

# Visual Worship

By Dr. J. Smith

Several years ago, when we still lived in Australia, I read a book by Herman Selderhuis, professor of church history at the seminary of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. The book is called *Morgen doe ik het beter: Gids voor gewone christenen* (tomorrow I'll do better: a guide for ordinary Christians). It's a wonderful little book, filled with encouragement and guidance for Reformed Christians in their daily walk of faith. At the end of chapter two Selderhuis tells a story that caught my attention and challenged my thinking. Let me quote a few paragraphs.

My childhood friend was a Roman Catholic. His parents were and are pious believers, in the good sense of the word. He lived just three houses down. We were inseparable; for years we would go to each other's places every day. Before we could even walk we often lay together in the same crib. At Johnny's house there was a crucifix on the wall, a cross with Jesus on it. In fact there was a crucifix in every room at his place, but there was a much bigger one in the family room, above the stove. So not an empty cross, but a cross with the Lord Jesus on it. That cross was always the first thing you saw when you came in. It was mounted in such a way that you couldn't help but look at it. That always made a great impression on me: the suffering Christ, the dead Saviour.

Now, of course [writes Selderhuis], I know that He is not hanging on the cross anymore and that He has risen. And I also know the objections that have been made against crucifixes, although I do not find them convincing. But the crucified Christ is my salvation. The way it was at Johnny's house is the way it always should be, that

you cannot help but look at the cross. His suffering is my joy. His death is my life.

I find it a pity [continues Selderhuis] that there are so few crosses in Protestant churches, and that, if they are there, they're empty. It is so good to see that Christ died. Such a cross can help you not to look to yourself but to seek your assurance, your holiness, your blamelessness, in Him.

Those are thought-provoking words, rather daring words for a Reformed professor to publish. Our first inclination might be to dismiss them with an appeal to Lord's Day 35: Is there not a grave danger that a person who has such a crucifix on his wall will begin to worship the Lord through that crucifix? "God does not want His people to be taught by means of dumb images but by the living preaching of His Word." "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ." "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." The Bible texts readily spring to mind. Our tendency as Reformed people is to leave our church buildings unadorned, to refer to our sanctuaries as auditoriums, and to greet visual technology and even floral arrangements with suspicion and criticism.

Now, it is indeed true that faith comes by hearing the gospel, so it is good that our churches have applied this Scriptural principle by emphasizing the audial over the visual aspect of worship. But is there perhaps more room for the visual aspect than we have been accustomed to? That was the question that occurred to me recently when I read Psalm 27:4. There David says, "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek Him in His temple" (NIV). I'm especially intrigued by the line, "to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD." For me it raises three questions. 1. What does that

mean: to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD? Is David hoping to see the visible form of God with his physical eyes, or perhaps to enjoy a vision of God? 2. Is it a wish that he could expect to be fulfilled; that is, is it something that he could expect to happen were he to spend time in God's house? 3. What are the implications for us, for our experience of faith, for our worship?

First then, what does it mean to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD? The Hebrew word that's translated as "beauty" is *no'am*—it's related to the name Naomi. When used of people it means delightfulness, it's a quality that's endearing, enjoyable, pleasant. The word is used of God in only one other place, in Psalm 90:17, where it's translated as favour: "May the favour of the LORD our God rest upon us." So for David to want to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD does not necessarily mean that he hopes to see God in visible form. In what sense, then, would he be able to see God's beauty in the tabernacle? The parallel clause speaks of seeking Him in His temple. There is a related Hebrew expression which means to inquire of the LORD, to seek His will, but that's not the expression that's used here.

Verse 8 speaks of seeking the LORD's face. It's a difficult verse to translate, and commentators often suggest changes to the text, but keeping the verse as it is, one could translate it like this: "'My face has been looking for You,' says my heart. 'O LORD, let me find Your face!'" In other words, David wants to have a face-to-face encounter with God. But does that mean that he wants to actually see God's face? Again, not necessarily. Notice verse 9: "Do not hide Your face from me; do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my helper [or better: *Be my helper*]. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Saviour." In English we would perhaps say that David was requesting an audience with God, that he wanted to receive a hearing, but where we use the language of the ears (audience, hearing), David uses language of the eyes (gaze on the LORD's beauty, seek His face). Notice verse 10 as

well: "I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Again the sense of sight is front and center.

