The Christian and the Arts

How should Christians glorify God in the ways we interact with the arts and express our artistic bent?

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Is there a legitimate place for the appreciation of art and beauty in our lives? What is the relationship of culture to our spiritual life? Are not art and the development of aesthetic tastes really a waste of time in the light of eternity? These are questions Christians often ask about the fine arts.

Unfortunately, the answers we often hear to such questions imply that Christianity can function quite nicely without an aesthetic dimension. At the heart of this mentality is Tertullian's (160-220 A.D.) classic statement, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? The Academy with the Church? We have no need for curiosity since Jesus Christ, nor inquiry since the evangel."

This bold assertion has led many to argue that the spiritual life is essential, but the cultural inconsequential. And today much of the Christian community seems inclined to approach aesthetics in the same hurried and superficial manner with which we live most of our lives. This attitude was vividly expressed recently in a cartoon portraying an American rushing into the Louvre in Paris. The caption read, "Where's the Mona Lisa? I'm double parked!"

Art and Aesthetics

What is aesthetics? Let us begin with a definition. Aesthetics is "The philosophy of beauty and art. It studies the nature of beauty and laws governing its expression, as in the fine arts, as well as principles of art criticism"{1}. Formally,

aesthetics is thus included in the study of philosophy. Ethical considerations to determine “good” and “bad” include the aesthetic dimension.

Thus, beauty can be contemplated, defined, and understood for itself. This critical process results in explaining why some artists, authors, and composers are great, some merely good, and others not worthwhile. Aesthetics therefore

> “. . .aims to solve the problem of beauty on a universal basis. If successful, it would presently furnish us with an explanation of the quality common to Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance paintings, and all good art from whatever place or time.”{2}

At the heart of aesthetics, then, is *human creativity* and its diverse cultural expressions. H. Richard Neibuhr has defined it as “the work of men’s minds and hands.” While nature (as God’s gift) provides the raw materials for human expression, culture is that which man produces in his earthly setting. It . . . “includes the totality and the life pattern—language, religion, literature (if any), machines and inventions, arts and crafts, architecture and decor, dress, laws, customs, marriage and family structures, government and institutions, plus the peculiar and characteristic ways of thinking and acting.”{3}

Aesthetic taste is interwoven all through the cultural fabric of a society and thus cannot be ignored. It is therefore inescapable—for society and for the individual. Human creativity will inevitably express itself and the results (works of art) will tell us something about its creators and the society from which they came. “Through art, we can know another’s view of the universe.”{4}

“As such, works of art are often more accurate than any other indication about the state of affairs at some remote but crucial juncture in the progress of humanity. . . . By

studying the visual arts from any society, we can usually tell what the people lived for and for what they might be willing to die."{5}

The term *art* can mean many different things. In the broadest sense, everything created by man is art and everything else is nature, created by God. However, art usually denotes *good* and *beautiful* things created by mankind (Note: A major point of debate in the field of aesthetics centers around the definition of these two terms). Even crafts and skills, such as carpentry or metal working have been considered by many as *arts*.

While the works of artisans of earlier eras have come to be viewed like fine art, the term *the arts,* however, has a narrower focus in this outline. We are here particularly concerned with those activities of mankind which are motivated by the creative urge, which go beyond immediate material usefulness in their purpose, and which express the uniqueness of being human. This more limited use of the term *art* includes music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, drama and literature. The *fine arts* is the study of those human activities and acts which produce and are considered works of art.

Aesthetics then is the study of human responses to things considered beautiful and meaningful. The arts is the study of human actions which attempt to arouse an aesthetic experience in others. A sunset over the mountains may evoke aesthetic response, but it is not considered a piece of art, because it is nature. A row of telephone poles with connecting power lines may have a beautiful appearance, but they are not art because they were not created with an artistic purpose in mind. It must be noted, however, that even those things originally made for non-artistic purposes can and have later come to be viewed as art objects (i.e., antiques).

While art may have the secondary result of earning a living

for the artist, it always has the primary purpose of creative expression for describably and indescribably human experiences and urges. The artist's purpose is to create a special kind of honesty and openness which springs from the soul and is hopefully understood by others in their inner being.

Aesthetics and the Bible

What does the Bible have to say about the arts? Happily, the Bible does not call upon Christians to stultify or look down upon the arts. In fact, the arts are *imperative* when considered from the biblical perspective. At the heart of this is the general mandate that whatever we do should be done to the glory of God. We are to offer Him the best that we have—intellectually, artistically, and spiritually.

Further, at the very center of Christianity stands the Incarnation ("the Word made flesh"), an event which identified God with the physical world and gave dignity to it. A real man died on a real cross and was laid in a real, rock-hard tomb. The Greek ideas of "other-worldly-ness" that fostered a tainted and debased view of nature (and hence aesthetics) find no place in biblical Christianity. The dichotomy between sacred and secular is thus an alien one to biblical faith. Paul's statement, "Unto the pure, all things are pure," (Tit. 1:15) includes the arts. While we may recognize that human creativity, like all other gifts bestowed upon us by god, may be misused, there is nothing inherently or more sinful about the arts than other areas of human activity.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament is rich with examples which confirm the aesthetic dimension. In Exodus 20:4-5 and Leviticus 26:1, God makes it clear that He does not forbid the *making* of art, only the *worshipping* of art. Consider the use of these vehicles of artistic expression found throughout:

Architecture. God is concerned with architecture. In fact, Exodus 25 shows that God commanded beautiful architecture, along with other forms of art (metalwork, clothing design, tapestry, etc.) in the building of the Tabernacle. Similar instructions were given for the temple later constructed by King Solomon. Here we find something unique in history—art works designed and conceived by the infinite God, then transmitted to and executed by His human apprentices!

