



L'Abri Papers #AF02



# Recovering Goodness, Beauty and Truth

## Andrew Fellows

### **Excerpts from a lecture:**

Goodness, Beauty and Truth, I call this the ancient triad. The classical culture of Greek civilisation called this the triumvirate. It's interesting to see this triad existed in other civilisations. There is something Trinitarian in the function of these three, existing together as one. They seem to belong together, just like an American BLT (bacon, lettuce, tomato) sandwich.

My main thesis is this:

- i) We cannot avoid the impulses of Goodness, Beauty and Truth as they impact our existence, they are inescapable realities.
- ii) We have taken some things that at one time overarched the whole of our lives—which governed our existence from the outside—and we have shrunk them to much smaller realities which we control.

This loss of Goodness, Beauty and Truth in the larger sense signals the demise of Western civilisation, for without acknowledging them as larger realities it is impossible to sustain human society.

I'm not going to define the members of the triad, so much as describe them. Part of the point of this lecture is to say that, intuitively, we all know what these things mean.

### **Goodness, Beauty and Truth are realities which point to God**

Christianity is careful not to idealise any member of the triad. To do this would be to turn them into idols, to make them ultimate. This is where the Greeks went wrong with the triumvirate.

Goodness, Beauty and Truth are not ultimate realities, they each point beyond themselves to God. C. K. Chesterton put it so well, "God is not a symbol of Goodness: Goodness is a symbol of God." Each member of this triad is a symbol, a signifier which tells us something about God. They are reminders of him, pointers to him. This is the reason why we should love them.

So, wherever we encounter Goodness, we see something which points to the essence of God himself. We glimpse it in the smile of a stranger. Because God is personal, goodness is also personal. Not some cold code of ethics, this was the Roman ideal of goodness. The

same is true of Beauty—every dimension of it is a symbol which points us to God. He is not beautiful, he is Beauty. All that is beautiful in some way reflects him. It acts as a kind of icon which is a pale reflection of who he is.

And in the same manner, all that is true points to God. The English puritans were fond of saying, “All truth meets at the top.” All truth points to the one who is himself the Truth. Truth is not propositions, mere statements of fact, it is also personal.

### **A step further.**

Goodness, Beauty and Truth are perfectly embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ. All three are difficult to define with precision, they easily become abstract and beyond our reach. This is especially true of Beauty. It is when I look at Christ that I gain some idea of what these are. In the prologue to John’s gospel, I see these three brought together in the revelation of the Logos. In chapter 1, verse 5 he says, “The light shines in the darkness.” When John uses the term light it always has a moral dimension to it. Jesus came as the incarnation of Goodness—he came as the full representation of Goodness. Later on in the passage (verse 17) he says, “Grace and truth came through Christ”. The word ‘grace’ in Greek comes from the notion of beauty. In Jesus, Beauty made an appearance, it was incarnate. And Truth made an appearance. “Beauty and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Light has come, Beauty has come. To have an encounter with Christ is to come face-to-face with incarnate Goodness, Beauty and Truth.

### **Goodness, Beauty and Truth function together in a way which reflects the Trinity.**

There is no act of God where all three persons are not at work. So it is with Goodness, Beauty and Truth—where one is reflected the other two will always be present because they function as a unity. You never have one without the others. When you encounter real Goodness it will also be true (it will not deny the truth) and it will also be beautiful. The same applies to Truth—if something is true, it will also be good and it will be beautiful.

For me, this forms a practical test for the presence of any one of these. It also means that we ought not to create a hierarchy of importance. Truth is more important than Beauty. We must value and cherish them equally. Because they form a unity, there will always be distortion when one is placed above the others—all three must work together.

### **Human receptors of Goodness, Beauty and Truth**

How do we connect with Goodness, Beauty and Truth? There is something remarkable about humans which enables each of us to be impacted by Goodness, Beauty and Truth—where they touch our embodied experience. These receptors belong to the order of the supernatural—the cause of them is not found within nature (the material world). This distinguishes us from that which is purely biological, which has its being only on the plane of the material. Our ability to connect with Goodness, Beauty and Truth is our glory.

However, though they are not bound to laws of nature, neither are they cut off. There is no dualism. Goodness, Beauty and Truth make their descents into the natural world and these descents are fully integrated with the material. They touch our embodied condition. When we encounter Goodness, Beauty and Truth it is not a platonic out-of-body, out-of-world experience. In healthy moments of a civilisation’s development the descents of Goodness, Beauty and Truth always call us to something higher, they enlarge and expand our worlds.

