

Fools for Christ.

by Jaroslav Pelikan (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, Oregon) 2001.

A review by Joe Carlson

I have just finished a book entitled *Fools for Christ* by Jaroslav Pelikan. It is a small book that has escaped the notice of serious Christian thinkers for far too long. Anyone who is interested in thinking critically about the world we live in, the way we think about this world, the way we live in it and in such a way that takes for granted the centrality of Christ and His status as sovereign King over all things, anyone interested in these things needs to read this book. In this small but significant work, Pelikan explores the relationships between intellectualism, morality and aesthetics and the Divine. Since the fall, man has striven to bind God, to tackle Him and put the Almighty in a box so that we may understand Him, and thereby be comfortable with Him in the room. We have done this through Intellectualism, making the one who is completely Other synonymous with our idea of abstract truth. This allowed us to place God on the shelf, nestled snugly between Gobble and Gopher. We have done this with Morality, making God nothing more than a list of commands. This beget our god named Traditional Values, which declares that healing a man on the Sabbath is a sin. Finally we have done this with Aesthetics, turning our Heavenly Father into a sentimental sob, who is nothing but whimpering whiskers and puppy dog tales. This has given rise to a world seen through the eyes of Thomas Kinkade, a world in which the God we worship is no more potent than a limp fish. To live honestly with the God of Scripture, and to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ the King, we must shed the scales of pagan thinking. We must also, like Eustace Clarence Scrubb, realize that only the breath of Aslan can turn us back into a boy after we have been a dragon. The scales of modernity and the enlightenment, the postmodern project and romanticism all have the same common goal. That goal is to understand all of life and existence apart from the reality of Christ, and His reign. In the end it is the philosophy of fools, for only the fool says there is no God. The wise man will honor God, and give Him thanks. This life of gratitude will inevitably find expression in what and how we think, what and how we act, and what and how we feel. It is in this totality of being, thought, action, and emotion, that we live and praise God. But that God is not a tame God, and we must not begin to think that He will be shackled by any of our insignificant paradigms. No, He is the Transcendent God of the universe, He is the wholly Other, of whom we can know nothing, unless He Himself reveal it to us. In a word, He is the Holy. The relationship between Truth and the Holy, Goodness and the Holy, and Beauty and the Holy, are the make-up of this small but significant book. To follow Christ in this world is to become as fools, for the world does not understand nor desire the Only Begotten Son of God. So we become Fools for Christ, and gladly bear His name.

The book is broken into three main sections, and each of those is broken in two. Truth and the Holy are addressed in the first section, first negatively and then positively, as is the trend throughout. Secondly, Goodness and the Holy are considered, and finally Beauty and the Holy. The negative sections are focused around men who have not been altogether sane in their respective fields. Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche are the subjects of Truth, Goodness and Beauty respectively. On the positive side, Pelikan focuses on the lives of men who have submitted themselves to God's word, and have sought to honor Him in their respective fields. St. Paul is discussed in light of Truth, Luther with Goodness, and Bach with Beauty. The central thrust of the work brings us to acknowledge the sovereignty of God, to trust in His eternal purposes, and to love His transcendence.

We must come before Him, and we must come with a humble heart, a bowed knee, a confessing tongue, a thankful soul, and a song of praise.

Truth

To the extent that Christian thought has fallen into this fallacy of equating knowledge and virtue, it has thereby committed the error of identifying the Holy and the True. It has assumed that a knowledge of certain truths about God provided the knower with a relationship to God he could not otherwise secure, and has made the inculcation of such knowledge its principle aim and purpose...This identification of the Holy and the True...desired to make of God an object of my knowing and my thinking, the highest object to be sure, but still one object among other objects over which I could assume mastery by learning to know them. Knowledge was power, and knowledge of God was power over God.

