



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Triumph of the Eye
(*Women and the Church*, pp.
37-46)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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The Triumph of the Eye

In a society ever more determined by the visual appeal of things, men begin to desire women who conform to a certain shape and look perpetually young. Women, in turn, strive to conform to eye-driven male desire. How can we reshape imagination to prefer spiritual vision to mere sight?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 31:10-31

Reflection

C. S. Lewis diagnosed a familiar pattern of sexual desire of our time. In *The Screwtape Letters*, he has the demon Screwtape introduce his sub-demon Wormwood to a subtler strategy for undermining chastity: the devils will strive to make “the role of the eye in sexuality more and more important [while] at the same time making its demands more and more impossible.” Screwtape explains how it works: “We now teach men to like women whose bodies are scarcely distinguishable from those of boys.” Meanwhile, the demons prompt women to please men by wearing clothes that “make them appear firmer and more slender and more boyish than nature allows a full-grown woman to be.”

This “eye-dominated dream-model” of beauty we covet in imagination is distorting our sexuality – dangerously twisting what men expect of women and, when they internalize the expectations of the “male gaze,” what women expect of themselves. Ralph Wood gives this example: “A friend of mine found his thirteen-year old daughter’s diary lying open in such a fashion as to invite her father’s inspection. There he found these words scrawled in large letters: ‘I despise my body.’ Unable to make her teenaged figure approximate the proverbial Coke-bottle shape, this woman-child has had her self-worth shattered. She has been virtually crushed by the desire for a false bodily conformity that has been imposed on her and that she has embraced without knowing it.”

Contrast the “capable wife” described in Proverbs 31. Behind the long list of her wifely duties – which will strike us as another culture-restricted role – the sage invites us to glimpse this woman’s amazing self-confidence, her true “capableness.” We cannot help but admire that “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come” (31:25). When she articulates this “wisdom” and teaches “kindness” to others, she does not blindly follow cultural expectations, but is guided by a greater truth she sees and welcomes as she “fears the LORD” (31:26, 30).

If we are to overcome the demonic “ocular deceit” about sexuality today, Wood suggests, we must restore our spiritual vision. In “mere sight,” we perceive just the “outward and visible and often ephemeral” features of people – their glamour, wealth, power, and position. “If, by contrast, we see *through* our eyes, with lenses formed by true convictions about God and man and the world, then we have *vision*. We can discern what is not apparent, what is not obvious, but what is indeed ultimately valuable. Especially can we recognize the true beauty of women.”

Wood finds these resources in the Christian tradition for restoring our spiritual vision:



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- ▶ *Scripture distinguishes vision from mere sight.* “While the Bible downplays raw naked sight, it elevates revelatory vision,” Wood says. No one can see God and live (Exodus 33:20, etc.), yet Moses finds God in a burning bush and dense smoke on Mount Sinai, Job hears God’s voice in a whirlwind, Isaiah discerns the Lord in the Temple, and people with ears to hear and eyes to see, encounter God in Christ’s parables. Based on biblical teachings (cf. Matthew 5:8; 1 Timothy 6:16; 1 Corinthians 13:12), theologians say the “Beatific Vision” is a privilege in Paradise. This “direct and unmediated sight of the Lord in all his goodness and glory is the happy purpose for which humanity was created...for God to behold us as creatures who have been redeemed by his grace, so that we, in turn, might be able ‘to know God and to enjoy him forever.’”
- ▶ *Icons of the Virgin Mary exhibit her true feminine beauty,* often by depicting dark half-circles under her eyes. “These signs of her suffering actually enhance her beauty,” Wood notes. “They reveal that she is no shallow and superficial maiden, but rather a woman of immense character and quality – precisely because she has declared her ultimate ‘Yes’ to God himself, even at the cost of immense grief and distress.”
- ▶ *John Donne helps us discern beauty.* In a tribute to the womanly beauty of Lady Magdalen Herbert, the poet says, “No spring, nor summer beauty hath such grace,” for in the very lines of her face, Love dwells. “Here, where still evening is, not noon, nor night; / where no voluptuousness, yet all delight. / In all her words, unto all hearers fit, / you may at revels, you at counsel, sit.” Wood explains, “Neither sultry nor seductive, Lady Magdalen’s beauty is suffused with a gentle delight.... What matters now is not her looks so much as her speech, for she both embodies and articulates the wisdom that provides apt advice to all who come to listen, whether it be youth who need restraint from their riotous revels, or adults who need her counsel in discerning the beauty that comes with age.”

Donne’s poem and Orthodox icons of the Virgin Mary can reshape our mind and imagination to “behold true feminine beauty...in the voice of wisdom and companionship rather than the shape of the hourglass,” Wood concludes. We may find such “autumnal beauty” even “in young women imbued with moral seriousness. Creased with the care of both love and sorrow, it is a beauty that can finally behold even God face to face.”

Study Questions

1. What signs do you notice of “the triumph of the eye,” of our being increasingly influenced by the visual appeal of things? How is it reshaping relationships between men and women?
2. Discuss the distinction Ralph Wood draws between spiritual vision and sight. How do we develop spiritual vision?
3. What resources for developing spiritual vision of feminine beauty does Wood find in Scripture and Christian art? Are there other resources that would you suggest?

