

# Aesthetics and Worship

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## Introduction

As the twentieth century of Christian history draws to a close, I believe that we can safely conclude the church is at a low point in terms of artistic accomplishment. The golden days of church leadership in music, painting, literature, drama, and architecture are a thing of the distant past.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps gone as well are the days when we Christians could entertain realistic hopes for a recovery of our leadership position in the arts. Therefore, two pressing questions loom for the church mired in an aesthetic malaise as the third millennium commences: what went wrong? And what can we do to make things better? The first query has been addressed ably by Christian scholars.<sup>2</sup> Credible answers to the second question, however, have been sparse.

Curing the aesthetic ills of the Christian community will be a mammoth task, if it is to be achieved at all. Without question the prescription for success will demand attention both to the theoretical (theological and philosophical) foundations of Christian thought as well as to assorted practical matters. Elsewhere I have addressed the matter of the philosophical foundations of aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> In this essay I shall discuss the theological foundations of a Christian aesthetic and make some concrete applications, specifically to the matter of worship. First, I will develop a biblical theology of beauty and the arts. Second, I will spell out a particular practical approach to the arts implied by this theological aesthetic framework, giving special attention to the matter of worship.

## Towards A Biblical Aesthetic

Evangelicals tend to be nervously suspicious of secular art, rigidly utilitarian in their approach to Christian art and apathetic about developing a biblical aesthetic. These prevailing attitudes represent so significant a deviation from a properly biblical approach to the arts that I am tempted to suggest that the church is guilty of what might be called the “aesthetic heresy.” But, alas, there has never been an official church aesthetic or doctrine of the arts, and without theological orthodoxy there can be no true heterodoxy. Still, the dominant view is grossly unbiblical, and recognition of this fact is the first step towards recovering a biblical aesthetic.

## *Divine Beauty*

Aesthetics, generally speaking, is the inquiry into the nature of beauty. Thus, in working out a systematic biblical aesthetic, a proper starting place is the divine attribute of beauty. The scriptures speak strongly and often of this important divine characteristic, which is expressed in a variety of ways such as when the Lord is praised for his glory, splendor, majesty, and excellence. In 2 Chronicles 20:21, for example, Jehoshaphat exhorts his people to “sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness.”<sup>4</sup> The psalmist writes, “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” (Ps 27:4). Elsewhere, the psalmist declares, “O Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed

with splendor and majesty” (Ps 104:1). Literally hundreds of other passages praise God for his beauty or describe him in aesthetic terms.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, the greatest of Christian theologians have recognized the attribute of divine beauty. This is implicitly affirmed by Thomas Aquinas when he asserts that “[b]eauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally,” both consisting in “due proportion.”<sup>6</sup> Also, Augustine exclaims,

I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. You were with me, but I was not with you. The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all.<sup>7</sup>

The last statement in this passage is the most significant, for there he affirms all earthly beauty to be merely derivative of divine beauty. Similarly, Jonathan Edwards asserts, “For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that being, who hath an infinite fulness of brightness and glory.”<sup>8</sup>

Just as God is primordial being, the ontological ground of all that is, and just as he is the foundation of ethics, the axiological ground of all values, so is he the foundation of aesthetics, the ground of all beauty. As all being is either God or is derived from God, so all that is beautiful either *is* him or comes *from* him. Consequently, any aesthetic satisfaction, whether of objects, animals, or other

humans, and however seemingly remote from the divine, is ultimately an enjoyment of God. Not only is God beautiful in his being, he also creates beautiful things.

### *Divine Creativity*

In the Genesis creation account God creates—a significant, if obvious, point. God also assesses his creative work. In verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25 of this first chapter, the writer declares “and God saw that it was good.” Verse 31 offers the following summation: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” Now this is an evaluative judgment so ordinary that it is easy to miss its import. The Hebrew term translated as “good” in each of these verses is *tov*, a word which generally denotes that which is pleasing, pleasant or delightful. In some passages (1 Sa 9:2; 1 Ki 20:3; Da 1:15) it specifically describes that which is agreeable to the sight or senses. Elsewhere it refers to that which gives pleasure to our higher nature (1 Sa 25:8; Est 2:6, 8:17, 9:19, 9:22; Zec 8:19; Mal 2:17). But it is most likely that *tov* in the Genesis creation narrative means that which is *good or excellent of its kind*. This meaning is the same sense the term has in Exodus 3:8 and Numbers 13:19, where it is used to describe the land of Canaan.

Evaluative terms and judgments have a variety of uses, but their basic applications are moral, legal, political, prudential and aesthetic. Which category fits the Genesis 1 evaluation of God’s creation, that “it was very good”? The phrase cannot be employed here in the moral sense, for moral evaluations properly apply only to persons or their actions. Rather, the assessment is clearly being applied to the world (inanimate nature and non-human organisms), which falls into neither category. It is equally obvious that the

judgment is neither legal nor political in nature. As for the possibility that this is a prudential judgment and that the term “good” is used here merely to indicate the practical usefulness of the created order, this option fails to explain the universal application of the term to *all* that God had made. For not everything God has created is practically useful. In what sense, then, can it be said that all he has made is *tov*, excellent of its kind? The answer is that the term must be applied in the *aesthetic* sense. The evaluative judgment regards the *beauty* of the world. This is a frequently overlooked fact about the biblical creation account, and its implications for a biblical aesthetic are profound.