What comfort and security there would be in the human mind if it could dispose of God's penetrating and judging look by subjecting the Holy, whose wrath it can neither tolerate nor dominate, to the True, with which it can live on reasonably satisfactory terms. Here has been the most profound source of the equation of the Holy and the True, as well as the factor that has made it a manifestation of sin. (12-13)

The Holy and the True

In this first section, Pelikan explains how throughout history, beginning with the Greeks, followed by the Romans, Medieval's, Enlightened folk, and Present day Philosophers, man has been interested in primarily one thing. The end result of this one pursuit is a God who has been conquered and categorized. The natural human mind finds it uncomfortable to admit that there is Someone higher and more in-control of events than itself. As a substitute we have placed either our reasonings or our experiences at the top of the totem pole, and bowed submissively. In effect, we have identified as synonymous our idea of Truth and the Holy One. In doing this we have created a Christ out of Truth, as Pelikan reveals. We have seen truth as our savior, and have made it the primary target we strive to obtain. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." This abstracted idea has grown to be a deity in our modern world. Scientific reasoning depends almost entirely on the idea that we can obtain certain truly objective and isolated proofs. Based on these objectified natural truth statements, we explain away the world, without resorting to a mystical, sentimental superstition we endearingly call our God. Hence we have terms such as Gravity, and completely ignore the Personal Triune revealed Creator God of Scripture.

Thus comes Kierkegaard. He brought to our attention, not apart from a small amount of personal insanity, the danger of identifying the True with God. He showed that once we limit God, the Holy One, to an idea that we can grapple with and categorize, we have placed our own minds above the Ultimate one, which is blasphemy. We cannot start from the True, our abstract ideals and propositions of how the world works, and 'derivitize' the Holy. One area that we Christians have failed in this respect, especially in the West, is our devotion to systematic theologies. In and of themselves they are not evil. But all too often they reflect a heart or the heart of a society which very much desires to put God in a box, and define Him in such a way that leaves us comfortable with Him

in the room. We can place the systematic on our desk, leave it there, and not feel threatened; whereas the Word of the Living God might be too challenging and convicting for us to leave in plain view.

In our modern era we have the overwhelming temptation to make Truth a Christ. We see lab coats with pens in the pocket, and immediately assume that whatever they say is gospel truth. Why? Our society has lifted science on such a high pedestal that it becomes blasphemy to doubt it. Post-modernism is the same thing only the lab coats have been traded in for Joseph's coat of many colors. Like his brothers, they have torn it in pieces and drenched it in blood. Cultural relativism has its own pedestal and must not be doubted or questioned. Question Authority, but don't question the statement Question Authority, by no means. So whether it is sterilized Truth in a Beaker, or the great soaring Truth that encompasses everybody's truth (which is to say no real truth at all), if it is sought with primacy, or if it becomes the highway on which we seek God, we have already failed. God is preeminent, and that means preeminent. God is before all things, above all things, beyond all things. He is the completely transcendent One. We cannot seek Him on our terms. Praise His eternal majesty for the real Christ, whose name is Jesus, the salvation of the world.

The Truth in Christ

We cannot seek, find, discover, describe, categorize, or even know in any way the Holy One, apart from His own condescension. If we use truth as a pathway to conquer God, to find Him, we are simply fooling ourselves. We may not set up any idea as higher than God or as God Himself, which is the same thing. In doing this with the concept of Truth, we have done the one who is the Truth, a profane disservice. Christ is the Way, the Truth, the Life, and the only doorway through which one may find God. Here is where we miss the boat entirely. We have our Greco-Roman forefathers to thank for the assumption that Truth is abstract proposition. Two plus two is four. Naked truth. What goes up, must come down. Truth with a capital T. We have grown up with this assumption drilled into our heads. It is so deeply engrained that it's hard to see around it. But in God's World (which is the only world), Truth has a beard and fingernails. Truth walks on two legs and a pair of feet. We can call on Truth, and He answers. Truth lived and died. Truth was raised from death and corruption and now sits enthroned, at the right hand of God the Father. Truth will come again to judge both the quick and the dead. Truth is a man, a living breathing man. If there is anything that pokes Greek Philosophy right in the eye it is this. It's a slap in the face. This completely destroys any notion that Truth can be diagramed and dissected and categorized in neat little file folders, and pushed out of sight. What is so uncomfortable about this is that Truth demands. Abstract propositions just sit there, and look at you with dumb faces and dead eyes. They are not unlike the little statues of Buddha you see in Chinese restaurants. They just sit there, and invite you to rub its belly. Will anything happen? No. Just worn bronze. But Truth demands your attention. If there is anything that will invade your personal space it is Truth, with His blazing eyes of living fire. We are not comfortable with this Truth. We find His demands too much. So we close our eyes and think of the fat little man with no demands at all. Truth demands repentance. But that would mean, we say, that we need to repent of something. That means, we continue to blather, we might have done something bad. This conclusion is too much for us to fathom and so we continue to walk ignorantly into the licking flames of Hell. But thank God that as a Human, as *the* Human, Truth is a rounded character. He is not flat like a proposition. His demands are coupled with grace. His demands are held by pierced hands. On the

table, next to the folded, pierced hands sits a basin of water. Beside the basin is bread, and with the wheat is wine.