Departing Hymn: “The Sacred Now”

The Triumph of the Eye

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine how we are increasingly influenced by the visual appeal of things, and how this distorts relationships between men and women.
2. To distinguish spiritual vision from mere sight in the perception of beauty in each person.
3. To consider resources in Scripture and Christian art for training our capacity for spiritual vision.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women and the Church (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Martha Croker, a character in Tom Wolfe's novel *A Man in Full* (1998), is a thoroughly modern woman who is deeply anxious to satisfy the eye-driven sexual desire of men today. Ralph Wood explains, "She is the fifty-three-year old ex-wife of Charlie Croker, an ageing real estate developer whose trophy wife Serena is half Charlie's age. Recognizing that, alas, she will never again have the filly-like appearance of Serena, Martha reflects on the younger women at the health club where she works fiercely at her own aerobic exercises: 'They had nice wide shoulders and nice narrow hips and nice lean legs and fine definition in the muscles of their arms and backs. They were built like boys, boys with breasts and hurricane manes.' Wolfe continues, 'Only vigorous exercise could help you even remotely approach the feminine ideal of today — a *Boy with Breasts!* ... The exercise salons were proliferating like cellular telephones and CD-ROMs. *Boys with breasts!*' Wolfe the deft satirist uses this phrase in witty mockery, knowing all too well that it is the eye-dominated dream-model that haunts many American women." (*Women and the Church*, 38)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for spiritual vision to see the beauty he created in each person we meet.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Proverbs 31:10-31 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study is a critique of the current ideal of feminine beauty in our society, in which men increasingly judge women by their superficial visual appeal. This ideal, Ralph Wood suggests, is one manifestation of what C. S. Lewis called "the triumph of the eye." Wood says a Christian remedy must involve the cultivation of spiritual vision, which is different from the mere sight of things. We must retrain our imagination, as well as our minds, for the perception of true beauty in persons. For this, he turns to Christian art — the Orthodox icons of the Vir

gin Mary and John Donne's *Elegy IX, The Autumnal*. Before your group meeting, download a sample of these icons and the complete version of Donne's poem from the Internet.

Study Questions

1. Ralph Wood notes, "We receive the world almost entirely through the projection of images onto screens – whether they are located on our computers, our televisions, or at the cinema." Do we evaluate people by their visual publicity, or desire things because of visual advertising? Most celebrities are people we have "seen" nicely photographed in magazines, movies, or on television, rather than merely heard about from trusted friends. We call them "the pretty people." Television "reality" shows depict attractive individuals who make good "first impressions," and try to convince us we really "know" them after a few episodes. Advertisers deploy arresting images to shape our desires, luring us to purchase products that are visually attractive or are associated in the advertisements with pretty people and places.

From grade school, boys are encouraged to "size up" girls by their "looks," and young women are pressured to conform to the "male gaze." "The giant success of the American cosmetic surgery business is a marker of...the demonic triumph of the eye," Wood suggests, for the "most common of these so-called 'aesthetic' procedures for women are mammoplasty (breast augmentation), lipoplasty (body contouring), blepharoplasty (eyelid lifting), abdominoplasty ("tummy tuck"), and breast reduction." While eating disorders (bulimia and anorexia) are not simply responses to eye-driven male desire, they often manifest in an obsessive fear of gaining weight. "A friend reports spending more than \$100,000 for his daughter's four collegiate years of psychiatric treatment for bulimia – all because her boyfriend complained that she was fat. The poor girl would have done better to dump her lover."

2. In mere sight, "we see *with* our eyes, using them as mere optical instruments" to notice "only of the outward and visible and often ephemeral" aspects of people and things. By contrast, with spiritual vision "we see *through* our eyes, with lenses formed by true convictions about God and man and the world.... We can discern what is not apparent, what is not obvious, but what is indeed ultimately valuable."

Even mere sight require some training on how to observe, what to notice, etc. (Consider that we must learn to see football team's alignments, identify individual human twins, and notice dim galaxies through a modest telescope.) But spiritual vision involves much more training, as we learn to use central truths to interpret everyday events correctly, evaluate our possible actions rightly, and recognize what is really beautiful about people and things.

3. In Scripture, Wood finds a paradox: no one can "see" God, yet people have visions of God. The divine presence is veiled in such a way that only those who desire and love God can "find" God through their experience. Several passages suggest the theological idea of a "Beatific Vision," the promise that we will behold God "face to face" in Paradise when we have a "pure heart" cleansed by God's grace of all deceit and sin.

In John Donne's poem, *Elegy IX, The Autumnal*, and the Orthodox icons of the Virgin Mary, Wood finds depictions of feminine beauty through arresting words and images, which challenge the eye-dominated ideal of beauty in our society. These works of art point to the beauty of character that is deeply formed by love for God and others and the world, and by suffering with them. If time permits, review Wood's summary of Donne's poem.

Ask members to share other resources – works of art (paintings, poetry, novels, stories, musical performances, television series), biblical stories, biographies of saints, or spiritual writings that make them look more closely at things, shape their imagination, and redirect their thinking about what is beautiful. (I'm haunted by a brief testimony by a "simple" young man in a twenty-something's church class thirty years ago: as he walked to church through the new canyons of skyscrapers in downtown Houston, he had been intensely aware of God's beauty. While I've never had *that* spiritual experience, his testimony keeps reminding me to look past the obvious and reflect on how the physical arrangement of space is influencing my perception of God.) Discuss how your congregation can use such resources in worship and study to develop members' spiritual vision of feminine beauty.

Departing Hymn

"The Sacred Now" can be found on pp. 65-67 of *Women and the Church*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.