

Poetic Effort

This book is about the relationship between poetic effort, on the one hand, and perceiving, relishing, and portraying truth and beauty, on the other hand—especially the truth and beauty of God in Christ. By poetic effort, I don't mean the effort to write poetry. Those who make the greatest poetic effort, as I am using the term, may never write a poem. Only one of the three men in this book is known mainly for his poetry—George Herbert. But all three of them made poetic effort in their Christ-exalting communications. They made poetic effort to see and savor and show the glories of Christ. This effort was the God-dependent intention and exertion to find striking, penetrating, imaginative, and awakening ways of expressing the excellencies they saw. My thesis is that this effort to say beautifully is, perhaps surprisingly, a way of seeing and savoring beauty...

It is not we but God who has made words indispensable for the greatest events of the world—spiritual events with eternal effects. And we cannot just quote Scripture. We must talk about it. Explain it. Exult in it. Defend it. Commend it. Herald it. Pray it. And each time we must choose words. Which words will we choose?

We know that different words have different associations and connotations and effects. We must choose how to put these words together in sentences and paragraphs. We must choose how to say them: softly or loudly, quickly or slowly, pausing or not pausing, tenderly or toughly, emotionally or dispassionately, joyfully or sadly, with gestures or without gestures, walking or standing still, smiling or frowning, looking people in the eye or looking past them. We cannot escape this. We must make these choices. We either do it consciously or unconsciously...

3. God Inspired Men to Make Poetic Effort

The third reason I don't think the apostle Paul (or any other biblical writer) ruled out poetic effort in the service of Christ is that God himself inspired men to make poetic effort in the writing of Scripture. We have already seen that in the very argument against vain human eloquence, Paul chose words that were highly out of the ordinary to strike an unforgettable blow: "The foolishness of God" and "The weakness of God" (1 Corinthians 1:25). This is the kind of thing I mean by poetic effort. This is a kind of shock-eloquence, and he used it while condemning vain eloquence.

Paul's Poetic Effort

This wasn't the only place Paul chose words that were unusual or metaphorical or emotionally impactful when he could have used words less surprising or moving or stabbing. For example,

- he called loveless speaking in tongues “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1);
- he described our incomplete knowledge on this earth compared with knowledge in heaven as the difference between a child’s stammering and an adult’s reasoning, and as seeing in a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:11–12);
- he dared to compare the Lord’s coming again to the coming of a thief (1 Thessalonians 5:2);
- he sought to waken the Thessalonians to his affections by saying, “We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7);
- in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12, he dared to play on the enemy’s field of boasting, beat them at their own game, then called himself a fool for doing it: “I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that” (2 Corinthians 11:21) and “I have been a fool!” (2 Corinthians 12:11);
- he calls his own weak body a jar “of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7), and in another place a “tent” (2 Corinthians 5:2);
- he refers to himself and the apostles as “the filth of the world, and . . . the offscouring of all things” (1 Corinthians 4:13 KJV);
- he says that his highest moral attainments without Christ are “rubbish” (Philippians 3:8);
- he refers to fickle listeners as having “itching ears” (2 Timothy 4:3); and
- he describes our sins as written in a record and nailed with Jesus to the cross (Colossians 2:14).

This is what I mean by poetic effort. All these words are images laden with verbal power and evocative potential. He strove not to be boring. Not to be bland. He aimed to strike blows with feathers (“nursing mother”) and stones (“fool,” “rubbish,” and “filth”).

(The Swans Are Not Silent, Book Six, Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully: The Power of Poetic Effort in the Work of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis by John Piper, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2014, ebook, 17, 21, 28-29)