This is the message of St. Paul throughout his letters. "I preach Christ, and Him crucified." I do not preach an algorithm or a formula. I preach a man and that man dying. A man dying, and being raised to new life, that is where Truth is found. It is not the end all proposition that sits enthroned in the heaven of forms. It is not the formulaic answer that governs all thoughts. We cannot start from Truth and argue our way to God, as Descartes would like. Cogito ergo Deum is just plain false. We seek first God and His Kingdom, and truth shall be added unto us.

Goodness

Society has valued Christianity for its moral teaching rather than for its faith, regarding that faith as something indifferent or downright annoying. Most of the complimentary things that leaders of states have had to say about Christianity applied to its ethic rather than to its faith... When the church has...preferred its moral preachments to its religious testimony, it has fallen into moralism. This has happened easily when the church has tried to relate itself constructively to the problems of society. At times of severe national or international crisis the church has sometimes been led to believe that the only contribution it could make was to bring its moral pressure to bear upon all who would hear. Such a development was tragic because it involved a surrender of the core and center of the Christian faith in favor of moralism, and identification of the Holy and the Good. (63-64)

The identification of the Holy and the Good has been ... important in the history of philosophy and theology. How completely it has worked itself into thought and even language is clear from the fact that the word "holy" has been modified by usage in various languages until it is frequently taken as a synonym for "morally good." ...Such phrases as "holier than thou" such terms as "sanctification," such names as "holiness sect" are all testimony to the difficulty of separating ... the Numinous from the concepts of moral goodness. (67-68)

The Holy and the Good

There are several pitfalls to avoid in life. The flesh will pop up no matter what stage of sanctification we are in. Not until glory will be we free of the old man. After we submit ourselves to the truth of Christ, and the reality that He is Truth, not the other way around, we naturally will seek to live in accordance with His word. Here is where another pitfall appears. Often, throughout history groups of people have identified, made synonymous, the Holy One with Goodness. The result is that Our Lord has simply become a list of do's and don'ts. The church becomes a moral advisor, nothing more. Even preached in the name of the Lord, sermons of self-betterment, and self-improvement have been with us since the early days of Christianity. This again is man's attempt to live outside the piercing eye of the Christ who is Jesus. Instead we make Him a gentle teacher, who taught us many nice things, about how to be kind to everyone. He has become a mentor and nothing more. He is not King of the Life and everything under the sun. He holds no demands on your heart, just as long as you smell roses and help old ladies cross the street. We become Pharisees and read into Scripture our own cultural taboos, for instance Fundamentalism and Prohibition in the 1930's. The basic underlying premise here is than man can be good, on his own steam. And this is folly. Pelikan notes that, "

...the Christian gospel is a religious denunciation of religion - religion being understood as man's attempt to relate himself constructively to the Holy. Traditional moralism and conventional piety have often put the objects of their search alongside God and have in that sense been guilty of idolatry. Atheism refuses to believe in the divinity of any traditional morality, and in this it is correct, more correct than some of the external Christianity that opposes it in the name of Christ. No distinction between right and wrong will avail me anything when I am faced by the awesome and fascinating presence of the Holy. Obedience to law and loyalty to social convection fall harmless to the ground before His glance." (pg 80)

This is not said to deny the existence of right and wrong. Only that before a thrice Holy God, our schemes of law, our moral codes, and our cultural expectations fall down hopelessly and die. Any attempt that we make to accomplish status before the eyes of the Holy, is acknowledging the desire within our natural flesh that we will be like God. The dragon first told us this lie in the Garden to our mother, and we believe him still.