The first lesson this text provides is simply that aesthetic evaluations are appropriate. The Genesis narrator, and presumably God himself, makes such an assessment. It is therefore fitting to make judgments regarding the aesthetic merit of a creative work. Second, and more controversially, aesthetic evaluations are objective. That is, beauty is a real quality of objects, and there are absolute standards according to which a thing can be assessed aesthetically.<sup>9</sup> This fact is implied by the presence of the aesthetic judgments in Genesis 1. How can such evaluations be made if not in light of some objective criteria? It is also implied by the fact that the sense of the term *tov*, denoting a thing that is excellent of its kind, rules out the possibility that the assessment regards the mere subjective response to creation by either the writer or God himself. The use of *tov* in this narrative suggests not just personal delight or pleasure but an objective quality about creation itself, irrespective of any particular person’s response. Of course, God does greatly delight in his handiwork. The point is that the judgment

of its goodness in Genesis 1 implies more than this.<sup>10</sup>

Now the divine creative act, the scriptures tell us, is not an event that completely ceases with early chapters of Genesis. God actively upholds the world, “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). Paul declares that “he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:17). And elsewhere he notes that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Ac 17:28). Indeed, the world, as a contingent being, demands a continual cause for its existence, deistic objections notwithstanding. And such continued support is tantamount to perpetual creation. This is a point emphasized by many Christian theologians and philosophers alike. Aquinas, for example, writes,

All creatures need to be preserved by God. For the being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment could it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of Divine power.... The preservation of things by God is a continuation of that action whereby He gives existence....<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Jonathan Edwards argues that

God’s *preserving* created things in being is perfectly equivalent to a *continued creation*, or to his creating those things out of nothing at *each moment* of their existence. If the continued existence of created things were wholly dependent on God’s preservation, then those things would drop into nothing, upon the ceasing of the present moment, without a new exertion of the divine power to cause them to exist in the following moment. If there be any who own, that God preserves things in being, and yet hold that they would continue in being without

any further help from him, after they once have existence; I think, it is hard to know what they mean. To what purpose can it be, to talk of God's preserving things in being when there is no need of his preserving them?<sup>12</sup>

Such theological and philosophical considerations as these lead me to conclude that divine creative activity continues on a grand scale even as you read these words.<sup>13</sup> The Genesis narrative reports the initiation of God's creative work; subsequent history and our current experience testify to his creative persistence.

A further observation to be made here pertains to the way that the cosmos authentically reflects the cosmic artist. Nature serves as an unmistakable self-expression of God. As the psalmist writes, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (Ps 19:1-2). And Paul notes that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Ro 1:19-20). God's cosmic art bears the indelible marks of a powerful, intelligent, wise, and loving being, so clear in fact that we have no excuse for not recognizing their source. Moreover, he is a creator who is "in the details" aiming toward ends and purposing particular outcomes of his creation, as is observed by the psalmist: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to pass" (Ps 139:16). The writer of Proverbs notes that "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Pr 16:33), and "[i]n his heart a man plans his course,

but the Lord determines his steps" (Pr 16:9). And as Paul famously asserts, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Ro 8:28).

Returning now to the Genesis 1 creation narrative, we find in verse 27 the statement that "God created man in his own image." To be created in God's image, of course, suggests that we share some essential ultimate capacities with the divine nature. Among these are the abilities to reason, will, perceive, love, emote, etc. But more significantly for our present purposes, humans image God in the capacity to create and to do so with intentionality. Like our creator, human artists properly execute according to a plan, aiming towards a definite, preconceived outcome. And just as God's creativity is self-revelatory, we may reasonably suppose that the human artist reveals something of himself in his art. Just as many divine attributes are manifested in God's creation, as Paul notes in Romans 1, the personal attributes of artists are known by their works.<sup>14</sup> Creation, it seems, is essentially an act of self-expression.

Having made these positive observations based largely upon the Genesis 1 creation account, we must not neglect Genesis 3 and the doctrine of the fall, an essential part of any biblical anthropology. As with all divine-image bearing capacities, the gift of creativity is prone to abuse. Human history and contemporary art provide plenty of examples. Because of sin, we must be deliberate in identifying guidelines for proper usage of this gift, as I shall do below.

### *The Bible and the Arts*

So what does the Bible have to teach us about the arts and artistic endeavor

*per se*? The scriptures speak to these matters both by example and by direct injunction. By example the scriptures declare the importance of the arts by the fact that the books of the Bible are, in the main, works of literary art. From Genesis to Revelation we find epic narratives (tragic and comic), proverbs, poems, hymns, oratory, and apocalyptic literature whose artistic tools include allegory, metaphor, symbolism, satire, and irony.<sup>15</sup> Comparatively little of the biblical material is strictly didactic, and where this is the case, such as in the book of Romans, the logical rigor itself is elegant (an aesthetic quality). Finally, Jesus' own preferred method of instruction, the parable, is an aesthetic device. And even when not using parables, his language tends to be heavily laden with metaphors and symbolism, a fact that exasperated the disciples.<sup>16</sup>

Surely the fact that God himself chose an artistic medium as his primary vehicle of special revelation ought by itself to persuade us to place a special premium on the arts. But the Bible also speaks explicitly to some specific art forms. With regard to music, the Bible is replete with injunctions to "sing a new song" (Ps 33:3, 98:1), to praise him using a variety of instruments (Ps 98, 150), and to "play skillfully" in doing so (Ps 33:3). Dance, too, is endorsed in the Psalms: "Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King. Let them praise his name with dancing..." (Ps 149:2-3; see also Ps 150:4).