### **A receptor of goodness is the human conscience.**

We tend to view our conscience in a rather negative light—that which makes us feel guilty. Although this is what the conscience produces when we violate Goodness, it begins as a receptor which enables us to relate to the world as moral beings. Francis A. Schaeffer talked about humans having ‘moral emotions’. We can never escape this. We never step outside the moral universe; we never become a-moral. That is why we are always calling out for justice. That is the work of the conscience. Every time we say to someone else, “It’s not fair!” we are appealing to a standard of behaviour that we expect the other person to know. “It’s not fair”—and you know it’s not fair.

In a healthy state of a civilisations’ development these moral emotions are formulated into something which galvanises a whole society and forms a common code to which everyone, including the king, freely subscribes. The Knights of the Round Table committed themselves to maintaining the cause of justice and honour in the land. They were so committed to this that they were prepared to lay down their lives for it.

When this way is mapped out by a group of people it is something which you either obey or disobey. Like a musical score, you can follow what is before you OR do your own thing. This is how we respond to the descent of Goodness, no one can ignore it.

Apart from the revelation of the Bible, we will never have a musical score that matches the perfect law of God. But we will always have a standard, one that suits us, which we either obey or disobey. And although the musical score is flawed we must never underestimate the power and wonder of Goodness as it makes its descents upon the human race. Every noble and good act in history, whether acted out by a Christian or a non-Christian is a response to the descent of Goodness. The Christian, above all people, should delight in the descent of Goodness for we have the ultimate musical score, the one written by the source of all Goodness—God himself, perfect, with no flaws. This is not a cold code of ethics, enshrined in stone; it is the way of obedience to a personal Creator. To submit to the higher way, revealed by the mouth of God, should be our highest joy.

Our culture has shrunk Goodness from something which transcended us and reduced it to personal rights.

### **A receptor of beauty is the human imagination**

The human imagination has this ability to read symbols – a word, picture, gesture, sound, shape... These symbols point beyond themselves to a higher reality; it is by means of them that reality becomes meaningful for us. We cannot have a first-hand experience of something until it is symbolised to us.

What is Goodness? If it is only a rational explanation, it doesn’t connect. A recent symbol of Goodness has been for many, Mother Theresa, an Albanian woman caring for outcasts and lepers in Calcutta. What is a healthy marriage? You see these things become real as they are symbolised to us and it is the imagination that deals with symbols. Symbols are the conductors of that which is beautiful.

Beauty comes to us as a whisper pointing to transcendence. In the words of George Steiner, “it is an echo of the presence of other.” Nature can act as a symbol which points to personal presence. We look at a sunset and our imagination reads it and tells us there is something more to this than purely mechanical function. Hearing its whisper we either praise the true and living God whose power and glory lie behind the sunset OR write a myth telling of the journey of Apollo across the sky in his golden chariot OR we write a poem which is a form

of nature worship celebrating the supernatural powers which lie behind the phenomena. Each of these is a response to the whisper of Beauty pointing to the transcendent. Through Beauty we are led to a joy which belongs to another world. That is why we need to pray for eyes, ears, noses and touch to be alive to a sense of Beauty, to hear its whispers and read the symbols correctly, and be led to a deeper appreciation of the world to which it beckons.

### **A receptor of truth is the human mind (rational faculties)**

It is by means of the mind/rationality that we are enabled to touch base with what is true. A proposition of truth is presented to the mind, “It is raining,” and the rational faculty is able to determine whether the idea is true or false. Truth is something which exists beyond the material (not part of the interlocking system of nature). In this sense, statements of truth are timeless and belong to the supernatural realm. They are not subject to change as with that which is material. That’s why I love the novel, *Sophie’s World*—it communicates that when you put an idea into history, whether it is the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* or a deep philosophical insight, that idea lives forever, it never dies. It is impossible to destroy it for it will always leave its impact, either for good or for evil. When the author is dead, the idea goes on. So, the mind is able to receive ideas—and to construct them.

When Truth makes its descent we are able to enter a world of ideas and make statements the universe which corresponds to the way things are. Truth gives us the ability to think about something which doesn’t deal with the immediate, the ability to be abstract. This is actually a remarkable thing. It can become unhealthy if used as an escape, but it also enables us to get a view from the outside, in order to make truth statements about the whole.

Again, if we are standing outside of God’s revelation we will never have the full view. We are too biased by our prejudices and sin to be objective in what we can see, and we are too limited by time and space to see the whole thing at a glance. However, we are able to make statements which correspond with a degree of truthfulness about how things are.

Today, our culture has shrunk Truth to the level of the personal. Truth is something you construct for yourself—it is only as big as your world.

### **Realities common to humanity**

These are the human receptors for Goodness, Beauty and Truth—conscience, imagination and mind/reason. These three receptors are the crowning glory of our humanity. They distinguish us from the animals. They enable us to touch the world of the supernatural.

