

AESTHETICS IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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Introduction

In 1998, philosopher James Spiegel published an article entitled *Aesthetics and Worship*. In the beginning of the article, Spiegel observes “As the twentieth century of Christian history comes to a close, I believe that we can safely conclude the church is at a low point in terms of artistic accomplishment.”¹ Spiegel laments that gone are the days when church leadership excelled in music, painting, literature, drama, and architecture. In yet another article, Spiegel claims that there is an “aesthetic malaise” in the Christian world and that there seems to be a lack of a Christian perspective on the arts.² There seem to be many reasons for this. For one, in light of all the contemporary issues Christianity addresses today (homosexuality, abortion, etc.), the arts seem to be inconsequential to matters of primary concern.³ Christians also seem to consider the arts as theologically suspect. In the representational arts (drawing, painting, and sculpture), some Christians may even see art as a transgression of biblical mandates (Ex. 20:4).

When it comes to art, Christians tend to be exceedingly utilitarian in their artistic approach.⁴ Some Christians tend to see the arts as merely evangelistic means to salvific ends. According to Spiegel, Christians are guilty of “aesthetic heresy.” While the arts can be used evangelistically, this should not be the only purpose for the arts. It will be the goal of this paper to explore the purposes of arts, and more specifically, to incorporate a Christian aesthetic into the area of worship. A theology of the arts will be constructed, and a model will be applied to the area of worship in the Christian life.

¹ James Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2:4 (Winter 1998): 40.

² James Spiegel, “Towards a New Aesthetic Vision for the Christian Liberal Arts College,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring 1999): 466.

³ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

⁴ Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship,” 40.

Before a Christian model of aesthetics is constructed, a word must be said about worship. This writer fears that a lengthy discussion about aesthetics before a discussion about Christian worship will inevitably result in too narrow a view that misses that goal to which this paper aims. Applying a Christian aesthetic to worship is not merely seeing how the arts fit into our church services. Constructing a Christian aesthetic is for the purpose of seeing how the arts fit into the whole of Christian worship, not just that aspect that fits into church on Sunday.

What is worship? The English word “worship” comes from an Old English word meaning “worthy of reverence and honor.”⁵ Whenever we ascribe reverence, honor, or admiration to things, we worship them. We worship things that we adore. However, there must be a distinction between an object of adoration and the means of adoration. We may worship an object like God, our stomachs, or money through many different means, by patterns of behavior, by speech, etc. That is why Paul describes a pattern of living as the primary means of worship in Romans 12:1-2.⁶ Christians are to present out lives to God as worshipful sacrifices. Everything that a Christian does should reflect our reverence and adoration to the God we love. With this in mind, one can see that a Christian aesthetic should not only manifest itself in church practice, but in the entirety of Christian orthopraxy. However, without Christian orthodoxy, one cannot have orthopraxy. Therefore, in order to construct a Christian aesthetic, a theology of aesthetics must be established before one can see how a Christian view of the arts can be applied in the area of Christian worship.

Towards a Christian Aesthetic

⁵ Franklin M. Segler and C Randall Bradley, *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub. Group, 2006), 1.

⁶I got this helpful distinction from my professor, Dr. Rhyne Putman.

What is “aesthetics,” and does the Bible have anything to say in the area of the arts?

Aesthetics is the inquiry into the nature of beauty.⁷ If a Christian aesthetic is to be constructed, then a survey of the biblical data is in order. In Psalm 27:4 it says “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: 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 inquire in his temple.”⁸ In Psalm 104:1 it states “Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty.” One central thing that must be noted when constructing a Christian aesthetic is that beauty is a divine attribute. No aesthetic can be called “Christian” by relativizing beauty. Beauty is not a matter of sheer subjective taste. Beauty is an objective feature of reality that is grounded in God’s intrinsic majesty and splendor. Put more simply, God is beautiful, and more than that, God *is* beauty.

With that said, anything that is encountered in creation that produces feelings of the sublime; the sense of beauty that captures our senses -from the smallest of things to the grandest of things, are not beautiful in virtue of itself. “Beauty is not some property discretely inherent in particular objects,” says David Hart. When a Christian speaks of beauty, he means that beauty is analogical.⁹ Hart says “God is the primary analogate to whom beauty is ascribed.” Beauty is not *in* things, but “indwells the analogical relationship of all things, each to the other, as a measure of the dynamism of their involvement with one another.” He adds “The Christian use of the word ‘beauty’ refers properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and

⁷ Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship,” 40.

