
- God absconds, only to be found fully as mercy in the preaching and ministry of Christ

# Diverging beauties

## **Plato and Augustine**

- Beauty comes with our participation in what is beautiful
- We claim for ourselves traits like goodness, freedom, and beauty
- Theology of glory

## **Luther**

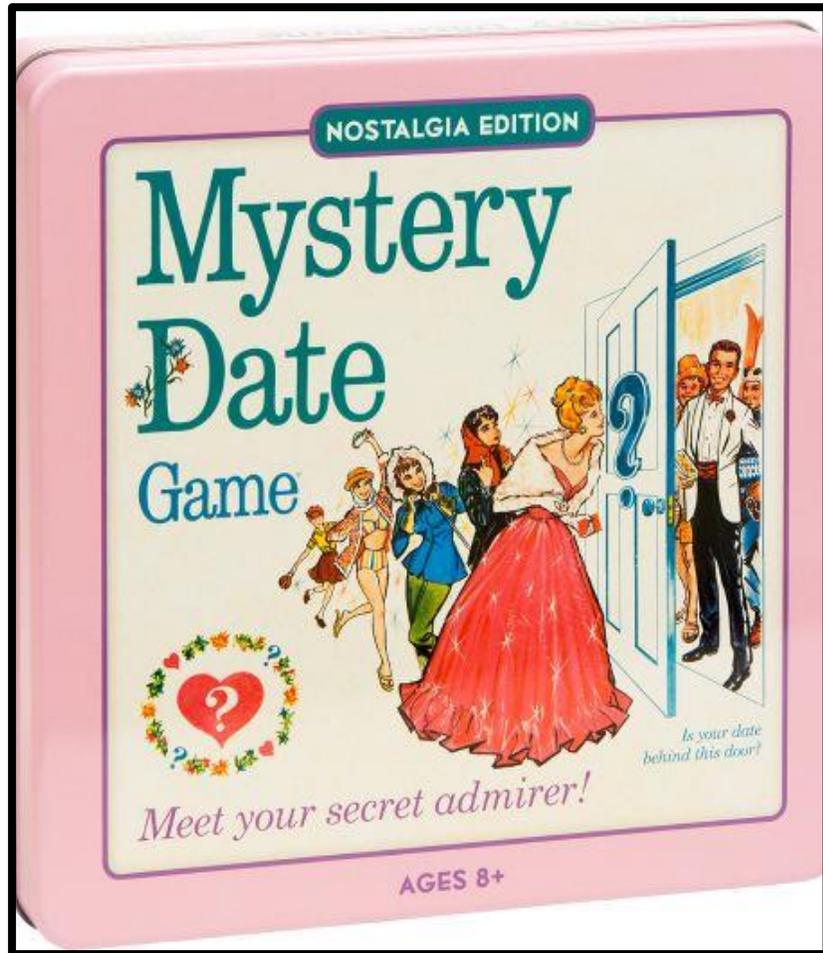
- We gain beauty solely because Christ, who is beautiful, makes it happen
- Our beauty, like our life, is hid with Christ
- Theology of the cross

# You think you're good? That's blasphemy!

When you call God good, you must deny that you are good and confess that you are altogether evil. **He will not suffer Himself and you to be called good together at the same time**, for He wants to be regarded as God, but He wants you to be regarded as a creature.

LW 11:387

# Will God's Mystery Date be a dream? Or a dud?



# God dates duds

“The divine bridegroom Christ marries the poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her [makes her beautiful] with all his goodness.”