Pelikan draws on the work of Dostoevsky to highlight the reality of this misidentification. Throughout his novels, the great Russian author explores the nature of man, as it really is. His work, *Crime and Punishment*, aims at exposing precisely this point. Man desires to be above God, and that is the perceived result of traditional moralism. Instead of trusting in God's Word alone, we add to it, for we stand in judgment over it and declare that it is lacking. We place ourselves in the shoes of God and set out our own system of law, or codes of right and wrong. Here is where we then ditch God altogether, though we may still call ourselves Christians, more for status than anything else. This is the heart of man, natural man. Just like we do not want the demanding Living Truth to disrupt our quiet propositions, we do not want a God who colors outside the lines, at least the lines as we have drawn them. This would mean our accountability.

In *Crime and Punishment* the main character sets himself up as a "Napoleon" of his time. He feels he is above the law, and therefore able to kill without recompense. And so he does. This of course sends him spiraling down in a contradicting vortex of horror for his actions and refusal to believe he was wrong. In a very unpietistic way, a prostitute, who is the only Christ-like one in the story, leads him to redemption. Her sacrificial love paves the way for recompense and healing. For without confession, there is no balm. *Non gloria sine kyrie*. The central motif however is pictured in a scene where she reads the story of Lazarus in the tomb to the young man. This is the biblical answer to any attempt to achieve status before the Holy on human terms. The Word demands that we must die, that indeed we are dead already. Only by the power of Jesus standing outside our tomb, calling us to come to Him, can we escape our darkness, and stand in His presence. There is no morality code that can accomplish this.

We understand the folly of identifying, or making synonymous, Goodness and the Holy. God is not the great do-gooder in the sky, that we seek to imitate. No, He is much more dangerous than that. In His presence our schemes and designs and codes, even if good-intentioned, which is rarely the case, fall down and shrivel up, as thin tissue paper in a consuming fire.

The Goodness of God

On the positive side, God is good. It is an attribute of His, and as such, He desires us to imitate His goodness. It is a fruit that the Spirit cultivates in us, and brings to fruition. We are commanded to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect. We are to be moral people. The difference between the above section and this one is where our ability for goodness is found. Is it in Man or in Christ? This was the major breakthrough for Luther, who had tried so hard all his life to rise to the occasion and please God on Luther's terms. But if we truly are justified by faith, as he realized, then Christ is the one who works on our behalf. When God looks upon us, He sees Christ, for Jesus has dressed us in His own righteousness. Faith is what gives us the eyes to see this. Even faith itself is a new pair of eyes that are given to us, so that no one can boast.

What does this mean? This points us to Scripture as the only rule for faith and life. We should not place our own ideas of morality on top of Scripture. The Prohibition and the Fundamentals again is a perfect example. According to their moral system, Christ participated in very un-Christlike activity: the production and consumption of alcohol, His association and fellowship with prostitutes, tax-gatherers, and public scum, and His anti-establishment diatribes. What this calls for is a re-examination of what our priorities in life are. If they match up with those of Scripture, all is well and good. If, however, we find that we are placing our own agendas, agendas not found in Scripture, above and before the Word of God, then we have serious repenting in front of us. We must shed our dependence on man-made systems, and the wisdom of men. Seek not the approval of men, but the approval of God.

We also need to shed our desires for autonomy. A true and honest acknowledgment of the God-ness of God, and the creaturely-ness of man leads to true and honest humility. Through humility is found complete dependence on the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Complete dependence leads to trust, trust leads to peace, and peace to Joy. The peace and joy we sought in our self-proclaimed autonomy come freely and naturally through a humble submission to the Holy One. On our own we sought to control all things, working them for our good. But what we find, if we have eyes that are honest and forthright, is that we have not the commanding power to turn all things in any direction, whether it be for our good or not. The only result of our own trial of self-reliance, is destruction and pain, not only for us, but for all around. So our call is to trust, and to rely entirely on the One who is above all, in all, and sustains all through the power of His Word.