Apparently He delights in color, texture, and form. (We also see this vividly displayed in nature). The point is that God did not instruct men to build a purely *utilitarian* place where His chosen people could worship Him. As Francis Schaeffer said, "God simply wanted beauty in the Temple. God is interested in beauty."{6} And in Exodus 31, God even names the artists He wants to create this beauty, *commissioning* them to their craft for His glory.

Poetry is another evidence of God's love for beauty. A large portion of the Old Testament is poetry, and since God inspired the very words of Scripture, it logically follows that He inspired the poetical form in such passages. David, the man after God's own heart, composed many poems of praise to God, while under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Among the most prominent poetical books are: Psalms. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Poetry is also a significant element in the prophets and Job.

The genre of poetry varies with each author's intent. For example, the Song of Solomon is first and foremost a love poem picturing the beauty and glory of romantic, human love between a man and his mate. It is written in the form of lyric idyll, a popular literary device in the Ancient Near East. The fact that this story is often interpreted symbolically to reflect the love between Christ and His Church, or Jehovah and Israel, does not weaken the celebration of physical love recorded in the poem, nor destroy its literary form.

Drama was also used in Scripture at God's command. The Lord told Ezekiel to get a brick and draw a representation of Jerusalem on it. The Ezekiel "acted out" a siege of the city as a warning to the people. He had to prophesy against the house of Israel while lying on his left side. This went on for 390 days. Then he had to lie on his right side, and he carried out this drama by the express command of God to teach the people a lesson (Ezek. 4:1-6). The dramatic element is vivid in much of Christ's ministry as well. Cursing the fig tree, writing in the dirt with His finger, washing the feet of the disciples are dramatic actions which enhanced His spoken word.

Music and Dance are often found in the Bible in the context of rejoicing before God. In Exodus 15, the children of Israel celebrated God's Red Sea victory over the Egyptians with singing, dancing, and the playing of instruments. In 1 Chronicles 23:5, we find musicians in the temple, their instruments *specifically made* by King David for praising God. 2 Chronicles 29:25-26 says that David's command to have music in the temple was from God, "for the command was from the Lord through His prophets." And we must not forget that all of the lyrical poetry of the Psalms was first intended to be sung.

The New Testament

The New Testament abounds as well with evidence underscoring artistic imperatives. The most obvious is the example of *Jesus Himself.* First of all, He was by trade a carpenter, a skilled craftsman (Mark 6:3). Secondly, we encounter in Jesus a person who loved to be outdoors and one who was extremely attentive to His surroundings. His teachings are full of examples which reveal His sensitivity to the beauty all around: the fox, the bird nest, the lily, the sparrow and dove, the glowering skies, a bruised reed, a vine, a mustard seed. Jesus was also a master storyteller. He readily made use of his own culture setting to impart his message, and sometimes quite dramatically. Many of the parables were fictional stories abut they were nevertheless used as vehicles of communication to

teach spiritual truths. And certainly the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 includes the artistic gifts.

The apostle Paul also alludes to aesthetics in Philippians 4:8 when he exhorts believers to meditate and reflect upon pure, honest, lovely, good, virtuous and praiseworthy things. We are further told in Revelation 15:2-3 that art forms will even be present in heaven. So the arts have a place in both the earthly and heavenly spheres!

We should also remember that the *entire Bible* is not only revelation, it also is itself a work of art. In fact, it is many works of art—a veritable *library of great literature*. We have already mentioned poetry, but the Bible includes other literary forms as well. For example, large portions of it are narrative in style. Most of the Old Testament is either *historical narrative* or *prophetic narrative*. And the Gospels, (which recount the birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ), are *biographical narrative*. Even the personal letters of Paul and the other New Testament authors can quite properly be considered *epistolary* literature.

Aesthetics and Nature

The Bible makes it very clear that a companion volume, the book of Nature, has a distinct aesthetic dimension. Torrential waterfalls, majestic mountains, and blazing sunsets routinely evoke human aesthetic response as easily as can a vibrant symphony or a dazzling painting. The very fabric of the universe expresses God's presence with majestic beauty and grandeur. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows forth his handiwork." In fact, nature has been called the "aesthetics of the Infinite."

The brilliant photography of the twentieth century has revealed the limitless depths of beauty in nature. Through telescope or microscope, one can devote a lifetime to the study of some part of the universe—the skin, the eye, the sea,

the flora and fauna, the stars, the climate.

And since God's creation is multi-dimensional, an apple, for instance, can be viewed in different ways. It can be considered economically (how much it costs), nutritionally (its food value), chemically (what it's made of), or physically (its shape). But it may also be examined aesthetically: its taste, color, texture, smell, size, and shape. All of nature can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities which find their source in God, their Creator.

Human Creativity

Wherever human culture is found, artistic expression of some form is also found. The painting on the wall of an ancient cave, or a medieval cathedral, or a modern dramatic production are all expressions of *human creativity,* given by God, the Creator.