The Bible sanctions drama as well. In Ezekiel 4:1-3 we find these instructions:

Now, son of man, take a clay tablet, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it. Then lay siege to it: Erect siege works against it, build a ramp up to it, set up camps against it and put battering rams

around it. Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel.

This directive of the Lord to Ezekiel continues at length, symbolizing truths of both civil and spiritual significance. It essentially constitutes a prophetic drama, portraying Israel's sad fate due to her disobedience.

Lastly, the scriptures speak to the visual arts. The most celebrated example appears in Exodus 35:30-35, regarding the construction of the tabernacle. Here Moses declares to the Israelites,

See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others.... Then Moses summoned Bezalel and Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work.

From this passage we learn not only that the visual arts are a worthy pursuit but also that gifts in this artistic domain are endowed by God himself. And it is the Lord's desire to have skilled persons do such work, whether that skill is a natural (or, better, supernatural) gift or trained ability.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, we should note that artistic ability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for doing such work. The artist must also be willing to contribute (v. 35).

So what conclusions are we to draw

from all this? I want to underscore three main points in light of the foregoing discussion. First, it is clear that beauty is an important biblical category, and this is true of the nature of God in two ways. God himself is beautiful in his being and creative in his actions, bringing other beautiful beings into existence. His works are excellent, displaying technical genius. They are original in the ultimate sense, as he creates *ex nihilo*. They display authenticity, serving as expressions of himself, declaring aspects of his nature. And his works are intentional, in that he purposes details and works towards an end, bringing glory to himself. Second, the Bible has much to say regarding artistic endeavor and aesthetic considerations. Both implicitly and explicitly, the Bible sanctions the arts. And these matters are important not merely for their utility but for the immediate glory of God. Third, the scriptures endorse aesthetic objectivism. Beauty is not merely “in the eye of the beholder.” Rather, artistic values are absolute public facts. Opinions may vary about the beauty of a thing, but the Christian view says that there is absolute aesthetic truth that abides in spite of this.

### **Aesthetic Virtues: A Christian Model**

In the previous section, we noted that it is because we bear the image of God that humans have the capacity to create. We might even say that, since we are called to mimic God, we have a duty to be creative. But what exactly does this mean? How ought we to pursue the fulfilling of this biblical aesthetic mandate? I would like to make some specific suggestions to help clarify our thinking on just this question. In doing so I will draw upon virtue theory, an approach typically used in the

moral domain but transferable to other disciplines as well.<sup>18</sup>

A virtue is a specific excellence or, as Robert Roberts puts it, a trait which makes a thing a good specimen.<sup>19</sup> In moral matters, a character trait is said to be virtuous if it makes one a good human. I would like to suggest that just as in morality there are virtues (and corresponding vices), this goes for the aesthetic domain as well. Based on the biblical aesthetic developed thus far, I propose the following catalogue, by no means exhaustive, of aesthetic virtues and vices. Note that each of these proposed virtues is derived directly from the nature and example of divine creativity elucidated above.

#### ***Technical Excellence***

The first rule in any endeavor, whether creative or not, is technique. For every skill there are proper and improper methodologies. For example, there is a right or best way to hold a brush while painting, to position actors on a stage in a drama, to enhance dynamics in the performance of a song, etc. Each artistic domain has its proper methodology. And while the results look different depending upon the art form (and even between genres within art forms), technical precision is always of the first importance. Artists must attend to the established guidelines of their craft. Abiding by such standards maximizes the desirability of the outcome of the creative process.

It should be noted, however, that in the fine arts a reasonable amount of room must be allowed for free and spontaneous play of the imagination. This is especially the case in the process of poetic and musical composition, but also in the performing arts. But in any case the artist should strive for efficiency. Proper method

or technique is essential for this trait.

### ***Veracity***

There are two basic aspects to this virtue: truth-telling and authenticity. With regard to the first, the Christian must place a high premium on truth. That is, to the extent that the artist makes truth-claims (and art works do so in a variety of subtle and explicit ways), she must take great care. The artist should strive to accurately depict events, faithfully portray persons, and insightfully expound upon important ideas.<sup>20</sup>

Artistic works must also be authentic, effectively displaying the artist's unique perspective. Creative activity is properly self-revelatory. As regards the content of a work of art, this implies the faithful presentation of the artist's particular beliefs and feelings about the subject matter. With regard to style, it is appropriate that the artist's personality be apparent in her work. Included here is the practice of genuine personal vulnerability, something often lacking in Christian circles today, but especially so in our art.<sup>21</sup>

While there are strong theological reasons for identifying veracity in artistic expression as an aesthetic virtue, there is also the incentive of human self-understanding. Leland Ryken remarks that the arts "are the most accurate index to human preoccupations, values, fears, and longings that we possess." And, he adds, "[t]he arts are therapeutic and corrective: They at once call us to the essential patterns and values of life."<sup>22</sup> If this is the case, then the more truthful and sincere an artist's expression, the more her work has to teach us regarding the human condition and the greater moral service it can provide.