How does this play out in our life, and in the living of it? The primary area that this addresses is the statement in Scripture, "The earth is the Lords, and the fullness thereof." Everything belongs to God. Everything was created by Him for us to work with. Everything was created with the purpose that we would have dominion over it, be fruitful with it, and multiply amongst it. The obvious caveat here is the need for wisdom. We do not take the creation ordinance and justify the slaughter of vast herds of buffalo, or the leveling of entire forests, or the dumping of toxic wastes in the sea. Christians should be the biggest environmentalists. The reason though is not found in the thought that it is our mother or any new-agey foolishness. Rather, it is the creation of God, and therefore owns a level of sanctity by being so. The Creation ordinance demands that we cultivate it, and use it wisely. This leads to the second point, that we use it. The earth is ours to use. God made it all and gives us complete freedom to use it all under the umbrella of biblical wisdom. In the famous words of St.

Augustine, "Love God, and do what you please." What we do and what we please will be dictated by our love for God. Let us humble ourselves before our God, and submit to His Goodness, and find joy and peace in Him, the only source for life and comfort.

Beauty

The blossoming of the flowers in the spring, the color of the autumn, the poetry that comes to our lips when we are at a loss to express an emotion that has come over us, the power of music, the awe we sense in the presence of artistic masterpieces- all these were actually experiences of the creativity of God. God was the supreme Artist...who took what He could get and fashioned it into beautiful forms that could provide human life with meaning, value and beauty. We could participate in the creativity of God if we learned sensitively to appreciate the gentle beauties He fashioned from the stuff of our experience and if we shared those beauties with others. In such an outlook, the identification of the Holy and the Beautiful was no longer a side issue. It became instead the formal principle of a religious faith in which the physical universe, the moral consciousness, the joy of begetting and the pain of dying were all united in one all-embracing affirmation of the creativity and the beauty that is God.

Such an interpretation of the artistic nature of God was possible in an effete and sophisticated culture, dissatisfied with the partial and inadequate answers to life being offered by science and by material comfort. It depended on the presence and power of a faith that had found aesthetic expression in music, poetry and art. Once the faith had developed such expressions, it became easy to equate these expressions with the faith that produced them, and eventually to dispense with the faith itself altogether. (131-132)

The Holy and the Beautiful

Nietzsche was a prophet. He saw things more clearly than many Christians see. He understood God more clearly than many Christians even dare to try. The era in which he lived was defined by Romanticism, and therefore the Church was as well. Society had attempted 'to trap the Holy in the Beauties of nature' (141). Again, idols were erected so that we did not need to confront the Holy face to face, for we would surely die. Music, the prime example of the human artistic endeavor, became a form of salvation for the people. To be swept away, caught up in an emotional heaven, where ecstasy could be reached easily and cheaply, was an enticing proposition. Wagner became a high priest in this Church of Music. His music was designed, written, and performed with the one goal of existential religious experience. It was a direct affront to the Christian religion. "The music drama was, Wagner believed, capable of expressing an answer to life's questions far superior to the answers of conventional religion or philosophy,"(134). As priest, Wagner led his congregants through the halls of heaven, answering their deepest questions of existence and being. I mentioned ecstasy being reached easily and cheaply. This experience came at no cost to the partakers. They did not need to give up anything. This was a big advantage the stage had over the alter. Sacrifices were made on the alter, but on the stage, pure undemanding religious ecstasy was available, and it cost nothing. Thus the Church followed suit. Instead of honest preaching, the sentiments were preyed upon. Emotionalistic revivals and sentimental sermons took the place of the Word and Sacraments. Instead

of seeing the beauty of Holiness, society saw the 'holiness of Beauty'; they saw Helen incarnate, swooping down to meet them in long flowing silks and flowers in her hair.

Here is where Nietzsche, in his insanity, thought more clearly than all others.

While some theologians were proclaiming that the kingdom of God could be discovered and brought to fruition by the moral improvement of man, Nietzsche saw that to accomplish his program he had to be rid of the damning presence of the Christ. There could be no compromise with the God who was the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, no compromise and no barter...After such an existential realization of the power and awe of the Holy, Nietzsche could not think of equating Him with the gentle beauties of Nature. The activity of God was much too furious for that. It was the sheerest romanticism, Nietzsche soon learned, to attempt to trap the Holy in the beauties of nature. If there was a creativity of God in the universe, there was as certainly a destructivity of God...If there was something in God that made the rose and the sunset, there was also something that made the cobra and the tornado. If God was beautiful, He was also ugly; if He was the principle of life, He also had to be the principle of death.