Man in God's Image

In Genesis 1:26-27, for example, we read: "Then God said, Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over . . . all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' And God created man *in His own image, in the image of God He created him* male and female He created them" (Italics mine).

After creating man, God told man to subdue the earth and to rule over it. Adam was to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15) which was described by God as "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The implication of this is very important. God, the Creator, a lover of the beauty in His created world, invited Adam, one of His creatures, to share in the process of "creation" with Him. He has permitted humans to take the elements of His cosmos and create new arrangements with them. Perhaps this explains the reason why creating anything is so fulfilling to us. We can express a drive within which allows us to do something all

humans uniquely share with their Creator.

God has thus placed before the human race a banquet table rich with aesthetic delicacies. He has supplied the basic ingredients, inviting those made in His image to exercise their creative capacities to the fullest extent possible. We are privileged as no other creature to make and enjoy art.

It should be further noted that *art of all kinds is restricted to a distinctively human practice.* No animal practices art. It is true that instinctively or accidentally beautiful patterns are formed and observed throughout nature. But the spider's web, the honeycomb, the coral reef are *not conscious* attempts of animals to express their aesthetic inclinations. To the Christian, however, they surely represent God's efforts to express. Unlike the animals, man *consciously* creates. Francis Schaeffer has said of man:

> "[A]n art work has value as a creation because man is made in the image of God, and therefore man not only can love and think and feel emotion, but also has the capacity to create. Being in the image of the Creator, we are called upon to have creativity. We never find an animal, non-man, making a work of art. On the other hand, we never find men anywhere in the world or in any culture in the world who do not produce art. Creativity is a part of the distinction between man and non-man. All people are to some degree creative. Creativity is intrinsic to our mannishness."{7}

The Fall of Man

There is a dark side to this, however, because sin entered and affected all of human life. A bent and twisted nature has emerged, tainting every field of human endeavor or expression and consistently marring all results. The unfortunate truth is that divinely endowed creativity will always be accompanied in earthly life by the *reality and presence of sin expressed through a fallen race.* Man is Jekyl and Hyde: noble image-

bearer and morally crippled animal. His works of art are therefore bittersweet. Calvin acknowledged this tension when he said:

> "The human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only foundation of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to Him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears. In despising the gifts, we insult the Giver."{8}

Understanding this dichotomy allows Christians genuinely to appreciate something of the contribution of every artist, composer, or author. God is sovereign and dispenses artistic talents upon whom He will. While Scripture keeps us from emulating certain lifestyles of artists or condoning some of their ideological perspectives, we can nevertheless admire and appreciate their talent, which ultimately finds its source in God. This should and can be done without compromise and without hesitation.

The fact is that if God can speak through a burning bush or Baalam's ass, He can speak it through a hedonistic artist! The question can never be how worthy is the vessel, but rather, Has truth been expressed? God's truth is still sounding forth today—from the Bible, from nature, and even from a fallen humanity.

Because of the Fall, absolute beauty in the world is gone. But participation in the aesthetic dimension reminds us of the beauty that once was, and anticipates its future luster. With such beauty present today that can take one's breath away, even in this unredeemed world, one can by speculate about what likes ahead for those who love Him!

Characteristics of Good Art

We now turn to the question of the important ingredients of various art forms.

First, artistic truth includes not only the tangible, but also the *realm of the imaginative, the intangible.* Art therefore may or may not include the cognitive, the objective. Someone asked a Russian ballerina who had just finished an interpretive dance, "What did it mean? What were you trying to say?" The ballerina replied, "If I could have said it, I wouldn't have danced it!" There is then a communication of truth in art which is real, but may not be able to be reduced to and put neatly into words.

Great art is also always coupled with *the hard discipline of continual practice.* Great artist are the ones who, when observed in the practice of their art appear to be doing something simple and effortless. What is not visible are the bone weary hours of committed practice that preceding such artistic spontaneity and deftness.

All art has intrinsic value. It doesn't have to *do* anything to have value. Once created, it has already "done" something. It does not have to be a *means* to an end, nor have any utilitarian benefit whatsoever. Even *bad art* has some value because as a creative work, it is still linked to God Himself, the Fountain of all creativity. The creative process, however expressed, is good because it is linked to the *Imago Dei* and shows that man, unique among God's creatures, has this gift. This is true even when the results of the creative gift (specific works of art) may be aesthetically poor or present the observer with unwholesome content and compromising situations.

But we would do well to remind ourselves at this point that God does not censor out all of the things in the Bible which are wrong or immoral. He "tells it like it is," including some

pretty detailed and sordid affairs! The discriminating Christian should therefore develop the capacity to distinguish poor aesthetics and immoral artistic statements from true creativity and craftsmanship¾dismissing and repudiating the former while fully appreciating and enjoying the latter. Christians, beyond all others, posses the proper framework to understand and appreciate all art in the right perspective. It is a pity that many have deprived themselves of the arts so severely from much that they could enjoy under the blessing and grace of God.

Artistic expression *always makes a statement.* It may be either *explicitly* or *implicitly* stated. Some artists explicitly admit their intent is to say something, to convey a message. Other artists resist, or even deny they are making a statement. But consciously or not, a statement is always being made, because each artist is subjectively involved and profoundly influenced by his/her cultural experience. Consciously or unconsciously, the cultural setting permeates every artistic contribution and each work tells us something about the artist and his era.