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural quotes will be taken from the English Standard Version.

⁹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 18.

return of the riches of being.”¹⁰ In other words, earthly beauty is merely a derivative of divine beauty. This truth is captured so well by St. Augustine:

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.¹¹

And also in the words of Jonathan Edwards, “All the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but a reflection of the diffused beams of that being, who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory.”¹² Spiegel sums this up nicely by writing “As all being is either God or derived from God, so all that is beautiful either *is* him or comes *from* him.”¹³

The second thing one has to establish in constructing a biblical view of aesthetics is that God called his creation “good” (Gen. 1:31). According to Philosopher Steven Cowan, “When God declares that the various aspects of his creation are ‘good,’ he is saying that they are aesthetically excellent or beautiful.”¹⁴ Spiegel agrees, and says that the biblical implications for this are quite profound.¹⁵ First, the Bible implies that aesthetic evaluations are appropriate, and secondly, aesthetic evaluations are objective.¹⁶ The Bible does not teach creation is good merely because God esteems it as such, but that God’s creation is good in and of itself. If God finds

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions* X, 27 (New York: Viking Penguin, 1961) 231-232, as quoted in Spiegel’s “Aesthetics and Worship,” 41.

¹² 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, as quoted in Spiegel’s “Aesthetics and Worship,” 41.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Steven B. Cowan, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* Steven B. Cowan, James S. Spiegel (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2009), 227.

¹⁵ Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship,” 42.

¹⁶ Ibid.

pleasure and delight in what he has wrought, then how much more should Christian find delight and pleasure in God's good creation?

More than showing that creation is aesthetically pleasing, the Genesis account also depicts God as an artist. In the opening chapters of Genesis, God is revealed as creator, and thus shows that he is creative. In Psalms 19:1-2, the David writes "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge." Thus, one can see that creation is God's self expression, and it reveals something about his nature. The apostle Paul develops this idea even further when he writes "for what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:19-20).

The third observation can be made when building a theology of the arts. The Bible itself mandates that people make works of art. In Exodus 25:9, God gives Moses instructions for the Tabernacle. That the Tabernacle was to be beautiful sometimes goes unnoticed, but God could have asked that the Tabernacle be a mere boxlike construction made of wood. A plain room with a few simple objects could have just as easily served the purposes that God wanted to achieve. A purely utilitarian view of the arts cannot account for the fact God gave designs to Moses that would make the Tabernacle beautiful. The Ark of the Covenant was to be made by people whom the Lord had "put skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary" (Ex. 36:1). The outer covering was to be made of multicolored linens, and everything on the interior was to be covered with pure gold. The Ark was fashioned with Cherubim on it, representations of angelic beings, and the Menorah was crafted with its branches being made to resemble almond buds with flowers. One could pull example after example from the Bible that

God approves of art. 2 Chronicles 3:1-17 speaks of the measures that David took to make the Temple beautiful. From descriptions of the Tabernacle and of Solomon's Temple, one can easily see that the visual arts are endorsed by God himself. Francis Schaeffer observes "The Temple was covered with precious stones for beauty. There was no pragmatic reason for the precious stones. They had no utilitarian purpose. God simply wanted beauty in the Temple. God is interested in Beauty."¹⁷

When one reads the Bible, one can easily overlook the fact that he is reading a work of art. According to Spiegel "...the scriptures declare the importance of the arts by the fact that the books of the Bible are... works of literary art."¹⁸ As a work of literature, the Bible contains narrative, allegory, hymns, poems and proverbs. Furthermore, aesthetic qualities abound in biblical literature, such as the logical rigor found in the apostle Paul's writing. Jesus used metaphors and symbolism in his parables, which are elements that have aesthetic appeal.¹⁹ Even further, the Bible speaks of music (Ps. 33:3), and the Psalmist injunctions people to use instruments (Ps. 98). People are told to dance (Ps. 149:2-3). Drama is also used in the Bible. In the book of Ezekiel, God tells the prophet to reenact scenes of the future destruction that God will bring upon his people, by telling Ezekiel to use clay tablets with Jerusalem on it, and then to build siege works, and to set camps against it. God says that Ezekiel's reenactment will be a sign to the house of Israel (Ezek. 4:1-3).