Nietzsche's atheism sprang, then, from an awareness of the God against whom he had revolted. He knew that the Holy was a force no man could control, that God was neither lovely nor congenial. God was not a kindly old man who gently nodded at the blunders of His children or grandchildren and who could be appeased with a few childish presents. There was nothing beautiful or tender about the God who could and did forsake the Crucified and plunge Him into the damnation of being cut off from the divine life. God was a consuming fire and a raging torrent. Whom but God did man meet in the hour of death, awaiting him not with comfort or kindness, but with holiness and judgment? Nietzsche's understanding of the Holy was far more profound than some so-called Christian doctrines of God, for it broke completely with any identification of the Holy and the categories of human value. (140-141)

These are strong words, and words we are not comfortable with. Yet they accurately represent what Scripture says of God. "Where were you when the foundations of the earth were laid?" God asks Job in the whirlwind. He continues to boast of His magnificent creations such as the leviathan, the dragon, and the unicorn. Our God is a dangerous God. He is not the God of flannel-grams and Teen Girl Slumber Party bibles, no matter how precious the moment. Our God is a consuming fire. The vision of Christ in the first chapter of Revelation is enough to make anyone realize He is not someone we can compartmentalize, or understand on our terms. He is the eternal God of the universe, not the man upstairs. The breadth of His hand covers the sea and all it contains. He speaks and the mountains erupt. By his breath, galaxies are formed. Behold here the Word, who was in the beginning with God, and was God, and created all things. Nothing was not made except it was made by Him. Here now is our God. And we are called to come into His presence. Therefore we come, and come on His terms. He is not one to be bargained with, or compromised with. We come, on our face, praising Him with our only breath, thankful that we are in His presence and live.

Lucy asks, "Is He a tame Lion?" The answer is, "No. By no means is He a tame Lion. But He is good." Our great God is good. Christ is the fullest expression of God's goodness and love toward us. But the reality of Christ does not change the reality of who God is. It should shape our understanding of the reality of Christ. It should bring us to our knees in repentance for the flippancy with which we treat

Him. We are called to worship Him in spirit and in truth, to worship with fear and trembling, to worship in the Beauty of Holiness.

The Beauty of Holiness

Aesthetics has probably been the branch of philosophy most shrouded in clouds and mystery throughout our time here on earth. The study of the beautiful has been broad and wide, and accomplished men from all countries and all centuries have attempted its definition. On one level, beauty is a physical trait, a description, an adjective. On another, it is a way of life, a disposition, an adverb. On yet another it is something objective, a concept, a noun. More often than not, however, Beauty has been cloaked in subjectivism, because the standards of beauty apparently change depending on the culture. The third type of beauty is objective only so far as the culture objectifies it. 'Thus and such is what beauty is' will be different depending on what era and country you are in. Philosophy has failed in defining any sort of real, objective, world-wide standards for beauty. We are left with our own standards. Thus in the end beauty is not really potent at all, and has no weight. Beauty has become as malleable as the shifting sands of human emotion and culture.

But Scripture, the Holy Word of God, would say differently. There is objective Beauty: the Holiness of God. This is what defines beauty. It is what transcends time and culture. Because beauty, and its standards, are transcendent, something that was beautiful, in the true sense, will be beautiful today, and in a hundred years. This is because the Holiness of God does not change. It is immutable. Immutable standards lead to objectivity. Our criterion for judging art then is this: How well does it reflect the nature of God's Holiness? If we look at a Picasso, we see that it does not really reflect anything that we can say of God's Holiness. We thus have objective reasons for what makes Picasso such an irreverent, and spiteful artist. We look at a Thomas Kinkade painting. We ask, "Does it accurately reflect God's nature, and the beauty of His Holiness? We then are able to conclude that it is rather shortsighted art, and misses the majority of who God is; it is therefore bad, misrepresenting Christian art.

The question will inevitably come up, "Who says that Picasso or Kinkade don't meet the standards of Holiness? Is that not simply your opinion?" They are partially justified in this question. On the surface it seems as if I am merely postulating another set of criterion, to place on the shelf next to everyone else's standards. But this is not the case. The standards we are putting forth are the inspired Word of God. It is here that we have revealed to us the nature of God, and the standards of His Holiness. The question comes again. It then becomes a debate in hermeneutics and applied theology. But for the purposes present, we have a standard for objective Beauty. It is found in the Word. Naturally we need the Spirit to guide our studies, and to enlighten our darkened minds. By grace, and through His work, we become familiar with what is revealed to us, and are thus able to judge art well. Our work then becomes a lifetime of studying God's Word, immersing ourselves in it's depths. There we find Beauty. Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. Beauty is found in Holiness.

