

I. Thinking Christianly About the Arts

1. Does the Bible affirm the artistic and aesthetic aspects of human existence, and does it approve of the making and appreciating of art objects of all types?
2. Do you as a Christian mistrust the arts seeing in them the dangers of idolatry and worldliness? The legalist.
3. Do you accept and participate in the arts and culture just because you like them, even though you really believe that the Christian faith condemns these activities? The hypocrite.
4. Do you accept and participate in the arts and culture uncritically, enjoying them for purely entertainment purposes as a naive consumer without thoughtful examination of their true content (message) and form (medium)?
5. Do you ignore the arts (especially high art: classical music, painting, opera, etc) as one who is almost completely indifferent to cultural values? The philistine, the barbarian?
6. What forms of artistic expression should you as a Christian allow yourself to be exposed to? Is the Christian free to enjoy the work of non-christian artists as well as christian ones?
7. Do you think some kind of career in art, literature, music, drama, etc. is a legitimate vocation for a christian who desires to love and serve God? Or should a Christian seek some other vocation of greater eternal value?
8. Do you believe that a christian artist can be both contemporary and christian or should the believing artist only employ old fashioned forms of artistic expression?
9. Does any of this concern about art and culture really even matter in a world that is lost and going to hell without Christ and the gospel?

The arts belong to the Christ, to Christianity, to the Christian life, to the Christian. We may think that they are an extraneous luxury, but in fact they are indispensable, and an inherent part of being human, which is synonymous with being Christian as well.

Is art no more than a present sideline, a readily dispensable tinkling of the bells that accompanies the seriousness of life?
F. Nietzsche in Preface to Richard Wagner, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

For Nietzsche, he writes: "I am convinced that art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life. . . ."

We wouldn't want to go this far, but we can certainly say that the fact and presence of art in life must imply some profound purpose, some important role, some indispensable function in human experience. In this course we want to recognize the arts as a part of our God-given humanity; we want to open the door to understanding and enjoying the arts as the gift and blessing of God to his creation and his creatures. We want to recognize the arts as the potential conveyors of truth and as examples of beauty, even divine beauty. We want to learn how the arts enrich and expand and enhance our personal lives and the life of our culture. We must be receptive. Here we want to consider the basic biblical doctrines that touch upon and give foundation to the arts.

II. Doctrinal Foundations for the Arts

We have no Christian aesthetic--no Christian philosophy of the arts. The church as a body has never made up her mind about the Arts, and it is hardly too much to say that she has never tried. She has, of course, from time to time puritanically denounced the Arts as irreligious and mischievous, or tried to exploit the Arts as a means to the teaching of religion and morals.... And there have, of course, been plenty of writers on aesthetics who happened to be Christians, but they seldom made any consistent attempt to related their aesthetic to the central Christian dogmas.

—Dorothy Sayers, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic," in *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, ed. Roderick Jellema, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969.

A. God

For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who has an infinite fulness of

brightness and glory. God is the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty.

Jonathan Edwards, The Nature of True

Virtue

Psalm 27: 4

B. Scripture or special revelation

Christianity is a revealed religion, and is the starting point for a Christian aesthetic, by both example and by its doctrine:

By example: the bible establishes the importance of literature, music, visual art, etc. This is especially true when it comes to literature: it contains law, poetry, songs, parables, proverbs, comedy, tragedy, etc.

By doctrine: the Bible makes comments about almost all the arts, as well as setting forth a doctrine of culture. The doctrinal foundations for the arts is forth coming in this lecture. Also, the bible provides principles for understanding and evaluating works of art, literature and music, and these we will learn as we progress.

Dorothy Sayers in her essay, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic," wrote: "If we commit ourselves to saying that the Christian revelation discovers to us the nature of all truth, then it must discover to us the nature of the truth about Art among other things."

C. Natural revelation and common grace

God reveals himself and his purposes not only in the bible but also in creation, in history, in humanity, in human reason and imagination, and creativity.

Furthermore, God's common grace, that is his grace which inclines him to be benevolent to all his creatures regardless of their spiritual state and status before him, his common grace endows all people, believers and unbelievers alike, with a capacity for truth, beauty, goodness, creativity.

Hence, if God does bless people with such artistic gifts despite their spiritual state, then Christians are free to enjoy the fruit of this gifts, to relish truth, goodness and beauty wherever it is found and by whomever it is produced. Truth, beauty, wisdom may be found

incognito, in people who are not christians, in places where we may not tend to expect it.

A further deduction from the doctrines of common grace and natural revelation is that not everything we need to know about aesthetics is found in the Bible; that many of the discoveries about aesthetics and art, as in the case of science, is found via human thought and activity. Knowledge of art comes from art itself, just as knowledge of science comes from the investigation of the natural world itself.

D. Creation and man as the image of God

No other doctrines have such far reaching implications for the arts than these two.

1. Creation

a. The cultural mandate

Cultural involvement is enjoined in Gen. 1. Rule the earthly order for God. Question is not whether culture requires the attention of believers, but how. Hence, God's creation of earthly reality and his setting the human race over it means that the artists' and critics' preoccupation with human experience and culture are a God given vocation and ordained by him.