An unfortunate trend in recent years has been the increase in the number of artists who admit their primary desire is to say *something*. Art is not best served by an extreme focus on making a statement. The huge murals prominent in former communist lands were no doubt helpful politically, but they probably did not contribute much aesthetically. Even some Christian art falls into this trap. Long on statement, morality, and piety, it often falls short artistically (though sincerely offered and theologically sound), because it is cheaply and poorly done. Poetry and propaganda are not the same, from communist or Christian zealot.

Another characterization of modern statements is the *obsession of self.* Since the world has little meaning to many moderns, the narcissistic retreat into self is all that remains to be expressed. Thus the public is confronted today with many artists who simply portray their own personal psychological

and spiritual wanderings. In art of this type, extreme subjectivism is considered virtue rather than vice. The statement (personal to the extreme) overwhelms the art. Many of these statements seem to imply a desperate cry for help, for significance, for love. In such art feelings overwhelm for; confessional outpourings bring personal relief, but little effort is put forth or the thought necessary for the rigid mastery of technique and form. Perhaps that is why there is such a glut of mediocre art today! It simply doesn't take as much or as long to produce it.

But consider artists of earlier centuries, those who never even signed their names to their work. This was not because they were embarrassed by it. They simply lived in a culture where the art was more important than the artist. Today we are awed more by the artist or the virtuoso performer than we are by the art expressed. Much of the earlier work was dedicated to God; ours is mostly dedicated to the celebration of the artist. Critic Chad Walsh alludes to a modern exception in the writings of C. S. Lewis when he says that *Mere Christianity* "transcends itself and its author . . . it is as though all the brilliant writing is designed to create clear windows of perception, so that the reader will look *through* the language and not *at* it."{9} Great art possesses this transcendent durability.

Art forms and styles are constantly *changing through cultural influences.* The common mistake of many Christians today is to consider one form "godly" and another "ungodly." Many would dismiss the cubism of Duchamp or the surrealism of Dali as worthless, while holding everything from the brush of Rembrandt to be inspired. This attitude reveals nothing more than the personal aesthetic tastes of the one doing the evaluating.

Form and style must be considered in their historical and cultural contexts. A westerner would be hard pressed, if totally unfamiliar with the music of Japan, to distinguish

between a devout Buddhist hymn, a sensual love song, and a patriotic melody, even if he heard them in rapid sequence. But every Japanese could do so immediately because of familiarity with their own culture.

Aesthetic sense is therefore greatly conditioned by personal cultural experience. Just as a each child is born with the capacity to learn language, so each of us is born with an aesthetic sensibility which is influenced by the culture which surrounds us. To judge the art or music of Japan as inferior to American art or music is as senseless as suggesting the Japanese language is inferior to the English language. Difference or remoteness do not imply inferiority!

Truth can be expressed by non-believers, and error may be expressed by believers. When Paul delivered his famous Mars Hill address in Athens, he quoted from a pagan poet (Acts 17:28) to communicate a biblical truth. In this case, Paul used a secular source to communicate biblical truth because the statement affirmed the truth of revelation. On the other hand, error can be communicated in a biblical context. For example, in Exodus 32:2-4 we from Aaron fashioning a golden calf for the children of Israel to worship. This was a wrong use of art because it directly disobeyed God's command not to worship any image.

Evaluating Art

How should a Christian approach art in order to evaluate it? Is beauty simply "in the eye of the beholder?" Or are there guidelines from Scripture which will provide a framework for the evaluation and enjoyment of art?

Earlier, we mentioned a statement by Paul from Philippians 4. While the biblical context of this passage looks beyond aesthetics, in a categorical way we are given in the passage (by way of application) some criteria necessary for artistic analysis. Each concept Paul mentions in verse 8 can be used as

sort of a “key” to unlock the significance of the art we encounter and to genuinely appreciate it.

Truth. It is probably not by accident that Paul begins with *truth*. Obviously not every work of art contains a truth statement. But wherever and to what extent such a statement is being made, the Christian is compelled to ask, “Is this really true?” Does life genuinely operate in this fashion in the light of God’s revelation? And Christians must remember that truth is honestly facing the negatives as well as the positives of reality. Negative content has its place, even in a Christian approach to art. But Christian hope allows us to view these works in a different light. We sorrow, but not like those who have no hope. Ours is a sorrow of expectancy and ultimate triumph; there is one of total pessimism and despair.

Honor. A second aesthetic key has to do with the concept of honor and dignity. This can be tied back to what was said earlier about the nature of man created in God’s image. This gives a basis, for example, to reject the statement being made in the total life work of Francis Bacon (d. 1993). In many of his paintings this contemporary British artist presents us with solitary, decaying humans on large, depressing canvasses. Deterioration and hopeless despair are the hallmarks of his artistic expression. But if Christianity is true, these are inaccurate portrayals of man. They are half-truths. They leave out completely a dimension which is really true of him. Created in God’s image, he has honor and dignity—even though admittedly he is in the process of dying, aging, wasting away. The Christian is the only one capable of truly comprehending what is missing in Bacon’s work. Without a Christian base, we would have to look at the paintings and admit man’s “true” destiny, i.e., extinction, along with the rest of the cosmos. But as Christians we can and must resist this message, because it is a lie. The gospel gives real hope—to individuals and to history. These are missing from Bacon’s work and are the direct result of his distorted worldview.