This was something that JS Bach knew very well. "It was the genius of Bach that though he refused to join in the idolatrous quest for the eternal feminine in the Beautiful, he found in his service to the Holy a new and more profound conception of the Beautiful as well,"(155). It is the underlying reason

his music is so amazingly stunning, and why it is still considered to be so, by pagans and Christians alike. In the words of Pelikan,

His whole life and work were a living testimony to his conviction that man could not live by bread or by beauty, but only by the Word that proceeded from the mouth of God. Beauty was demonic if it was not subordinated to the speaking of God. It was not the pathway to the Eternal or the road to Joy. True contact with the Eternal, abiding joy, and therefore with the Beautiful with which Bach wanted to live was to be had in the Holy. (153)

Bach's world was centered around the Christ. The whole trajectory of his life was the praise and adoration of Jesus. Pelikan goes on to derive four propositions from his work that aim at summarizing Bach's view of Christian art. The first one is this: *According to Bach, the highest activity of the human spirit was the praise of God, but such praise involved the total activity of the spirit.* This meant the whole man. In thought, word and deed, man was to praise God. One of the greatest tragedies in music history has been the classification of Bach's music into two categories: sacred and secular. Rightly understood, all of Bach's music is sacred. All of it praises the Lord. For this reason, we cannot think that our lives can be divided into the sacred and the secular. All of it is lived before the Lord, and all of it is meant to be a song of praise to Him.

The second proposition is this: *As the praise of the Eternal God, Christian art was an expression of boundless freedom; but as the praise of the God who had limited Himself in the Incarnation, it bound itself to form.* The boundless freedom we have in Christ is defined as a freedom to act within our created and re-created nature. As a train has complete freedom as long as it stays on the track, so we Christians have complete freedom as long as we stay obedient to the Word of God. This is the true meaning of Christian freedom. Much harm has been done in this arena, and it has been due the lack of wisdom that must accompany a life lived in Christ. The central aim of this proposition is the fact that in being Christ-like, our art must be bound to a form. This means that the form itself either represents well or poorly the image of Christ. Thus, media is not neutral. Media, the form, carries meaning. Christ did not come as a peacock. He came as a man. There is a difference, and substantial one at that. The form mattered entirely to the purpose of His coming. Had Christ come as anything other than a man, we would still be lost in our sins. Taking this down the road a little, the music we use in our worship matters. The music communicates just as much as the content. The Form/Content debate is pointless, because without one, you haven't the other. If one is bad, that reflects on the other. Good text with horrible music is a bad song. Good music with horrible words is bad song. If Scripture takes both form and content equally seriously, and it does, so should we. And the implications for this are as diverse as they are far reaching, from liturgical hymnody to the discipline of children, to the suit you wear to work, to the way you blow your nose.

The third proposition is this: *As the medium of a historical faith, Christian art had to be cast in terms of the historical repository of its tradition; but as an expression of faith in the living God, it had to be relevant and contemporary in its use of this repository.* Rightly understood this means a convergence of Eastern Orthodoxy and Modern Evangelicalism. We cannot deny our roots, our heritage, the great fathers of faith that have gone before, have conquered dragons, and desolated armies on our behalf, paving the way to a stronger, larger body of faith. We cannot forget the shoulders we stand upon. At the same time, we do not preach to the shoulders. We preach to those around, in our era, in our

cities, in our towns, in our churches. We are one with the saints from two thousand years ago, but we do not mimic their style or cultural necessities. We honor them, and hold them in esteem, but we move on from glory to glory. The unity lies in the same faith, the same confession, the same creed. But the people who need to be reached are here and now, and are not dealing with the same issues that our fathers dealt with. So we regroup and attack differently, over different issues, with sometimes different methods. All of this is taking for granted the supremacy of Scripture, and the primacy of preaching. But David was different than Moses. Both warriors for Christ, but in different circumstances, with different weapons.