"In Christ man is restored to God as a cultural creature to serve his Maker in the world and as ruler over the world for God's sake." Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*

b. God made a world that is beautiful as well as functional, and thus the concern of the artist with beauty, form, etc. is legitimate.

In grasses, trees and fruits, apart from their various uses, there is beauty of appearance and pleasantness of odor. Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our noses, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor? Did not God, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their

necessary use? —John Calvin (Commentary on Genesis or Titus?)

"Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins (19th century British poet)

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-color as a brindled [spotted] cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple [dots or small spots] upon trout
that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chesnuds-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced [like the English
countryside]—fold, fallow, and plough;
And al trades, their gear and tackle and trim [equipment]

All things counter [contrasted patterns or colors], original,
spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him.

2. Human beings as the image of God

Thus they express creativity, imagination, and originality (*ex nihilo*) in their own finite acts of creation.

As image-bearer of God, man possesses the possibility both create something beautiful, and to delight in it.

Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism and Art*.

"How then can he be said to resemble God? Is it his immortal soul, his rationality, his self-consciousness, his free will, or what, that gives him a claim to this rather startling distinction? A case may be argued for all these elements in the complex nature of man. But had the author of *Genesis* anything particular in his leading up to the statement about man when he wrote? It is observable that in the passage leading up to the statement about man, he has given no detailed information about God. Looking at man, he sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the "image" of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, "God created." The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: **the desire and the ability to make things.**"

—Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, p.

22.

3. The consequences of denying the doctrine of creation

- Docetism: Christ only seemed to have a body
- Arianism: Christ was only semi-human and semi-divine
- Monophysitism: Christ had only one nature, a spiritual nature
- Monasticism: true holiness can only be obtained by denying and withdrawing from the world
- Asceticism: that all bodily and sensual pleasures, especially sexual ones, must be rejected forcefully for the sake of sanctification and holiness.
- Legalism: establishing non-biblical rules that restrict the actions of believers and truncate their humanity.

When God's creation is denied, its goodness assailed, and humanity's nature and needs demeaned, we have the agnostic critics of Christianity like poet Algernon Charles Swinburne writing lines like this one which suggest how under the influence of Christianity, life and the world have lost their color and vitality:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean,
And the whole world has grown grey at your breath.

The imagery of Christ as "pale" denotes that which is, according to my thesaurus, dull, dim, faded, washed out, ashen, blanched, pallid, insipid, waxen, sallow, sickly, ghastly, death-like, bloodless, anemic, faint, feeble, weak, ineffectual, etc.

The second line expresses the results or influence of the so-called Pale Galilean (Jesus) on life and the world: it has grown grey at his breath, that is, colorless, drab, murky, lifeless, mousy, flat, and so on.

E. Beauty, the senses, and pleasure

God is the ultimate source of beauty as we saw earlier; he has endowed us with five senses, by which we experience much pleasure. See Ecclesiastes. Consider this example from the Song Solomon.

The SS is a celebration of the five senses that God has given to human beings by which they enjoy the gift of body and sexuality in marriage.

The five senses in the Song of Solomon (cf. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*)

Taste:

- His fruit is sweet to my taste (2: 3)
- . . . and taste its choice fruits (4: 16)
- I have eaten my honey and my honeycomb (5: 1)
- Eat, friends; drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers! (5: 1)
- Your mouth is like the best wine (7: 9)

Smell:

- Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes (1: 3)
- My perfume spread its fragrance (1: 12)
- Perfumed with myrrh and incense (3: 6)
- The fragrance of your perfume (4: 10)
- The fragrance of your garments (4: 11)

Touch:

- May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth (1: 2)
- Your love caresses is more delightful than wine (1: 2)
- His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me (2: 6; 8: 3)
- I held him, and would not let go (3: 4)
- Your lips, my bride, drip honey (4: 11)
- Honey and milk are under your tongue (4: 11)

Hearing:

- Let me hear your voice (2: 14)
- Listen! My beloved is knocking (5: 2)
- Let me hear your voice (8: 13)

Sight:

- Show me your face (2: 14)
- You have stolen my heart with a single glance of your eye (4: 9)
- Turn your eyes from me, they overwhelm me (6: 5)
- Come back that we may gaze on you (6: 13).