Just. The third key to aesthetic comprehension has to do with the moral dimension. Not all art makes a moral statement. A Haydn symphony does not, nor does a portrait by Renoir. But where such a statement *is* being made, Christians must deal with it, not ignore it. We will also do well to remember that moral statements can often be stated powerfully in negative ways, too. Picasso's *Guernica* comes to mind. He was protesting the bombing by the Germans of a town by that name just prior to World War II. Protesting injustice is a cry for justice. Only the Christian is aware and sure of where it can ultimately be found.

Pure. This fourth key also touches on the moral—by contrasting that which is innocent, chaste, and pure from that which is sordid, impure, and worldly. An accurate application of the principle will help distinguish the one from the other. For instance, one need not be a professional drama critic to identify and appreciate the fresh, innocent love of Romeo and Juliet, nor to distinguish it from the erotic escapades of a Tom Jones. The same dynamic is at work when comparing Greek nudes and *Playboy* centerfolds. One is lofty, the other cheap. The difference is this concept of purity. It allows the Christian to look at two nudes and quite properly designate one "art" and the other "pornography." Possessing the mind of Christ, we have the equipment for identifying purity and impurity to a high degree.

Lovely. While the first four concepts have dealt with facets of artistic statements, the fifth focuses on sheer aesthetic beauty. "Whatsoever things are lovely," Paul says. A landscape makes no moral statement, but it can exhibit great beauty. The geometric designs of Mondrian may say nothing about justice, but they can definitely engage us aesthetically. The immensity and grandeur of a Gothic cathedral will inspire artistic awe in any sensitive breast, but they may do little else. Again, the Christian is equipped to appreciate a wide range of artistic mediums and expressions. If there is little to

evaluate morally and rationally, we are still free to appreciate what is beautiful in the art.

Good Report. In this concept, we have the opportunity to evaluate the life and character of the artist. What kind of a person is he? If a statement is being made, does the artist, composer, or author believe in that statement? Or was it to please a patron, a colleague, or a critic? Is there a discontinuity between the statement of the work and the statement being made through the personal life of its creator? For example, Handel's *Messiah* is a musical masterpiece, but he was no saint! Filippo Lippi used his own mistress as a model for Mary in this Madonna paintings. The "less than exemplary" lifestyle of a creative person may somewhat tarnish his artistic contribution, but it does not necessarily or totally obliterate it. Something of God's image always shines through in the creative process. The Christian can always give glory to God for that, even if a work of are has little else going for it. The greatest art is true, skillfully expressed, imaginative, and unencumbered by the personal and emotional hang-ups of its originators.

Excellence. This is a comparative term. It speaks of degrees, assuming that something else is not excellent. The focus is on quality. Quality can mean many things in the realm of art, but one sure sign of it is craftsmanship. *Technical mastery* is one of the essential ingredients which separates the great artist from the rank amateur. Obviously, the more one knows about technique and artistic skill, the better one is able to appreciate whether an individual artist, author, composer, or performer has what is necessary to produce great art. Many Christians have made unfortunate value judgments about art of all kinds. Through ignorance and naivete, superficial understanding of technique has been followed by smug rejection. This has erected barriers instead of bridges built to the artistic community, thus hindering a vital witness. We need to know *what* is great art and *why* it is considered such.

Excellence is also found in the *durability of art.* Great art lasts. If it has been around several hundred years, it probably has something going for it. It has "staying power." Christians should realize that some of the art of this century will not be around in the next. Much of it will pass off the scene. This is a good indication that it does not possess great aesthetic value; it is not excellent.

Praise. Here we are concerned with the impact or the effect of the art. Is *anything* praiseworthy? The crayola scribblings of a toddler are praiseworthy to some extent, but it does not elicit a strong aesthetic response. We are not gripped or overpowered by it. But great art has power and is therefore a forceful tool of communication. Francis Schaeffer has mentioned that the greater the art, the greater the impact. Does it please or displease? Inspire or depress? Does it influence thinking and behavior? Would it change a person? Would it change you. Herein lies the "two-edged-swordness" of art. It can elevate a culture to lofty heights and it can help bring a society to ruin. It is the *result* of culture, but it can also *influence* culture.

Conclusion

Paul undergirds this meaty verse with the final command, *think on these things.* Two very important propositions come forth with which we can conclude this section. First, he reminds us that *Christianity thrives on intelligence,* not ignorance—even in the aesthetic realm. Christians *need* their minds when confronting the artistic expressions of a culture. To the existentialist and the nihilist, the mind is an enemy, but to the Christian, it is a friend. Second, it is noteworthy that Paul has suggested such *a positive approach* to life and, by application, to art. He doesn't tell us that whatsoever things are false, dishonorable, unjust impure, ugly, of bad report, poorly crafted, and mediocre are to have the focus of our attention. Here again the *hope* of the Christian's approach to life in general rings clearly through. Our lives are not to be

lived in the minor key. We observe the despair, but we can see something more. God has made us more than conquerors!

Arts, Culture and the Christian

We now turn to two final areas of consideration in the way of suggested applications of what has been discussed.

Christ and Culture

At the beginning, we mentioned that aesthetics is related to culture, because in culture we find the expressions of human creativity. In his very fine book, *A Return to Christian Culture,* Richard Taylor points out that each of us is related to culture in two ways: we find ourselves *within* a cultural setting and we each *possess* a culture personally. That is, society has certain acceptable patterns to which individuals are expected to conform. When one does so, one is considered "cultured."