### ***Originality***

Dorothy Sayers writes that a "true work of art...is something new; it is not primarily the copy or representation of anything. It may involve representation, but that is not what makes it a work of art."<sup>23</sup> Like our creator, artists should strive to be innovative in the content of their works. Stylistically, they should show imaginative resourcefulness in depicting events, portraying persons, addressing issues, expressing feelings, and communicating truths or values. New styles should be boldly explored, remembering that, as Schaeffer notes, "there is no such thing as a godly style or an ungodly style."<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the argument from the divine ideal, there is the matter of community. No artist, particularly the Christian artist, is an island of innovation. Art happens in and, in part, for the sake of community, and the history and tradition of that community will properly find expression in each art work the members produce. But just as communities evolve and advance, so must its artistic expressions. Artists must constantly strive to push boundaries, both in terms of the techniques of production and the content of their works to maximize their aesthetic potential. Artistic exploration serves to vitalize and nourish a community's corporate imagination, awaking persons to new truths and enabling them to see old truths from a new perspective.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Moral Integrity***

All human endeavors should reflect a commitment to biblical moral standards, and the artist is no exception. She must create works that are not only consistent with a Christian ethic but which display moral coherence, speaking with one

voice as regards its moral messages. For example, no work of art should be caustic or demeaning towards a person or institution in the name of Christ but strive always for redemptive themes. Artistic criticism of false ideas or worldviews is appropriate, and at times even necessary, but should always be done in a spirit not of combat but of service, not to glibly censure but to imaginatively persuade and enlighten.

This idea of the moral responsibility of artists is one of the distinctive features of a Christian aesthetic. As Nicholas Wolterstorff notes, "Where the Christian sees the artist as a responsible agent before God, sharing in our human vocation, Western man in the Gauguin-image sees him as freed from all responsibility, struggling simply to express himself in untrammelled freedom."<sup>26</sup> True artistic freedom, the Christian ironically claims, begins with the recognition of the moral responsibility of the artist, for it is in living morally that humans are at their best, fulfilling their earthly purpose. And it is a biblical ethic that constitutes the true ground of moral responsibility.

### ***Intentionality***

The Christian artist ought to be thoughtful about his work in the fullest sense. There are at least four aspects to this principle. First, one must attend to proper technique and mechanical execution. This, of course, is a practical axiom for excellence in any endeavor, as was discussed earlier. Second, critical reflection about the nature of one's artistic labors is necessary. Every work of art falls within some specific genre. And the artist must be critically aware of the standards for excellence within that genre if he is to excel.<sup>27</sup> Third, the intentional Christian

artist is a student of the history of that genre and is capable of emulating the worthy artistic methods of its experts. Fourth, some minimal awareness about art theory is essential. The Christian artist must be aesthetically literate, having developed a basic definition of art, a view on the nature of the creative process, a conception of the biblical view of art, and an understanding of the various purposes of artistic expression. And regarding these matters he should be conversant with others in the Christian community, drawing upon them for the sake of moral and theological accountability.<sup>28</sup>

It is said that every virtue has a corresponding vice, and this is no less true in aesthetics than in the moral realm. Here is a *precis* of some such vices that plague the evangelical community. Because they are so common, we must be especially careful to recognize and avoid them.

### ***Laziness***

The lazy artist is too easily satisfied with: (a) flawed technique (e.g. poor acting, writing, singing, etc.); (b) unauthentic art which addresses issues in the abstract; (c) unoriginal productions that merely offer cheap rip-offs of what is popular and trendy; and (d) work that shows little or no sign of critical reflection on the part of its creator. While some maintain that it is the message that matters or that good theology can compensate for aesthetic mediocrity, such an attitude forgets that aesthetics *is* a theological concern. As Madeleine L'Engle says, "If it's bad art, it's bad religion, no matter how pious the subject."<sup>29</sup>

### ***Banality***

This aesthetic vice deadens the sensibilities of the lay person who is not aes-



thetically keen enough to recognize it but is nonetheless harmfully affected by it. And it annoys the aesthetically aware person to distraction, or else it puts her to sleep. In short, any significant lack of imagination is banal. In written or lyrical compositions the vice of banality consists in the use of platitudes, clichés, and trite moralizing. Musically it is exhibited in dull, excessively repeated choruses or a failure to sufficiently diversify musical styles. A bland visual atmosphere, displaying little or no artistic expression is an obvious example.