The attraction and articulation of beauty in the SS:

- Dark am I, and lovely (1: 5)
- I liken you, my darling, to my mare (1: 9)
- Your cheeks are lovely with strings of beads (1: 10)
- How beautiful you are my darling (1: 15)
- How handsome you are, my lover! (1: 16)
- I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys (2: 1)
- Show me your face (2: 14)
- How beautiful you are, my darling! (4: 1)
- Your eyes behind your veil are doves (4: 1)
- Your hair is like a flock of goats descending... (4: 1)
- Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn (4: 2)
- Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon (4: 3)
- Your mouth is lovely (4: 3)
- Your temples are like the halves of a pomegranate (4: 3)
- Your neck is like the tower of David (4: 4)
- Your two breasts are like two fawns (4: 5)
- There is no flaw in you! (4: 7)
- My lover is radiant and ruddy (5: 10)
- His head is purest gold (5: 10)
- His hair is wavy (5: 10)
- His eyes are like doves (5: 12)
- His cheeks are like beds of spices (5: 13)
- His lips are lilies (5: 13)
- His arms are rods of gold (5: 14)
- His body is like polished ivory (5: 14)
- His legs are pillars of marble (5: 15)
- His appearance is like Lebanon (5: 15)
- His mouth is full of sweetness itself (5: 16)
- You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah (6: 4)
- You are lovely as Jerusalem (6: 4)
- You are as majestic as troops with banners (6: 4)
- Who is this that appears as the dawn? (6: 4)
- Your graceful legs are like jewels (7: 1)
- Your navel is a rounded goblet (7: 2)
- Your waist is a mound of wheat (7: 2)
- Your breasts are like two fawns (7: 3)
- Your neck is like a tower of ivory (7: 3)
- Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon (7: 4)
- Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon (7: 4)
- Your head crowns you like Carmel (7: 5)
- Your hairs is like a royal tapestry (7: 5)
- Your stature is like that of a palm tree (7: 7)
- Your breasts like clusters of fruit (7: 7)

F. The fall of humanity into sin: uncreation

The arts can become idolatry; aestheticism; art is my religion; so F. Nietzsche).

Nietzsche fundamentally asked this one question which is a great aesthetic question?

What can art do for life?

How can it help us to flourish, or to at least survive?

Nietzsche's answer which expresses one evaluative criterion:

good art is art which promotes life; bad art is that which hinders it.

Art is a life saving activity, our only salvation from nausea and suicide.

Art protects; narcotizes; it can even become the opiate of the neurotic; artistic distance from reality; the cult of the untrue; the artistic taming of the horrible.

They express falsehood, and portray depravity, and have an immoral effect on an audience. The arts abused, and loved in a disorderly manner.

How has the fall affected human creativity? How has it affected the attitudes toward art, and toward the attitudes embodied in works of art, and the way people view and are affected by art? How and in what ways do the arts become idolatrous, and how do they convey depravity? Can the arts be redeemed, or should they be banished from human experience?

G. Incarnation

The incarnation provides a basis and model for the artist's absorption in earthly reality. Thus the doctrine of the incarnation has been the cornerstone of most attempts at a Christian aesthetic. In the incarnation, we find a clear, unmistakable affirmation of the value and goodness of earthly reality and preoccupation with it, a reality worthy of study and love. It lends sanction to the artists' immersion in human experience, and the products of creativity, imagination, and originality.

Art itself can become an incarnation all its own, an embodiment of meaning in the form of images, tones, stories, poems, etc.

At the same time, not only does the incarnation affirm the immanent realm, but the ascension also affirms the heavenly, transcendent realm as well. Reality is constituted by both the this worldly and the other worldly, such that the other worldly is also a legitimate object of artistic portrayal and representation. There is the need to transcend the earthly sphere as well in artistic efforts. Ideas of heaven, eternal life, spirituality, etc. need attention.

H. Redemption and sanctification

As Christ came to redeem the world, and to transform life, so also the artist ought to apply principles of redemption and sanctification to the world of art as well. To return it back to God; to redirect it to its divinely appointed role in human life. To find the beautiful, the truth, the good, to portray faith, hope and love, etc. Holiness defines the kind of activities and art that are good for people, that are proper and improper. There is moral and spiritual significance to the artistic enterprise, and it is a domain of spiritual and intellectual warfare. The Christian artist must desire to see holiness and sanctity prevail in art as in all of life: cultural sanctification as well as personal.

I. The Christian sacraments

Earthly reality: bread and wine and water: can point to and symbolize spiritual realities. The things of earth can be a vehicle for things in heaven. Tangible images and symbols can express truth; hence the value of sign making tendency in the arts, and the whole domain of semiotics.

Hence if bread and wine can illustrate truth, so can the arts. Works of art can convey truth to the glory of God and the edification of people. Like the incarnation, the sacraments provide a convenient model for what works of art are like and can do: truth in earthly images.

J. Stewardship and calling

Duty and responsibility to every talent and gift (Matt. 25). Hence, like the mind and all other of God's gifts, the capacity for art is God given, and is something that must be faithfully cultivated and employed.

The talent and the time must be exercised rightly, or else judgment results.

There is also the possibility of a calling, vocational, into the arts that must be recognized. This doctrine encourages each believer to determine what his/her calling is from God, and to follow it assiduously.

K. The Christian telos: the glory of God

1 Corinthians 10: 31. Every dimension of human existence, including the artistic, is to glorify God. Creativity, excellence, imagination, technical proficiency, content, form, etc. the enjoyment of the arts, can be a way to glorify God. This will keep us from making an idol out of art, from either over or under valuing art.

Let us give thanks to “God our Creator--to whose glory all good art contributes--for having granted us as his favored creatures that there should be art in our lives.” N. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, page. x.

Books:

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Leland Ryken, ed. *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, 1981.

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