In the light of Romans 12:2 and other biblical passages, the challenge for the Christian is to resist being "poured into the mold of the world" without also throwing out legitimate aesthetic interests. At the individual level, a Christian should seek to bring his maximum efforts toward the ". . .development of the person, intellectually, aesthetically, socially to the full use of his powers, in compatibility with the recognized standards of excellence of his society."{10}

Culturally speaking, the same goal could be stated for Christian and non-Christian alike, but the Christian who wants to reflect the best in culture has his/her different motives. And some Christians can display the fruit of the Spirit, but be largely bereft of cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. D. L. Moody is said to have "butchered the King's English," but he was used mightily by God on two continents. This would suggest that cultural sophistication is not absolutely necessary for God to use a person for spiritual purposes, but

one could well ponder how many opportunities to minister have been lost because an individual has made a cultural *"faux pas."* The other side of the coin is that a person may have reached the pinnacle of social and aesthetic acceptability but have no spiritual impact on his surroundings whatsoever.

Three words are important to keep in mind while defining Christian responsibility in any culture. The first is *cooperation* with culture. The reason for this cooperation is that we might identify with our culture so it may be influenced for Jesus Christ. Jesus is a model for us here. He was not generally a non-conformist. He attended weddings and funerals, synagogues and feast. He was a practicing Jew. He generally did the culturally acceptable things. When He did not, it was for clear spiritual principles.

A second word is *persuasion*. The Bible portrays Christians as salt and light, the penetrating and purifying elements within a culture. Christianity is intended to have a sanctify influence on a culture, not be swallowed up by it in one compromise after another.

A third concept is *confrontation*. By carefully using Scripture, Christians can challenge and reject those elements and practices within a culture that are incompatible with biblical truth. There are times when Christians must confront society. Things such as polygamy, idolatry, sexual immorality, and racism should be challenged head-on by Christians.

How can accomplish this kind of impact? First by the *development of high personal, cultural, and aesthetic standards.* These include tact, courtesy, dress, and speech. In doing this, Christians need to avoid two extremes. The first is the tendency to try to "keep up with the Joneses." This becomes the "Cult of the Snob." A second extreme is to react against the Joneses and join the "Cult of the Slobs."

Second, Christians must employ all of life to proclaim a

Christian worldview. In a century dominated by darkness, despair, and dissonance, Christians can still offer a message and demeanor of hope. If being a Christian is a superior way of living, its benefits should be apparent to all.

Finally, Christians should be encouraged to *become involved in the arts.* This can be done first of all by learning to evaluate and appreciate the arts with greater skill. Generally, Christians can become involved in the arts in one of three ways.

Involvement in the Arts

One of the deep hopes for this paper is that it might instill in the reader a healthy desire to plunge more deeply into the arts and enjoy what is there with the freedom Christ has given. It might encourage us to remind ourselves that Paul lived in a X-rated culture similar to our own. Yet he and most of the other believers kept their spiritual equilibrium in such a setting and were used mightily by God in their culture.

Too often today Christians, like the Pharisees of old, are seeking to eliminate the leprous elements which touch their lives. With increasing isolation, they are focused more on what the diseases of society can do to them than how they might affect the diseased! Nowhere is this more critically experienced than in the arts. We mostly shy away from those contexts which disturb us. And there is today much in the arts to disturb us—be we creator, spectator (a form of participation) or performer.

Ugliness and decadence abound in every culture and generation. From this we cannot escape. But Jesus touched the leper. He made contact with the diseased one in need. As Christians, our focus should be not on what art brings to us, but rather what we can bring to the art! Therefore the development of imagination and a wholesome, expanded analysis of even the many negative contemporary works is possible when viewed in

the broad themes of humanity, life, and experience of a truly Christian worldview. Great art is more than a smiling landscape. Beauty and truth include terrible and ominous aspects as well, like a storm on the ocean, or the torn life of a prostitute.

Christians can also experience the arts as *participators and performers.* If each person is created in the image of God, some creativity is there to be personally expressed in every one of us. Learn what artistic talents you have. Discover how you can best express your creativity and then do so. Learn an instrument, write some poetry. Take part in a stage production. Your Christianity will not mean *less,* but more to you if you do.

A third area often overlooked must also be mentioned. I refer to those greatly gifted and talented Christians among us who should be encouraged to *consider the arts as a career.* A Christian influence in the arts is sorely needed today, and things will not improve as long as Christians are happy to allow the bulk of contemporary artistry to flow forth from those who have no personal relationship with the One who gave them their talents. The artistic environment is a tough place to live out your Christian faith, and the dangers are great, but to do so successfully will bring rich rewards and lasting fruit.

Gini Andrews, an acclaimed concert pianist and author, writes of the great need for Christians to excel in all the artistic fields and sounds a challenge for them to develop their gifts:

> “All the disciplines, music, painting, sculpture, theater, and writing, are in need of pioneers who seek a way to perform in a twentieth century manner; to show with quality work that there is an answer to the absurdity of life, to the threat of annihilation, to the mechanization of man, the message being sounded loud and clear by the non-Christian artist. . . . “If we are to present God’s message to

disillusioned, frenetic twentieth century people, it's going to take His creativity expressed in special ways. I hope that some of you in the creative fields will be challenged by the Almightiness of our Creator-God and will spend long hours before Him, saying, like Jacob, 'I will not go unless you bless me, until you show me how to speak out your wonder to the contemporary mind.'"{11}"

Here is expressed the unprecedented challenge and opportunity before the body of Christ today. May God enable us to seize it.

