

**Mark Mattes. *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017. vii+226 pp. \$35 (hbk).**

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At its core, Mark Mattes' book is an attempt to demonstrate that Martin Luther cannot be ignored in the field of theological aesthetics, a discourse sustained primarily by Catholic and Orthodox thinkers. Theologians seeking metaphysical accounts for the beautiful might find Luther a surprising source for a theology of beauty. Common readings of Luther's distinction of law and gospel, his nominalist training, and his supposed rejection of philosophy would seem to pit Luther against any theological account of the beautiful. Mattes seeks to challenge such reductionist readings of the reformer and demonstrate that he is an important and overlooked source on questions of beauty by offering careful exegesis of a wide breadth of Luther's corpus. The author distinguishes between Luther's early and mature writing on beauty, and gives special attention to the topics of goodness, music, and visual imaging. Throughout the book, Mattes consistently distinguishes Luther from the contemporary theologies of his time, Catholic or otherwise, which leads to the final, more constructive sections of the book. Because of their distinctive focus, it is helpful to provide a summary of each chapter, highlighting the themes Mattes consistently returns to in his reading of Luther.

Mattes begins the first chapter by asserting that reading Luther as a pure existentialist or nominalist obscures nuances that allow one to engage properly with Luther's unique contribution to questions of beauty, and indeed, his contributions to theology as a whole. For Mattes, the fundamental theme obtained from Luther is that God's alien work, his wrath, is not beautiful; rather, it is God's proper, merciful work that is beautiful. Thus, the author finds that for Luther, "the gospel lays out a stance on beauty that transgresses the tendency to encompass beauty with matters such as proportionality...or light...or integrity" (7). It is on the cross, with its usurpation of philosophical assumptions, that beauty is found. Mattes' book teases out the various implications of this assertion through both a historical and constructive analysis.

Breaking down thin readings of Luther, the second chapter clarifies the reformer's use of philosophy. While stereotypes of Luther's strict nominalism persist throughout the academy, Mattes understands Luther to be more eclectic (16), borrowing from both platonic and nominalist schools of thought while also being extremely critical of both. Generally, Luther's understanding of philosophy relates to the greater theme of law and gospel: law and philosophy correspond to the temporal, while gospel and theology to the eternal. The third chapter, on Luther's view of

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goodness, extends this primary distinction. Goodness is defined not by metaphysical claims, but by God's own favor and mercy. Metaphysical accounts of goodness, for Luther, implicate a medieval theological system which focuses on human merit as integral to the achievement of salvation. The law condemns this, forcing one to cling to the promise of the cross, where God's true goodness is found. Only those reborn through the work of Christ can truly see the divine in creation, for only after one is "renewed by God's mercy, liberated from incurvation, [are they] open to creation as address, God's communication as threat but also as mercy and wonder" (60). Mattes thus situates Luther against medieval theological systems while demonstrating Luther's complex indebtedness to Augustine, the *Theologia Germanica*, and Pseudo-Dionysius.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Mattes turns toward Luther's construal of beauty in both his early and mature work respectively. Luther concurs with mystical and medieval thinkers that beauty is an attribute of God and that creation reflects God's beauty. In Luther's indebtedness to this received tradition, he consistently critically appropriates such ideas, only filtering them through the lens of God's alien and proper work. Beauty as proportionality, light, and desire are all affirmed in his early writings, but they are all reshaped to avoid any metaphysical attempt to find personal merit before God or access to things divinely hidden. In this vein, Luther refuses scholastic definitions of beauty as a transcendental. Thus, while he agrees with certain aspects of Aquinas' criteria of beauty, finding them appropriate for understanding the beauty of creatures, Luther insists that Christ himself, and the redeemed life of the Christian in Christ, is the source of beauty; one cannot claim beauty for themselves.

Mattes finds Luther's early writings to have the most explicit treatment of beauty, in particular the *Dictata super Psalterium* and *Lectures on Romans*. Luther rejects both the conception of the platonic *eros* and Augustinian *caritas*. Instead, he asserts that, "sinners are *attractive* because they are loved [by God], they are not loved because they are attractive" (81). Mattes states that the guiding question of Luther's *Dictata* is "how do we render God his due?" (82). Luther's inability to find anything in the human that deserve God's justification compels the move toward a "theology of humility" (82). It is self-accusation, then, the admittance of guilt, that warrants God's justification. The lower and humbler one becomes through recognizing their own sin, the closer they are to God. Ultimately, Luther shifts the location of the encounter with beauty from the intellect and the fulfilment of desire to Christ exclusively. Mattes contends that this posture of humility and admittance of guilt germinates into Luther's more mature theological positions of the law and gospel distinction, theology of the cross, and God's proper, alien work (84).