This is not to say that simplicity in art is always aesthetically vicious. On the contrary, it can be an aesthetic merit. Clyde Kilby explains the distinction between simplicity as virtue and as vice, particularly as applied to Christian art works:

There is a simplicity that diminishes and a simplicity that enlarges, and evangelicals have too often chosen the wrong one. The first is that of the cliché—simplicity with mind and heart removed. The other is that of art. The first falsifies by its exclusions, the second encompasses. The first silently denies the multiplicity and grandeur of creation, salvation and indeed all things. The second symbolizes and celebrates them. The first tries to take the danger out of Christianity, and in removing the danger it often removes the actuality. The second suggests the creative and sovereign God of the universe with whom there are no impossibilities. The contrast suggests that *not* to imagine is what is sinful.<sup>30</sup>

### *Artificiality*

This vice is opposed in certain respects to the virtues of both originality and authenticity. It represents a failure to take seriously the psalmist's injunction to sing a new song, and in mimicking our God, to do so in new and original ways. The various forms of popular kitsch,

including T-shirt designs, jewelry, posters, bumper stickers, and coffee mugs are clear instances of artificiality.<sup>31</sup> But the vice has more subtle manifestations as well, such as in the use of hackneyed formulas in music (e.g. a key change towards the end of the song) and maudlin dramas that oversimplify the complexities of real life moral problems and dilemmas (e.g. "Yes, Jane, your pregnancy out of wedlock is a serious problem, but if you just trust the Lord...").

Perhaps the best (or worst) example of artificiality in Christian art is the widespread use of musical accompaniment tapes. These should be scuttled not only because they epitomize the sort of pre-fabrication that runs counter to authentic, original art but also because they rob budding musicians of the opportunity to perform in worship and hone their artistic craft (e.g. piano, guitar, etc.) in the preparation process. Consequently, the excuse that "there aren't any able musicians available" only perpetuates the problem, for the use of accompaniment tapes eliminates the *need* for musicianship, which is the most effective incentive for development of musical gifts in the first place.

### *Authentic Utilitarianism*

In one sense this vice opposes the virtue of intentionality. It is manifested among Christians in the common notion that art is used properly only for evangelistic purposes. First, this perspective runs counter to the biblical idea that excellent creative endeavors bring direct glory to God and need not be used as a means to save souls in order to be valuable and pleasing to God. Second, it subversively affects even the capacity to successfully use art as an evangelistic tool. For to

accent the salvific effects of a work of art, thereby demoting aesthetic concerns, invariably results in a lower grade art object which an audience will consequently find less compelling. The ironic result is that prioritizing the evangelistic purpose of art compromises the artist's ability to connect with persons outside the Christian community.

### Art as Worship

Having worked out the rudiments of a biblical aesthetic, it remains now to apply this theory to practice. Specifically, I want to apply it to worship. Let us pursue this end with two main foci: (1) art *as* worship and (2) art *in* worship.

It has been said that the art world is the secularist's religion.<sup>32</sup> It is easy to see why this claim is made, for art, like religion, addresses the issue of ultimate human meaning, deals with eternal truths and values, expresses emotions that arise from the core of our being, offers solace for the suffering, and does all this in the context of a community that transcends cultural boundaries.<sup>33</sup> Some, such as Calvin Seerveld, argue that art is worshipful by its very nature: "Art is a symbolically significant expression of what lies in a man's heart, with what vision he views the world, how he adores whom. Art telltales in whose service a man stands because art itself is always a consecrated offering, a disconcertingly undogmatic yet terribly moving attempt to bring honor and glory and power to something."<sup>34</sup> While this might overstate the matter, for the Christian there can be no mistaking the fact that art is one of the most natural forms that worship can take. And when undertaken from the right perspective, art is quite properly a form of worship. Christians need to take this prin-

ciple more seriously.

The notion of worship is one of the more straightforward biblical concepts (though this is not to imply that it is always an easy task). To worship God is to praise, venerate, or express allegiance to him. In the most general sense, a worshiper is one who in one way or another actively glorifies God. That is to say, genuine worship involves action. Any entity may glorify God by its very nature (e.g. a bird, a mountain, a tree, a sunset, etc.). But a worshiper willfully *gives* glory to his God, through some intentional endeavor. And the ways in which this may be effectively done are perhaps as vast as the number of human activities themselves. This is a point traditionally emphasized by Reformed theologians which also has strong biblical support. The chief end of man, declares the Westminster catechism, is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever," and the mechanic, salesman, and artist may do this every bit as effectively as the pastor or missionary. When it comes to worship, the definitive question is not *which* activity one chooses but *how* and *why* one does it. As Paul admonishes us, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Col 3:23).

So long as one's activity is morally permissible and is intended to glorify God, it is a genuine act of worship. This is not to say, however, that all worshipful acts are equally *good*. Every endeavor is subject to evaluation by the standards of excellence internal to that practice, and acts meant for worship are no exception. A common distinction used in moral philosophy to help clarify and focus ethical assessment is that between an act and its motivation.

	Good Motive	Bad Motive
Good Act	Good art intended to glorify God	Good art intended to impress people
Bad Act	Bad art intended to glorify God	Bad art intended to impress people

In each case a (more or less) positive or negative judgment may be made. Hence, in any case, such as in the above chart using art, we may distinguish four combinations of possible assessments.

Obviously, the proper motive for the Christian in any activity is to bring glory to God. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” To the extent that the Christian maintains a divinely directed intention, he satisfies this biblical maxim. But this is only half of the story, when it comes to glorifying God. We must strive not only for true worship, but for true worship done *well*.

As pertains to artistic endeavor, we have discussed the aesthetic virtues. Artists must exhibit technical excellence in their work. They must produce works of art that serve as veracious disclosures of the human experience and personal perspective within a Christian worldview. They must strive to make original contributions with works of art that offer intriguing insights using creative styles of expression that challenge conventional forms. And above all of this, artists must be fully intentional, working continually to increase their understanding of the history and philosophy of their crafts.