Aesthetics in Christian Worship

¹⁷ Francis Schaeffer, "*The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*," 2nd ed. 5 vols. Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 1985, 381.

¹⁸ Spiegel, "Aesthetics and Worship," 44.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Earlier in the paper it was established that Christian worship is a life dedicated to God. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that "...whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." This is a principle, says Leland Ryken, "of far-reaching implications. It means that every dimension of the artistic enterprise- creativity, excellence of technique, artistic content, the enjoyment of works of art- can become a way of glorifying God."²⁰ For the Christian, we must realize that the lordship of Christ covers the whole of life, even the artistic aspects of human existence. Francis Schaeffer writes "The arts...do have a place in the Christian life- they are not peripheral." He goes on to say that "A Christian should use [the] arts to the glory of God- not just as tracts, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An art work can be a doxology in itself."²¹ Art is the means by which we can worship God.

Because humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:31), we have the capacity to create. Not *ex nihilo* as God creates, but *ex materia*. Therefore, just as creation is God's self expression, so is art a self-expression of man. Art is worshipful by its very nature. Calvin Seerveld says "Art is a symbolically significant expression of what lies in 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 moving attempt to bring honor and glory and power to something."²² What one worships reflects itself in how one lives, and how one lives reflects what one worships. There is a two way interchange in worship in general, so it is the

²⁰ Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly About the Arts*, The Wheaton Literary Series (Wheaton, Ill.: H. Shaw Publishers, 1989), 21.

²¹ Schaeffer, 377.

²² Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Hamilton, Ontario: Guardian, 1968) 28, as quoted in Spiegel's "Aesthetics and Worship," 49.

duty of the Christian to let the God whom he serves to be reflected in his orthodoxy and orthopraxy, for the two are interrelated.

Art is worship, and both art and worship are actions by which we worship God. Therefore, man is responsible in the artistic means by which he glorifies God.²³ Therefore, Christians should practice artistic excellence. For every area of artistic practice (music, literature, film, etc.), there are standards set by which that art is measured. Every art form fits within a specific genre, and a Christian artist should be knowledgeable of the standards of excellence in the specific genre.²⁴

But no matter what genre, one of the universal standards of any art form should is that it should effectively serve its purpose.²⁵ Philosopher of art, Nicholas Wolterstorff gives a fine example.²⁶ A hymn is a good hymn when it serves its purpose. A hymn's purpose in Christian worship is not made for the purpose of sounding beautiful, but for directing ones heart toward God. A Christian should strive for beauty, and artistic excellence, but beauty and excellence is not the sole aim. The Christian artist's aim is to glorify God. Art should never be for art's sake in Christianity. Art is considered excellent based upon its ability to accomplish its purpose. Furthermore, because we are stewards of the material creation, the materials we use should be used in a responsible way, so that our effect may be achieved in an aesthetically excellent way.

²³ For in depth discussion and defense of this point, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), chapters 1 and 4.

²⁴ Spiegel, "Aesthetics and Worship," 45.

²⁵ Wolterstorff, 158.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Art is for the glory of God, therefore Christians should exude aesthetic excellence in order to give their best to God.

“The arts are the most accurate index of human preoccupations, values, fears, and longing we possess,” says Ryken. “If we wish to know what it means to be human in this world, we can go to the stories, poems, songs, and paintings of the human race.”²⁷ According to Ryken, the arts are therapeutic in that they remind humans of what is essential and valuable in life. This is why, according to Spiegel, a Christian should be truthful in how they depict persons, and events, and also in the way that they expound ideas.²⁸ Truth is beautiful, and because God is beautiful, he must also be truth. Christians worship a God who is true to how he reveals himself; therefore Christians should be true in their own self-expression. Any art form that portrays reality deficiently, or warps creation in a way that God did not intend it, that art form ceases to become beautiful.

Artists should strive to be original in their artworks.²⁹ Christians should be imaginative in the way that they express their message, and should not be afraid of being innovative in producing a new style that communicates effectively. There is no such thing as a godly or ungodly style.³⁰ As long as that style communicates effectively with the artist’s audience, then the artwork has fulfilled its intended use. Every art form has a community that has established accepted practices. However, if there is no innovation, accepted norms can become trite, and

²⁷Ryken, 132.

