Redeeming Evil, Part 3: How to Redeem Evil [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 18 October 2026 - 20:33



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There are many paradoxes in Christianity [2]. God created a world that was (and in some respects still is) good. But, it is tainted by sin. Similarly, the crowning achievement of God's creation—mankind, created in His own image—is also fallen and sinful. We are redeemed by the blood of Jesus, but also still susceptible to a sinful nature.

Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God, so that those who are in Christ can work out the Kingdom on earth. But, as people who are redeemed, how do we counteract the effects of sin, and redeem what is fallen and broken in the world?

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

Some ancient Greek philosophers explored concepts which "transcend" all others. These became known as *transcendentals*. The medieval church picked up on this idea, and ran with it. There wasn't a definitive list of all transcendentals. I'll limit the discussion to *truth*, *goodness*, and *beauty*.

Because it is not overtly biblical, it is found more in Roman Catholicism and less so in Protestant denominations. However, the inference is logical: God alone is the ultimate source of all that is true, that is good, and that is beautiful.

> Truth, goodness, and beauty: the three things that we all need, and need absolutely, and without limit. … Nobody only wants some truth. We just want truth. We're not satisfied when we understand our twenty thousandth truth; we want more, forever. And no one wants only some good; twenty thousand good things are not enough; we want more, forever. And no one wants only some beauty, but all beauty—Beauty itself—without limit. When we see our twenty thousandth beautiful thing, we wonder where the next one will be. … Everything that exists has some truth, and some goodness, and some beauty. Everything is divine revelation. We are creators, because we are created in the image of the Creator. We are artists, because God is.
>
> Peter Kreeft

As Peter Kreeft said, "Everything that exists has some truth, and some goodness, and some beauty." This is true, even in the most extreme cases where people are deliberately trying to create what isn't beautiful, or manufacture lies, or deny what is good. Even in such cases, because we were created by God, these things "leak" into all that we create.

But such cases (where people are sincerely and deliberately working against God's creation) are

rare, as Calvin's mom wisely pointed out [3]. In most of what one will encounter in the everyday, it isn't difficult to find what is true, good, and beautiful, although it might take some practice to identify (and to train oneself to look for it as a habit).

The Relentless Pursuit of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

This is how I propose those in Christ approach what they think may have been "defiled". This doesn't mean that we ignore or excuse what is bad or evil about a thing. The first is to identify what *is* good, true, and beautiful about something. We pause to *look* for what is good, true, and beautiful in something. This immediately makes one less hostile, less afraid, more patient, and more forbearing. It disarms both those who try to fear-monger, and those who try to provoke. Taking this time also allows us to *recognise* what is bad, false, and ugly in ourselves, as if what we are looking at holds up a mirror to ourselves.

This requires wisdom and discernment. Nothing—apart from God Himself—is all beautiful, all good, and wholly truthful. That is the consequence of the Fall. And so we need to draw the line. We need to be capable of doing it, and proficient at doing it. As Tom Waits once said,

> I like beautiful melodies telling me terrible things.
>
> Tom Waits

Here we have an example of someone who is able to distinguish between beauty and terribleness. I'm not saying we should like terrible things. But I have learned to distinguish between what is a well-executed, catchy tune (a display of a God-given talent), and lamentable lyrics, rather than fall into the trap of thinking that any song with a catchy tune is a good song. Overtly Christian movies often are criticised [4] because, even though they intend to impart truth to the audience, they have sacrificed beauty (that is, storytelling and movie-making as an art form) in the process. When speaking to someone who holds a political or ideological opposite view to ourselves, it is better to first focus on what is true in their beliefs, rather than reactively attack falsehoods.

No Reason to Fear

We don't need to be afraid to look at what we think is bad, evil, and corrupted. All of us are all of these things to some degree. None of us are so completely.

> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? … No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God's love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
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> Romans 8:35a, 37–39

As an example, many Christians cower on Halloween night, fearful of the "demonic activity" running rampant that night. This isolates them from the world. But, if "we are more than conquerors through Him", is this fear justified? While huddled in homes and churches, are we able to be salt and light of the world? Are we not able to be more effective witnesses if we can participate in parties, fun, and dress ups? (It is good to be principled and refuse crossing certain lines, such as sexualisation, glorifying death, etc., which can also be a witness: we can discuss with our friends about our beliefs and why we have lines that we won't cross.) So what if someone is dressed as a devil, demon, or vampire? Those are nothing things. If Paul wasn't afraid of a woman whom he knew had a demon in her followed him around for days (Acts 16:16–18), then why should we be afraid of someone dressed

up as one? Avoiding people because of costumes will only lead to a breakdown of relationships, which is far more effective for the demons' purposes than some kind of baseless “release of evil powers”. This is the same reasoning that Paul applied in 1 Corinthians 8:4–13 when asked about eating meat which had been offered to idols.

After having identified what is good, true, and beautiful in something, we can celebrate it, while reforming (or otherwise warning against) what isn’t. There is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Put this way, there is a case for Christianity to appropriate pagan celebrations. By identifying what is good, true, and beautiful in what people are already doing anyway, it is easier to point them to God via those things, rather than trying to pretend what is good, true, and beautiful is not so, because of a perceived guilt by association. Many of the Western wedding traditions date back (in some form) to pagan Roman times. But because they celebrate the institution of marriage—without glorifying what is bad—Christians had the liberty to retain many of these customs, which have become hallmarks of “Christian” weddings in the West. By redeeming what is good, true, and beautiful, rather than unfairly vilifying it, we are, to some extent, doing Kingdom work. If a pagan festival includes, for example, family time spent together, or giving of alms to the poor, or beautifying a home by using decorations, such things (should) be celebrated and encouraged. Where a pagan celebration involves worshipping an idol, anyone coming to Christ out of such a tradition can be directed to rather worship Christ instead of the idol, rather than needing to abandon a tradition or culture completely.

Conclusion

Christians have a moral obligation to build for the Kingdom of God (Matthew 25:14–30). I believe that this involves redeeming what once was considered evil for good. This is certainly true of people, but also of things and habits and symbols and rituals. Otherwise we are surrendering part of God’s good creation to the forces of evil. It is within our rights and power to take it back.

To quote from one of the books that I recently bought for my children:

> The darkness is afraid of the light.
>
> Dan DeWitt The Bright Light and the Super Scary Darkness

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