Freedom of a Christian (1520)  
LW 31:352





# Kenosis

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

Philippians 2

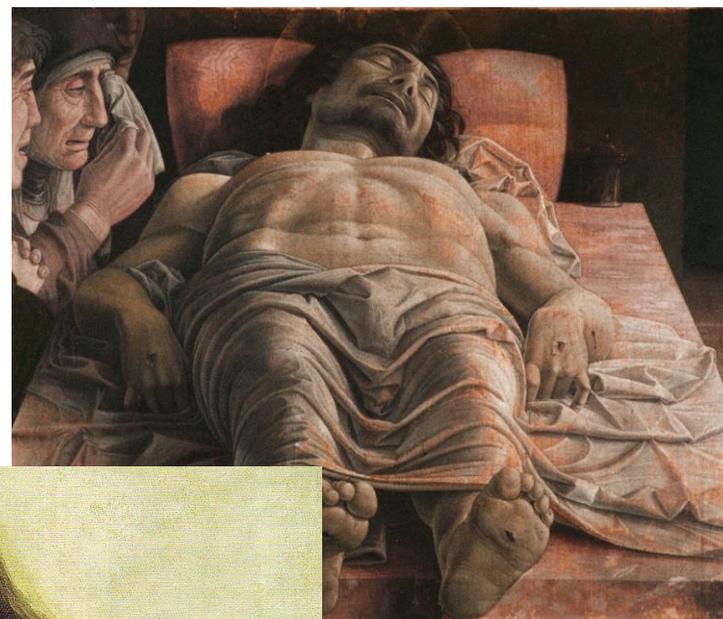
# Christ has x-ray vision

Since we are flesh and blood, we are moved only by the substantial form and beauty that the eyes see. If we had spiritual eyes, we could see what a great disgrace it is that human will should be turned from God.