Notes

1. William Bridgewater, ed. *The Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia, Vol. I* (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 16.

2. John I. Sewall, *A History of Western Art.* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1953), p. 1.

3. Richard S. Taylor, *A Return to Christian Culture.* (Minneapolis: Dimension Books, 1975), p. 12.

4. Marcel Proust. *Maximus.*

5. Sewall, Ibid.

6. Francis Schaeffer, *Art & the Bible.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 15.

7. Ibid., p. 34.

8. John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 1.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 236.

9. Chad Walsh. "The Literary Stature of C. S. Lewis," *Christianity Today*, June 8, 1979) p.22.

10. Taylor, p. 33.

11. Gini Andrews, *Your Half of the Apple* (Grand Rapids, MI:,

Zondervan, 1972) pp. 64-65.

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Echoes of a Voice

Rick Wade explores how we hear echoes of a supernatural voice calling us through justice, relationship, beauty and spirituality.

Is Anybody Listening?

We spend so much time defending our beliefs and making a case for the faith, and we wonder why people won't listen. We have great arguments and evidences, and it's all so obviously true to us, but they give it as much attention as *we* might if asked to consider some ancient Sumerian religion. Maybe they hear it filtered through preconceived negative ideas of Christianity. Think of the very vocal atheists who think that Christianity is not just old and useless; they think it's downright dangerous. Another problem is that people really don't know about Jesus and what He taught. We live in a society which has little understanding of Christianity outside the churchand, unfortunately, inside it, too, in too many cases.

Maybe we should consider changing the order in which we make a case for Christ.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century scientist and apologist, said that we should "make [Christianity] attractive, make good men wish it were true, and *then* show that it is."{1} Theologian John Stackhouse argues in his book *Humble Apologetics* that today we have to address the question of *plausibility* before that of *credibility.* "'*Might* it be

true? Is Christian argument something I should seriously entertain even for a moment?'"{2}

Of course, Christianity has to be true to be worthwhile, but in some cases it could be better to postpone arguments for the truth of the faith in favor of simply putting it on display. If I tell someone I have a diamond in my pocket, before arguing that it *is* a diamond and not some kind of fake, maybe I need to pull it out and show them to get their interest.

What are some important issues in most everyone's life that could pique people's interest? For his book *Simply Christian,* Anglican bishop and Bible scholar N. T. Wright chose justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty. I'll draw from that book in this article.

There's another important dimension, namely, living out the gospel. Are the things we talk about *real*? Do we live them out across the spectrum of our lives' activities?

In the discussion that follows, I'll talk first about the four subjects just mentioned. Then I'll highlight a very important theme in Wright's book, that of the meeting of heaven and earth. Finally, we'll turn to the matter of Christians as the living voices of God on earth, heralding the day of final redemption, and showing how Christianity applies in some important areas.

Justice and Spirituality

N. T. Wright says we hear "echoes of a voice" calling to us from many directions. To hear these echoes correctly is to hear the voice of God. By encouraging people to pause and focus on these echoes, we can help prepare them to hear a case for the truth of Christianity, if a case needs to be made at all.

One of those echoes is justice. Everyone hears it, even

children. Let one child get to stay up later at night than another, and you'll hear it: "That's not fair!"

We want things to be right, to be in proper order, but we live in a world so often out of order. Racism, religious oppression, laws which serve only the powerful: we can multiply examples. We try to bring about justice, but it slips through our fingers.

Some say the echo we're hearing is just a dream, that there can be no justice. Others say there is such a thing as justice, but it's from another world and cannot be attained here. Still others say it's the voice of Someone speaking to us from elsewhere. God is calling to us, telling us what is right and wrong, and bidding us to pursue justice.

Spirituality is another echo. Wright tells a parable of a dictator who believes it isn't safe to have water coming from so many sources in his kingdom, so he decides to cover with concrete all the land that once was marked by springs and provide one water source for all the people. This is safer, he thought. It's controlled. In time, however, the waters of the springs begin to break through the concrete, and soon they erupt all over the place.

The water in this parable is spirituality, and the dictator is the philosophy that has shaped our culture for a few centuries, that of naturalism.

As much as the "dictator" of naturalism hates it, spirituality is breaking out all over these days. Many religions are now practiced in America. Spirituality and the supernatural are regular themes on TV and in the movies. Bookstores sell scads of books on the subject. It's cool to be spiritual.

Why has this happened? People are hearing something, although many aren't hearing it correctly. Wright says that the formerly "hidden spring" of spirituality "[points] away from the bleak landscape of modern secularism and toward the

possibility that we humans are made for more than this."{3} There is more to us than what can be studied scientifically.

Relationships and Beauty

After dealing with spirituality, Wright turns to relationships. He wonders, "How is it that we ache for each other and yet find relationships so difficult?"{4}

It's obvious that we are made to live in relationships with other people. In the realm of relationships, we hear the echo of a voice telling us something very important about ourselves.