Chapter 5 additionally focuses on texts from Luther's later work ranging from commentaries on the Psalms to the *Lecture on Galatians*. Mattes notes that the role of human agency shrinks dramatically in Luther's later work. God's accusation of sin replaces self-accusation, which also entails an emphasis on God's proper work of mercy. Beauty in Christ, then, works *sub contrario*, under the form of its opposite. To the eyes of the world, Christ is ugly because sinners hate the mercy he offers. Only the redeemed see Christ as truly beautiful. What is more, his beauty is imputed to the life of the believer. Once again, Mattes calls attention to the fact that Luther is pushing back against metaphysical conceptions of beauty. Christ is not beautiful according to

proportion, clarity, and perfection, as Aquinas would have it. Rather, “[i]n Jesus Christ, God gives his beauty as compassion and his compassion as beauty to those oppressed by the law” (97).

The explicit attention to beauty is not as prominent in other areas of Luther’s mature work, but it is still a fundamental theme. In Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians*, Mattes finds beauty to be essential to understanding justification. Where Tuomo Mannermaa found a medieval approach to *theosis*, Mattes argues for the lectures’ particularly forensic interpretation. While the human life certainly becomes beautiful in Christ, it is because the old and ugly form is destroyed. A Christian’s new form is only beautiful because it is Christ’s own imputed beauty. And though Luther borrows metaphysical idioms—form, apprehension, or brightness—he always appropriates its use to serve his own theological vision.

Mattes transitions in Chapters 6 and 7 to examine Luther’s notion of beauty in music and visual imagery. Music, in particular, is dear to Luther, who writes that it is actually not a human creation, but a creation of God. It is analogous to the gospel in that it is an interplay between “order and freedom” (114). Liberty, the freedom of movement, gives music the unique capability of both worship and proclamation, and thus can reshape and reorder human lives. Music is thereby coupled with justification in that it is a purely imputed gift, coming directly from God. Platonic attempts to prioritize reason over emotion in order to devalue music, which Mattes states is prevalent in both the greater Catholic and Reformed traditions, are rejected by Luther throughout his career. Mattes claims that the fundamental theological locus of Luther’s view of music is that the finite is capable of bearing the infinite (120-121, 132). Music, then, becomes an essential extension of the gospel in how it communicates God’s promise.

Chapter 7 on visual imaging expresses a similar point. While Luther is critical of iconography because he finds that it displaces the believer’s trust in Christ alone (142), Mattes notes that Luther’s emphasis on the Word’s embodiment pushes against the radical iconoclasm of Andreas Karlstadt and Martin Bucer. His willingness to borrow metaphysical language resurfaces in his claim that to *apprehend* Christ, which implies sight, is fundamental to Christian faith (150).

Ultimately, Luther sees God in all things. Creation indeed images God, and while his proper work is hidden and impossible to see without the gospel, Mattes contends there is no room for a secular space in Luther’s thought and no neutral ground from which God is absent (151-152). Mattes finds that, although Luther “violates a Neoplatonic view that advocates an analogy of being in which all things conform to or participate in some way in God as the highest being” (152), his cosmology still upholds the enchantment of the world.

Those with an interest in theological aesthetics will be most attracted by Mattes’ last two chapters. Chapter 8 directly interacts with interpreters of the *nouvelle théologie*, focusing on how Luther offers a distinctive approach to their theology of beauty. While Mattes is sympathetic to concerns regarding modernity’s secular and reductionist understanding of creaturely existence, Luther’s theology directly opposes the inclinations of the *ressourcement* theologians. Luther, for Mattes, provides a third way between the platonic metaphysics and the total bracketing of divinity in modernity. The enchantment of the world, then, can only be understood

through God's proper work of the forgiveness and redemption of sinners; beauty is imparted by Christ.