If, as the scriptures clearly teach, the love of God is made manifest in action, and we are commanded to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and

strength, then it follows that those Christians who are involved in the arts, whether part-time or full-time, have a biblical duty to exert maximum effort in their work. This is perhaps the most important message of all for today’s evangelical artists. We have failed in the arts as a Christian community because we have not sensed the urgency of the endeavor, and as a result we have succumbed to the aesthetic vice of laziness. While our motives may have been good (e.g. evangelistic zeal, mutual edification, church growth, etc.), our art has been poor. We must learn again to worship well aesthetically.

The most powerful anti-aesthetic force to be overcome in the church today is the utilitarian mindset that demands some practical application or tangible outcome of art works in order to justify their pursuit. The leading Christian aestheticians of our time, H. R. Rookmaaker,<sup>35</sup> Leland Ryken,<sup>36</sup> Francis Schaeffer,<sup>37</sup> and Nicholas Wolterstorff,<sup>38</sup> have all critiqued this attitude. Again, we take our cue from God himself, whose works include myriad instances of beautiful things that have no practical use beyond the enjoyment and aesthetic satisfaction they bring. This is not to say that art never serves a practical function. On the contrary, art may legitimately be used as a means in the accomplishment of ends of many kinds, moral, social, political, educational, and liturgical (as will be discussed below). The

point is that no such end is necessary to justify art.

### Art in Worship

In liturgical application art *is* primarily a means towards the end of the formal corporate worship of God. Out of this context has grown some of the greatest art the world has known, such as Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, Handel's *Messiah*, Rembrandt's *Denial of St. Peter*, Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel, and the brilliant architectural achievements of gothic Church cathedrals. Of course, liturgical art need not achieve this order of brilliance to be legitimate, but aesthetic standards ought to be applied nonetheless. In the remainder of this essay I shall outline ways in which this might be done, based on the biblical aesthetic explained above.

Art used in formal worship should abide by the aesthetic virtues outlined earlier. But in spite of the needed emphasis on these ideals, we must not forget the explicit purpose of liturgical art, namely, to be a catalyst in the corporate worship of God. There is a basic functional difference between art in worship and art on stage, at the museum, or in the concert hall. As Gene Veith notes, "liturgical art exists not for aesthetic contemplation but for the contemplation of God."<sup>39</sup> This basic point suggests two obvious constraints. First, art in worship must not distract the worshiper but help her to focus upon God. To this end, liturgical art should not be human-centered but truth-centered. Second, art in worship must be theologically informed. At its best, liturgical art is not merely consistent with sound doctrine but serves positively to illuminate biblical teaching, making imaginative expression or application of

biblical truth.

Now let us specifically apply the aesthetic virtues discussed above to formal worship. First, with regard to technical excellence, church congregations vary considerably in terms of the talent pool in the various art genres. And as it is in the life of the individual, so it is in the church community: to whom much is given, much will be required. Larger churches are appropriately held to higher aesthetic standards than smaller churches when it comes to the execution of a song, drama, or work of visual art. This principle applies to the matter of originality as well. Novel and creative modes of artistic expression will only be as prominent as a church community's leading artists are gifted.

As for veracity, expressions of feelings and personal perspectives should always be monitored for their moral content and theological orthodoxy, as with all other aspects of church life. But tactful honesty, vulnerability, and open sharing through art about the struggles and triumphs in the Christian's life should be encouraged. As for style, I would also suggest that the use of art in local churches fit the general congregational ethos and social customs. Every Christian sub-community has a cultural identity, and this should manifest itself in the art it produces. Perhaps this aspect is where Paul's practice of becoming all things to all men applies to aesthetics in worship.

Regarding the virtue of intentionality, the mandate is simple to understand, but difficult to apply consistently. Those in charge of organizing and leading worship services simply must learn to think aesthetically, which takes work. If we are ever to recover a biblical emphasis on the aesthetic (whether in formal worship or other

spheres of the Christian life), there must first be a recognition of the importance of aesthetics by church leaders. This must happen in both of the following ways. First, present church leaders (pastors, lay ministers, youth leaders, etc.) must educate themselves in the arts and aesthetics. Of course, the usual demands of ministry are severe, and most pastors are overworked as it is. I am not suggesting that they supplant their normal duties of ministry and counseling for the sake of this task. What I do suggest is that church leaders at least make the arts a regular part of their lives, whether that takes the form of attending plays and symphony orchestras, reading great literature and poetry, or perusing local art galleries. I believe that as few as two hours per week devoted to artistic edification can significantly enhance a person's aesthetic sensibility. For those who complain that they do not even have that much time to spare, I would ask them to estimate the number of hours per week they spend watching television. If they are sincerely convinced that it is better stewardship of time to watch a sitcom or football game than to attend a play or read a classic work of literature, then nothing I have to say will convince them anyway.

Second, local church leaders may hire trained Christian artists to oversee and direct aesthetic elements of church life and worship. Christian liberal arts colleges such as the one where I teach are graduating excellent artists yearly whose expertise is underused. Churches could hire art directors who are not necessarily skilled in all the arts but who have a broad enough background in the arts to identify and recruit congregants who do have various expertises and then place them in charge of contributing to and assessing

elements of worship relevant to their area.