We find our meaning in the context of a society, small or large, including intimate relationships. Maybe especially so. Marriage is still popular even though so many marriages end in divorce. Many couples just live together in an attempt to avoid the messiness of divorce. We seek good relationships, but plan on failed ones.

And even good relationshipsincluding marriageshave to end, because death, that great separator, comes to all. We fear it, but we can't do anything about it.

Not only marriages struggle, but so do larger societies, especially democratic ones. We want to trust people, indeed we have to. But we're let down and cynicism is bred. Wright says that in Britain, more people vote on reality TV shows than in elections.

What keeps driving us to be so closely involved with other people despite all the risks? Christians have an explanation. But now I'm getting ahead of myself. That's for later.

What about the echo of beauty? Is beauty important to people? Not everyone is a patron of the arts, to be sure. But people put time and money into making their homes attractive places

to live. Even a person who doesn’t care about such things will be found outside on Saturday washing his car.

Yet for all our love of beauty, we find it difficult to capture. Artists paint canvas after canvas trying to get it right. Beauty is transient and incomplete. My wife often draws my attention to the late afternoon Texas sky. The sun, partly hidden behind clouds of white and grey shoots out a fiery glow of brilliant orange and red and yellow. And in a matter of seconds the colors change and then are gone.

The common belief about beauty is that it is in the eye of the beholder. But if that says it all, then nothing is beautiful in itself. Shared experiences of beauty with other people are just happenstance; their subjective response just happens to accord with ours at the moment.

But I don’t think that idea exhausts the truth. We behave and talk as though some things are beautiful in themselves.

Through the transient beauty of our world, could we be hearing the echo of a real voice whispering to us of a beauty that will remain?

Jesus: Where Heaven and Earth Meet

What explanation does Christianity offers for those “echoes of a voice” we’ve been discussing?

The bottom line is this: The death and resurrection of Christ provides a context within which these things come to fruition, where His creation will not be ultimately frustrated by the fallenness of the world.

One of the central motifs of Wright’s book is the meeting of heaven and earth. When he speaks of heaven, Wright is speaking of the supernatural realm where God is; he has in mind more two different realms than two spatial locations.

Wright describes three views of the way God and the world relate. Option 1, he calls it, is the belief that God and the world are identical; what is called *pantheism*. Option 2 is the belief that there is a great gulf between God and the world, what has been called *deism.* Option 3 is the belief that, while God and the world are distinct, their realms meet and even overlap at times.

In Christ, heaven and earth meet in their fullest, most profound way. Jesus, the full embodiment of God, became man; Emmanuel, God with us, is what Isaiah called Him. "In listening to Jesus," Wright says, "we discover whose voice it is that has echoed around the hearts and minds of the human race all along."{5}

In his ministry and his death, Jesus took on the powers of darkness. The victory He won didn't only serve to get us into heaven. In defeating evil he won a victory over injustice, spiritual deadness, broken relationships, and an ugly world among other things. His victory applies to us. Being a Christian isn't about leaving this fallen world behind to join God in a disembodied state way out there in heaven. Jesus has set us free and made us new creations, empowered by His Spirit to work at restoring creation in the here and now. We know that this work won't be completed until Jesus comes again and establishes a new heaven and new earth. However, we are to enter into His victory now. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," Jesus prayed (Matt. 6:10).

Jesus is the one who both makes sense of our longing for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty, and who makes them possible.

Living in the Future Today

So what do we do? What does this have to do with the matter of plausibility I discussed at the beginning of this article? I

noted that people who won't hear a case made for the truth of Christianity might be open to hearing what it has to say about such significant matters as justice and relationships and others. I also noted, however, that people have to see them being worked out in our own lives individually and corporately.

In 1 Cor. 3:16 Paul tells us that we are individually temples of the Spirit. In Eph. 2:21 he says that the whole church forms a temple. The temple in the Old Testament was where God dwelled among His people. Now, *we* are God's temple, the place where God dwells. In us because of the Spirit within us, heaven and earth meet. And the Spirit, who is our constant companion, enables us to continue Jesus' work, to "begin the work of making God's future real in the present."{6}

We participate in the life of the church: we read and speak the Word; we engage in worship and prayer; and we partake of the Lord's Supper. In all these things, we declare that God is engaged in this world.

And as a result, God's Spirit is at work through us to set the world to rights. Justice should be demonstrated by the church, and it *will* be complete one day.

We discover true spirituality, that we can partake in both the earthly and heavenly realms, because we are body and spirit. Both parts of our nature find their fulfillment in a proper relationship with God.

We are given a new relationship with God, and the Spirit works in us to show the love of Christ to others and hence to establish and maintain good relationships with people.

And through the church, the Spirit works to restore beauty to this world and to free it from corruption. One day God will restore beauty completely in remaking creation to be what it is supposed to be.

John Stackhouse writes that "We live in a time-between-the-times,' in which people raised in a more or less Christian culture now are reacting against it. Christianity seems to receive greater disdain and resistance than other religions.{7} How can we get them to listen?

As Christians, Wright says, we are "workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty."{8} "We are called not only to listen to the echoes of the voice . . . but to be people through whom the rest of the world comes to hear and respond to that voice as well."{9}

When people see us living this way, maybe they will stop long enough to listen to our reasons.

Notes

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* 187.
2. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.
3. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 20.
4. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 29.
5. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 92.
6. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 124.
7. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 51-52.
8. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 189.
9. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 218.

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