I want to make an obvious point here, but one that is important to grasp—these functions occur whether or not one is a Christian. Because all humans have a conscience, imagination and reason they are able to grapple with Goodness, Beauty and Truth. Because of the corruption of sin these things are always distorted. However, because God has given us conscience, imagination and reason we can deal with Goodness, Beauty and Truth in a way which has a remarkable correspondence to the way God has made things. Therefore, we shouldn’t be surprised if non-Christian civilisations have something to say to the issues of truth, morality and beauty. They will always be distorted because of sin, but there is something to learn.

Goodness, Beauty and Truth are realities which all humans are subject to, we cannot avoid them because we have conscience, imagination and rationality. All of them are givens which cannot be ignored—we can maul them, corrupt them—but we cannot destroy them because they each reflect God and are signposts to his reality.

## **Recovering the triad in a moment of its demise**

I said at the beginning that all great civilisations have been founded on the basis of the triad. There has been a love of goodness enshrined in some kind of moral code which all bowed to. There has been a deep appreciation of beauty reflected in their artefacts. There has been a love of truth—and a serious search to find it.

Today, all three have fallen on extremely hard times. So serious is the situation that our culture actually has a strong mood against Goodness, Beauty and Truth in their larger sense.

Goodness used to be a higher way which everyone subscribed to. Our culture is quick to dismiss such things as being oppressive, small-minded. In our eyes, goodness is about personal rights, nothing must be imposed. We are free to decide the way we will follow. Our musical score no longer serves a higher cause, it simply protects what we are personally entitled to. When this is affronted, we feel victimised.

Beauty used to relate to universal symbols which governed our existence, our architecture, music, fairy tales, etc. Today we live with the loss of universal symbols, these have disappeared and we are free to invent our own. Many have given up on the idea of Beauty altogether. I'll never forget doing a lecture on Beauty in central Europe for a group of artists. I was shocked when they began to hiss at me. It's always shocking to be hissed at when you are lecturing, but the greatest shock was that they would denounce Beauty. Many see it as dishonest to their experience of reality. It is saccharine in the face of our despair.

Truth used to be something which one believed described things as the way they really were. This belief provided the basis from which we acted on the world. Today, many have pronounced the death of Truth in this sense. We all have little truths that come out of our experience. They are just about big enough for us, perhaps, but not big enough for the universe. Today's truth is largely about introspection. No longer is reason directed outwards into the world of ideas, it's turned inwards onto the self and reason is used as a tool to explore the self.

We have shrunk these large concepts; they have been pulled down from the supernatural realm. Where we once followed their demands, they now follow ours.

Notice that I am not saying that they have been destroyed, we still have a conscience, imagination and a mind (reason). The modern self has domesticated these wonderful qualities to suit our whims, fancies and desires. The place they have now in our culture is so altered that they are no longer recognisable as the triad.

### **How can Goodness, Beauty and Truth be recovered?**

- A. We need to point people to Jesus Christ. Goodness, Beauty and Truth are incarnated in him. It is only as we know him and follow him that we can recover the true sense of these things. As Christians, we must make sure that the Christ we proclaim adequately sets forth Goodness, Beauty and Truth.
- B. We must argue against scientific materialism and for the reality of the supernatural. Goodness, Beauty and Truth cannot be maintained in the higher sense without this. The ultimate loss of Goodness, Beauty and Truth is post-Enlightenment scepticism against the supernatural. The pagan has more real notion of Goodness, Beauty and Truth than the modernist.
- C. Focus on Beauty. The loss of Truth and Goodness (as larger realities) is so endemic, the resistance to Truth and to Goodness is enormous. This is reflected in pluralism

(loss of truth) and moral relativism. I wonder if they have been shrunk to the point where they are almost beyond recovery. It doesn't mean that I have given up on talking about them, symbolising them. I am deeply committed to this, but it often seems a lost cause.

This leaves the other member of the triad—Beauty. When I read “The Idiot” by Dostoyevsky, I read some words that burned deep into my soul, “Beauty will save the world.” When Truth and Goodness have been abandoned by the modern, despised, discarded, there is still Beauty. It may also be downtrodden, yet there is something so intriguing about it. It crops up in the most unlikely places. Alexander Solzhenitsyn spent many years in a prison under the Soviet regime. In a speech for his Nobel Prize in 1970 he said, *“Perhaps, then, the old trinity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty is not simply the dressed up, worn out formula we thought in our presumptuous, materialistic youth. If the crowns of these three trees meet (as most scholars have asserted) and if the too obvious, too straight sprouts of Truth and Goodness have been knocked down, cut off, not let grow—perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will work their way through, rise up to that very place, and thus complete the work of all three.”*

Not Beauty on its own. But this tender shoot has a strange ability to work through the hardness and indifference of our culture. When Beauty (pointing through to the transcendent) makes an appearance, Goodness and Truth will follow. Beauty, by means of symbol is a gateway to the recovery of Goodness and Truth.