Consider these major areas, for example: (a) drama, (b) the visual arts (painting, quilting, pottery, etc.), (c) literature (poetry, prose, etc.), and (d) music. The most aesthetically dynamic church with which I have ever been associated addressed each of these areas specifically. The senior pastor actively sought out trustworthy persons with strengths in these areas, and asked each one to form a small group of leaders for their area. The contributions of each were a regular part of the Sunday services. Quilted seasonal banners were rotated throughout the year. Creative dramas pertaining to sermon topics or holiday themes were performed. Original poems and stories were read aloud to illustrate various biblical themes. During worship services a music group, composed of musicians playing a variety of instruments led the congregation in hymns and spiritual songs (also representing a great range in styles, from classic to contemporary). The result was exciting and engaging for newcomers. Today that church still thrives and is in the midst of a vast building project to accommodate its numbers. But more importantly, the *quality* of worship and fellowship at that church is strong and authentic, due in large part to the attention this pastor pays to the aesthetic elements of the worship services.

One further positive effect of the serious application of this model (and it is just one of many that could be implemented) is that of creating opportunities for much needed fellowship and discipleship among Christian artists themselves. All too often Christians who take a serious interest in the arts feel disenfranchised and alienated from other Christians. Even as a musician—and therefore a practitio-

ner of the art form that is taken most seriously by the church today—this is something I have personally experienced. Sadly, Christian painters, actors, poets, among other artists are not only underappreciated, the creative use of their skills is sometimes deemed odd or frivolous by the very persons who should be the first to celebrate their God-given talents. By setting up small leadership groups for artists in their local church, pastors create opportunities for the artistically gifted to flourish and to share insights and wisdom regarding what it means to be a Christian artist in their particular genres.

Of course some evangelical churches do follow this model, incorporating each of these artistic genres in worship, and some pastors are quite intentional about doing so. But even where this is done, it is often done poorly. It is not enough just to incorporate the arts in the life of the church. It must be done well. We must raise our aesthetic standards in the evangelical church, and we must be earnest and aggressive in doing so. Otherwise, our aesthetic malaise will not be rectified.

Some will object that raising standards in this area will hurt the feelings of some church members who would like to contribute aesthetically but who are not gifted artistically. Is this a justifiable complaint? I think the answer depends to a large extent upon each particular church's resources. But in the end there really is no excuse for poor aesthetics in worship. No church would put a poor accountant in charge of their finances or allow a hack carpenter to do the electrical wiring just because he "really wanted to contribute." No, we allow persons with trained skills to help in such areas.<sup>40</sup> If no one is available within the church, we look outside to find someone competent for the task

(as many churches wisely do already to find able organists). Remember that Solomon called upon the skilled Sidonian craftsmen in the construction of the temple. His first concern, it seems, was artistic ability, not doctrinal commitment.

Others object that aesthetics is different from accounting and carpentry in that the former regards matters of taste, while the latter do not. This objection betrays just the sort of subjectivist aesthetic that has plagued the church for so many years and which helps to perpetuate church mediocrity in the arts. Unfortunately, our blindness in this area is precisely what may prevent us from regaining our vision. As I showed in the first part of this paper, a biblical aesthetic—like a biblical ethic—is objectivist rather than subjectivist or relativistic in nature. Admittedly, there is a dimension of taste and personal preference in the arts, but this is not to say that there are no standards by which art works can be assessed for their beauty. The Christian is called to a difficult work when applying moral standards. This is no less the case when it comes to standards of artistic excellence.

## Conclusion

The Christian church, once the leader of the arts, is now scarcely taken seriously in artistic communities. Worse yet, the formal worship of Christians is compromised by mediocrity in this area. Our problem, however, is not for lack of inspiration, as the scriptures are brimming with aesthetic instructions, from the Genesis creation account to the hymns of Revelation, not to mention the nature of the Biblical writings themselves. We must recapture a truly Christian vision for the arts, and strive mightily to be aesthetically virtuous. The duties of the church pertain

not only to goodness but to beauty as well.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is an understatement. As Clyde Ruby dourly notes, "When evangelicals dare attempt any art form it is generally done badly." See Ruby, "Christian Imagination," in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 40. This sentiment represents the consensus among Christian scholars of the arts.

<sup>2</sup> See H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1970); Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978); Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968); and Gene Veith, Jr., *State of the Arts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> James S. Spiegel, "A New Aesthetic Vision for the Christian Liberal Arts College," *Christian Scholar's Review* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of such passages and the whole matter of the beauty of God, see F. Duane Lindsey, "Essays Toward a Theology of Beauty." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (1974) 120-136.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Vol. I* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947) 26. The difference, says Aquinas, regards the faculty that they please, goodness appealing to appetite and beauty to the cognitive faculty.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* X, 27 (New York: Viking Penguin, 1961) 231-232.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Nature of True Virtue," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. I* (1834; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984) 125.

<sup>9</sup> Historically aestheticians have offered a variety of philosophical arguments for aesthetic "realism" or "objectivism." For an especially astute recent defense of this thesis that beauty is a real, objective quality of objects, see Eddy H. Zemach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1997) chs. 1-3.