That's not always the case in the book of Psalms. Sometimes the Psalmist takes comfort from God's voice, His word, His promises, His law. But not here. Yes, in verse 7 he asks God to answer him, but it seems that he does not expect an answer in words but in deeds; he wants God's shelter and protection. And verse 11 says, "Teach me your way, O LORD," but it is not clear that this is verbal teaching, because the parallel clause says, "lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors." The idea seems to be that David wants God close by, leading him by the hand, tucking him safely away, being the God who is pleasant and kind when everyone else has turned against him. Reading Psalm 27 reminds me of the hospitality customs of Ancient Near Eastern society. If a guest would come under someone's roof he could expect not only refreshments but fellowship and protection: his host would treat him like family and protect him from harm, even if it cost him dearly. That is what David is looking for in the house of the LORD: to enjoy the delightful company of the LORD Himself, who gives him shelter and keeps the enemies at bay.

If that is how we should understand what it means to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD, then we've answered our second question as well: is it realistic for David to expect to see the beauty of the LORD in the tabernacle? If he was looking for a visible face-to-face encounter with God, then we might have all kinds of questions and objections. For no one can see God's face and live. And God is not at David's beck and call but is sovereign and free to reveal Himself whenever and to whomever He pleases, so it is not at all certain that David could expect to see God. But if gazing upon the beauty of the LORD means experiencing God's favour and protection, then those questions and objections fall away. It is not at all unreasonable for David to expect divine protection and fellowship in the

tabernacle. Particularly if the priesthood was faithful to the LORD, the godly could expect to find refuge in the tabernacle and the ungodly would not dare to enter. Now, whether the tabernacle was in fact a safe place in David's time is another question. Reading David's wish in this Psalm it at least comes as no surprise that David worked so hard to organize the priests and prepare them for temple service.

That leaves our third question: what are the implications of Psalm 27:4 for our experience of faith and our worship? We live in a different situation than David did. The LORD has not preserved the tabernacle for us; we cannot view the beauty of the LORD there as David could. But the LORD has preserved this Psalm for us, in written form, as part of His Word. So this Psalm indeed confirms that faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ. But it's also important to keep in mind that the words of this Psalm are visual: David uses the language not of the ears but of the eyes; he speaks not of what he hears God say but of what he sees God do. So too our preaching and our prayers should use vivid, pictorial, descriptive language so that we help the congregation to view the beauty of the LORD as a deeply personal, kind and loving God who goes to great lengths to protect His children from enemies and to enjoy fellowship with them, even though it cost him His only Son. We need to portray God not only as someone who hears our prayers but as someone who sees our situation and is close by to help and to save. I think of what Paul writes in Ephesians 1: "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe." And in Galatians 3:1 Paul gives a pictorial description of the preaching which the Galatians received: "Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified."

So what about Selderhuis' crucifixes? Do we need those? I'm not sure. If it were possible for a

crucifix not to attract attention to itself but to redirect our attention to heaven where Christ is, then maybe, but I think that an empty cross does a better job of that than a crucifix does. Now, it's all too easy to give a theologian a bad rap by taking a couple of paragraphs out of a book and quoting them for you without context. I don't want to do that to Prof. Selderhuis. That would not be fair to him. He in fact has a very good reason for writing as he does. He has written this particular chapter for insecure Christians. He says that many people—Christians too—have a tendency to search for self-confidence by looking at themselves or by comparing themselves to others. Don't do that, says Selderhuis. We have to look outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ. The New Testament compares the crucifixion with the elevation of the bronze snake: just as the Israelites could look up at the snake and be healed, so too we should look at the crucified Christ (John 3:14, 15). And in that context he tells the story of Johnny's crucifix: find your assurance by looking to the Saviour who died for you. To be sure, writes Selderhuis, you can do that without a crucifix; you can do that by celebrating the Lord's Supper, which is designed to help us look outside of ourselves and to set our minds on things above, where Christ is. The Lord's Supper is meant for people who do not have perfect faith, people who do not serve God as they should. The point is that those who focus too much on themselves need a visible reminder that their salvation does not depend on what *they* can accomplish but on the offering that *He* has accomplished for them.



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