The fourth proposition is this: *Christian art did not have a primarily programmatic function in relation to the Word, but it could illuminate or even transcend the content of the words with which it was joined.* Scripture says that 'faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ.' The argument here is not the primacy of preaching, nor the chosen media of preaching for the communication of the gospel of Christ. Music and art are rather responses to the Word. They are what we offer in return. As such they are modes of thanksgiving. That is our primary response to God's Word. Give thanks at all times, for all things. Art is a vehicle for our praise, our adoration, even our supplication and our distress. But all is done in gratitude, or else either arrogance or bitterness will creep in. But music has the God-given ability to enhance and transcend. This much Wagner had correct. The aim of the enhancement and transcendence becomes the proving grounds. Bach adding ornamentation to a line where the singer is vocalizing the word 'gloria' is consistent and honoring. It falls into the category of the seraphim repeating the word Holy three times. Wagner creating new 'harmonies' and moving from one key to the other, without reason or purpose, is dishonoring and contemptible. Remember that form matters. Whatever field of art is to be pursued, it will take vigilant study to create it, and vigilant study to appreciate it. Both the composer and the listener should understand what is happening. Otherwise it becomes pure amusement, and is no longer art. If art is what Nietzsche called, the *Mittewelt*, or middle world (127), where truths and realities of things unattainable, become attainable, in metaphorical form, then art has the high calling of representing the nature of Holiness. Pelikan notes that 'the supreme instance of this is the Incarnation,'(127). Unseen, unseeable God became flesh and blood, and tabernacled among us. Here is where we take notes, and learn from Scripture, as we are called to be imitators of Christ. This means some of us will be artists. Learn what your art is doing, and do it well. Art is the vehicle which communicates the nature of God and His creation. Either it will communicate well, or it wont. Bach was a master, and all who seriously consider art, need to study his work, and how he used music to glorify God in all that he did.

The Big Picture

The Holy is who He is. The Creator God is above all and beyond all. He is uncreated, and we are created. He is infinite, where we are finite. In our sin and arrogance and desire to be autonomous we feel we can arrive at certain levels of knowledge concerning our own existence and the forces above. We feel we have a right to determine what we are and where we came from. This leads to our deciding who God is, and what He is like, based on our own discoveries. We proclaim Truth and reason to be the highest possible entity and therefore shove God in a box with a butterfly label pinned next to Him. We see Morality as the ladder to heaven, and fill our lives with good deeds and

benevolence on the outside, while our souls rot in selfish deterioration. We understand Beauty as queen of the universe, and declare to the world that salvation is found in an emotional crescendo. We find everything that we can think of, and place it on a pedestal, and bow down to it. We do so because it cannot demand of us. What we make holds no authority over us, and cannot require our obedience, leaving us free to do as we will. But God is not mocked.

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We take Him as Scripture declares, and praise Him for that. We do not attempt to bolster Him up where we think He needs it, or quiet Him down where we think He has gone to far. He is God. That means He is above us. We do not approach Him like we do a hot dog stand, and ask for the special. Our God is a consuming fire. He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. He was, and is and ever shall be world without end. Amen. This God, who is Holy, entirely different, completely other, demands our presence, demands our obedience, demands our lives. With what purpose? That we might be blessed by Him, and glorify Him forever. That we might be given life, and eternal life in Christ. That we might come before Him and rest on His strong arm. But we do so in humility. We come honoring Him as God, and we give Him thanks. Here is the meaning of life. Here is all we can do. Here is Christ.

The sun rises and sets at His word.

The moon comes at His call.

Fire leaps from peak to peak, in praise of its Maker.

In His hand glaciers rest and waters freeze.

The sea churns and crashes upon the rocks at His breath.

The earth is but clay and putty in the hands of the Almighty.

The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof,

For the steadfast love the Lord never ceases. Selah.

Beneath His right foot is Orion,
and with His left He stands upon Jupiter.

His right arm encompasses Truth,
and his left arm grips Goodness.

In full height He reaches beyond the highest universe,
and in one stoop, He comes to earth.

Holiness is the silver hair on His head,
Beauty adorns His brow like a crown. Selah.

“Is He dangerous?” I asked. My pursed lips quivered, but not from the pain of fire.

“O yes, quite dangerous,” said the Seraph, still holding the burning coal plucked from the alter. “But He is good.”