<sup>10</sup> For another aesthetic analysis of the Genesis creation account, see Leland Ryken, "In the Beginning, God Created," in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 55-67.

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas, 511-512.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Original Sin," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. I* (1834; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984) 223-224.

<sup>13</sup> Even Descartes recognized, from a purely philosophical standpoint, that divine preservation essentially involves perpetual creation. He reasons as follows: "... the whole duration of my life can be divided into an infinite number of parts, no one of which is in any way dependent upon the others; and so it does not follow from the fact that I have existed a short while before that I should exist now, unless at this very moment some cause produces and creates me, as it were, anew or, more properly, conserves me.

Actually it is quite clear and evi-

dent to all who will consider attentively the nature of time that a substance, to be conserved at every moment that it endures, needs the same power and the same action which would be necessary to produce it and create it anew if it did not exist. Thus the light of nature makes us see clearly that conservation and creation differ only in regard to our manner of thinking and not in reality." (See Rene Descartes, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Laurence J. LaFleur [New York: Macmillan, 1964] 105).

<sup>14</sup> For an extended exposition of this point, see Lindsey.

<sup>15</sup> On this point, see Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1989) ch. 2; and Clyde Kilby, "Christian Imagination," in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 37-46.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Lk 16:17-30.

<sup>17</sup> For an illuminating discussion of this biblical passage and its implications, see Veith, chs. 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> A serious application of virtue theory to aesthetics is much needed. In recent decades this Aristotelian approach has been popular in ethics, largely due to the seminal work of Alasdair MacIntyre. See his *After Virtue* (South Bend, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981). More recently Linda Zagzebski has done some significant work in applying this approach in epistemology. See her *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> "A virtue," says Roberts, "is a trait that makes a person a good specimen. Traits that make people good

as human beings are moral virtues; traits that make them good as Christians are Christian virtues....” Robert Roberts, “Humor as a Christian Virtue.” *Faith and Philosophy* (April 1990) 190.

<sup>20</sup> For a helpful discussion of the elements of truth in art, see Frank P. Gaebelien, “What is Truth in Art?” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 99-109.

<sup>21</sup> Leo Tolstoy’s Christian aesthetic recognized the communication of genuine feeling as essential to artistic expression, which he explains as follows: “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.” (See *What is Art?* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960] 51.) Tolstoy defends a strong “expression” theory in aesthetics, but one need not share his definition of art to recognize the validity of stressing authentic communication in art.

<sup>22</sup> Ryken, 132.

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Sayers, “Toward a Christian Aesthetic,” in *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: MacMillan, 1969) 83. Later in this same work she develops this notion further in application to literary art in particular, saying that the artist brings us a recognition of truth that “comes to us as a revelation of new truth.... I mean the recognition of a truth that tells us something about ourselves that we had not been always saying, something that puts a new

knowledge of ourselves within our grasp. It is new, startling, and perhaps shattering, and yet it comes to us with a sense of familiarity. We did not know it before, but the moment the poet has shown it to us, we know that, somehow or other, we had always really known it” (87).

<sup>24</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973) 51.

<sup>25</sup> Consider Madeleine L’Engle’s words regarding perhaps the greatest of Christian composers: “Bach is, for me, the Christian artist *par excellence*, and if I ask myself why, I think it has something to do with his sense of newness. I’ve been working on his “C Minor Toccata and Fugue” since college, and I find something new in it every day. And perhaps this is because God was new for Bach every day, was never taken for granted.” (See *Walking on Water* [Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1980] 55.)

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 78.

<sup>27</sup> T.S. Eliot takes this a step further: “What I believe to be incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and that by these criteria and standards everything what we read must be tested.” (See “Religion and Literature,” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981] 153.)

<sup>28</sup> I am aware of one well-known Christian musical artist and composer, Michael Card, who is a com-

mendable example of what I am endorsing. Christian artists are not trained theologians, but as producers of theologically pregnant art works it is incumbent upon them to be especially circumspect about their works.

<sup>29</sup> L’Engle, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Kilby, 42-43.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin Seerveld writes, “Kitsch accepts the technocratic denaturing of ordinary life, but pretends to lift you above it, nostalgically. Kitsch is willing to be slick, it always glitters somehow, bewitching the simple with illusions of grandeur... Kitsch canonizes immaturity; it panders to introverting experience...because kitsch thrives only on sentimentality.” (See *Rainbows for the Fallen World* [Toronto: Toronto Tuppence, 1980] 63.)

<sup>32</sup> The poet Matthew Arnold even predicted that art would eventually replace religion. See “The Study of Poetry,” in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961) 306.

<sup>33</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the religious qualities of the art world, see Veith, 137-138.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Hamilton, Ontario: Guardian, 1968) 28.

<sup>35</sup> Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification*, 30-39.

<sup>36</sup> Ryken, 85-89.

<sup>37</sup> Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 33-38.

<sup>38</sup> Wolterstorff, 32-45, 67-84.

<sup>39</sup> Veith, 202.

<sup>40</sup> In celebrating the return of the ark of the covenant, the Bible says that Kenaniah “was in charge of the



singing; that was his responsibility because he was *skillful* at it" (1 Ch 15:22).