Commentary on Psalm 45  
LW12:207

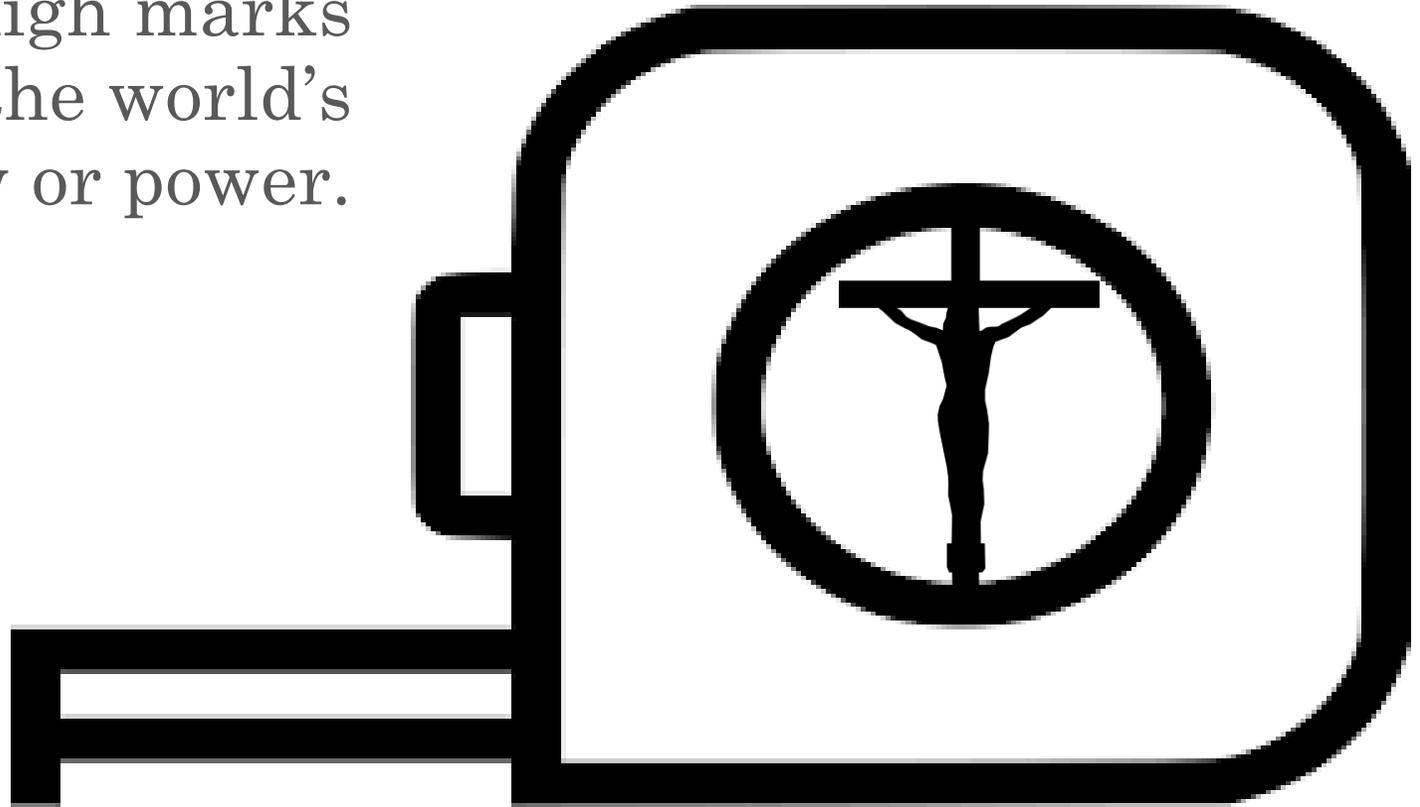


# Beautiful Christ



# Our metrics

The beloved of Christ do  
not score high marks  
according to the world's  
metrics of law or power.



# Clothed in beauty



God gives beauty to sinners, clothing them in his beauty. In a word, justified and beautiful are synonymous. Hid in Christ, we are not only acceptable to God but also, and strikingly, lovely, by means of trusting Christ.

# Original beauty

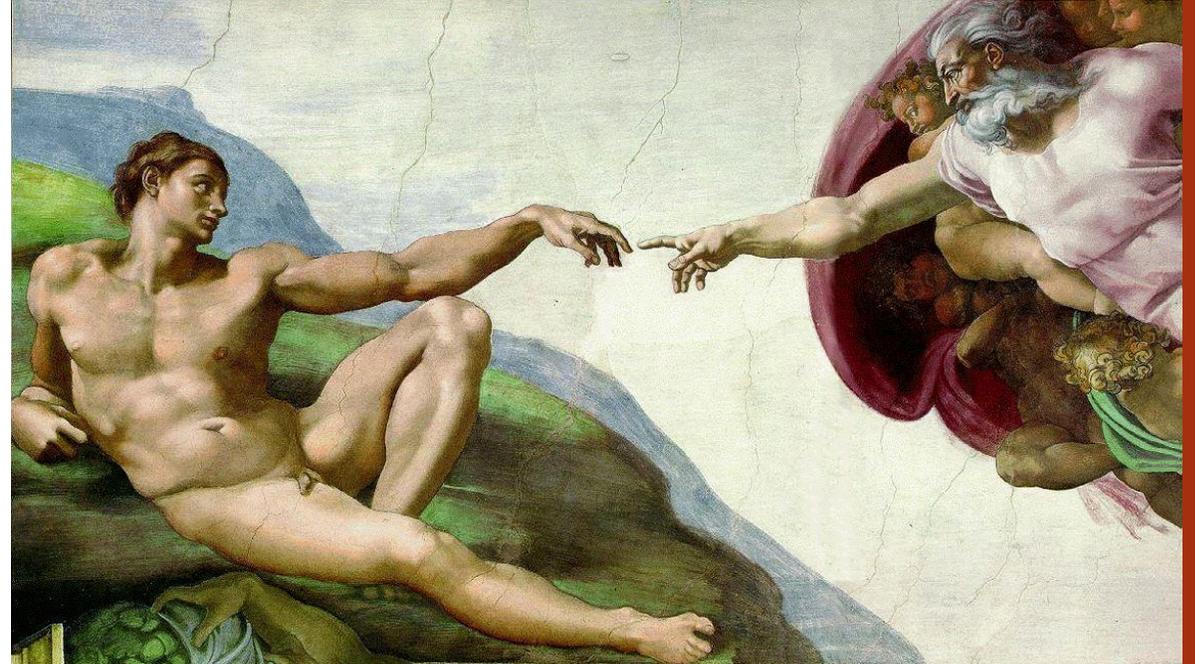
- Luther spoke of beauty not only in terms of redemption, but also of creation
- Adam and Eve bore original righteousness
- Creation beauty is a beauty of the law
- Redemption beauty of the gospel



# Adam's beauty

Both his inner and outer sensations were all of the purest kind. ...To these inner qualities came also those most beautiful and superb qualities of body and of all the limbs, qualities in which he surpasses all the remaining living creatures.

Lectures on Genesis  
LW 1:62



# God is no iconoclast

- God uses physical beauty because human minds think in images
- The gospel comes in tangible signs
- Re-ordered by God, we enjoy the beauty which God fashions in creation