²⁸Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship,” 46.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰Schaeffer, 406.

monotonous. Christian artists must make an attempt at being original; being adventurous in terms of technique and content.³¹

What of beauty then? If beauty is a divine attribute, as discussed earlier in this paper, how does this influence the way we see art in Christian worship? Sadly, a full discussion of beauty would go beyond the required length of this paper.³² Suffice it is to say, that beauty, according to Jeremy Begbie, “evokes a desire to dwell with and enjoy that which we experience as beautiful.”³³ Simply put God’s beauty is attractive, and his beauty should cause worshippers to love and adore him. But how is it that worshippers encounter God’s beauty? Is God not immaterial, and transcendent? How can the divine attribute of beauty be incorporated with the arts and Christian worship? In Chuck Colson’s book *How Now Shall We Live?*, a story is told of a film producer who was driving along the Pacific Coast Highway. As he was driving, he turned on his radio to the classical station, and on the radio was Henryk Gorecki’s *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*. The double basses of the symphony grew stronger and stronger, and the strings joined in. The music seemed “to speak with the power of the sea rumbling against the land and climbed in a steady progression that lifted his eyes to the blue, cloud-gauzed heavens. It made him long for...for what?”³⁴ The story ends with the producer being so overwhelmed by the music, that he is moved to tears.

³¹ Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship”, 46.

³² This writer highly recommends David Bentley Hart’s “The Beauty of the Infinite, as well as Nicholas Wolterstorff’s “Art in Action” for detailed discussions of beauty. Also recommended is Jeremy Begbie’s article entitled “Created Beauty,” published in Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin, eds., *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007), 19.

³³ Treier, Daniel J., Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin, eds. *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007), 30.

³⁴ Charles W. Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 432.

Music (as well as beautiful art in general) can produce a longing in us; a desire that only the Christian can properly understand. When art portrays beauty, beauty calls to us. But it is not as if beauty is a thing within objects that calls for us to admire the objects that contain the beauty (as Hart said earlier). No, beauty comes through things; it is not in things. God communicates himself through his creation. So the call to which a sunset hearkens us to- the desire to be enveloped by music that arrests our senses- this is not beauty calling us, but the God who is calling us through his beauty. And his beauty is mediated to us through his material creation. Richard Viladesau writes that "...the positive evaluation of music in the church was founded on the idea that the music we hear on earth gives us a sensible taste of the spiritual order and finality of all being and, in its truest nature, expresses the praise of and desire for God."³⁵ The finality that Viladesau speaks of is eschatological finality. That beauty points to an eschatological goal, a transfiguring of the entirety of creation, is found among other writers.³⁶ If beauty evokes a desire for eschatological fulfillment, then by creating beautiful art, the Christian can cause himself and his audience to long for that which is truly beautiful: God himself. It is his presence, and his glory that is the goal of Christian eschatology. Art never had a more worthy goal.

Conclusion

To build a Christian aesthetic, one must begin to realize that the created universe is an "aesthetic phenomenon."³⁷ God is an artist, he has made man in his image, and he has endorsed the arts in the Bible. From these facts come artistic implications that should revolutionize the

³⁵ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 36.

³⁶Once again, see Begbie's article entitled "Created Beauty," published in Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin, eds., *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, as well as David Bentley Hart's, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*.

³⁷ Spiegel, quoting Fredrick Nietzsche, in "Towards a New Aesthetic Vision for the Christian Liberal Arts College," 469.

way Christians see art, and how Christians can incorporate the arts into worship. Art is worship. Christians use art in their liturgy, films, dramas, and even through their writing. Even painting can be an act of worship. Because art is worship, aesthetic excellence is an imperative for Christians because art is for the glory of God. Flawed technique should never be accepted due to the fact that art should be the best. Art should be offered to God, and he deserves the best. Art should be truthful in what it depicts and represents, never distorting, or depicting life in sentimental terms. Art should portray reality accurately, and it should glorify God. Christian art should serve the purposes of glorifying God, and should aid others in worshiping him. If at any time art distracts from worshipping God and God alone, it has invalidated its purposes.

Finally, God is beautiful, and his beauty is reflected in the things that he has made. Because beauty increases longing in the human heart, aesthetically pleasing artwork can be used to help provoke a longing for the God who calls out through the beauty of his creation, and through the beauty that shines through the art of his co-creators.

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