At its core, the criticism Mattes mines from Luther is the dissatisfaction with theologies of glory (162-163). Neoplatonic notions of desire are disparaged as, in Mattes' terms, thoroughly eudaimonistic (171); an extension of this assertion is Mattes' charge that *nouvelle théologie* brings forth its own desire and merit as integral to justification, implying that "Christ is necessary, but insufficient" for the *ressourcement* thinkers (168). A final critique is Luther's own skepticism of hierarchy, which remains a vital concept to the *nouvelle* theologians. For Mattes, this hierarchical fixation implies an attempt to ascend to God through one's own merit. Such theologies of glory are always challenged by a theology of the cross.

Mattes' concluding chapter summarizes what has been drawn from Luther's approach to beauty and engages with a number of contemporary theologians. Rudolf Bultmann, who for Mattes embodies the common assumption that Protestants have little to offer on the discussion of beauty, fails to see precisely what is beautiful in Luther's eyes: the gospel itself. It is this focus on Christ's saving work, rather than metaphysical interpretations of beauty, that allows for humans to understand what is truly beautiful; only the redeemed are imputed the beauty that is Christ, and thus only the redeemed can see creation as truly wondrous (191, 193).

In his most thorough engagement with contemporary theology, Mattes singles out the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the most influential aesthetic theologian of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mattes commends Balthasar's christological approach to beauty, which hinges on the crucifixion of Christ as the ultimate point of revelation that discloses an inner trinitarian logic. Though Balthasar understands beauty in a way that "comes as close to Luther as a Roman Catholic can," Mattes argues that,

Christ so identifies with sinners that his cross is no mere analogy that grants humans access to divine glory but instead is the death of sinners, God's alien work, God's consigning "all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Rom. 11:32). The fact that God is finally not beholden to a prearranged order—God as beyond or other than law, God, then, as sheer love and mercy, revealed in the cross—is the very basis by which grace can truly be mercy and gospel beauty can be established (202).

That Balthasar finds the cross as an analogy to the trinitarian life is problematic for Mattes; this analogical formulation assumes too much access into things hidden and fails to locate beauty solely in Christ and God's work of justifying sinners.

Over and against the metaphysics of Balthasar and *nouvelle théologie*, Mattes closes his book with a warning against the frustrating and dangerous attempt to ascend to God through beauty (203). Thus, preaching is essential to the task of offering the clothes of righteousness to humanity, for "the gift can only be received through proclamation." (203).

Mark Mattes' work shines when he is challenging presumptuous readings of Luther's theology; his attention to Luther's metaphysics and use of philosophy is especially important in the effort to introduce Luther as an indispensable voice in the

discussion of beauty. And his depiction of Luther as a champion of enchantment is well argued, though I found myself craving a more exhaustive interaction with those thinkers that name Luther as part of the fall narrative of modernity. Noting the consistent themes through Luther's thought, while also distinguishing between his early and mature theology, helps those outside this area of scholarship wrestle more honestly with the reformer and, I would assert, contemporary Lutheran theology as well. And yet, the same readers might well appreciate a more thorough approach to medieval theology. While Mattes agrees with Luther's view that the medieval and mystical tradition are insufficiently concerned with the crucifixion and the suffering of Christ, I wonder if the presence of St. Bonaventure challenges such readings. Not only is St. Bonaventure highly christological, but his focus on the crucifixion could be what Luther and Mattes perceive to be missing from medieval and mystical theologies of beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Mattes is certainly ambitious in his willingness to address both historical and constructive concerns with Luther; however, a more sustained engagement with the primary sources within the *nouvelle théologie*, rather than a reliance on secondary literature, would have been beneficial. In particular, a more thorough reading of Balthasar would challenge the flawed reading Mattes provides; Balthasar has an approach to beauty, the crucifixion, and the atonement far more compatible with Luther than Mattes' book suggests.

*Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty* is a timely work; as aesthetics continues to have a prominent position in contemporary theology, the introduction of a prominent Protestant voice into the dialogue is crucial not just for adding to the breadth of scholarship on the subject, but for continued ecclesial dialogue as well. The addition of Mattes' distinctively Lutheran voice to ideas rooted in particularly Catholic and Orthodox theologies is especially welcome. While a lack of thorough engagement with his interlocutors leaves something to be desired in particular sections, Mattes' work is essential reading for those interested in theological aesthetics and questions of beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ilio Delio, *Crucified Love: Bonaventure's Mysticism of the Crucified Christ* (Allegany, NY: Franciscan press, 1998); and Zachary Hays, O.F.M. *The Hidden Center: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981).