

# The Hum of a Ceiling Fan

*September 23, 2008*

A dear friend of mine is a writer of songs and a writer of words. She went through a period of time when all the songs she wrote were all the key of F.

"I wondered why I could not write songs in any other key," she wrote. "It really bothered me. Not everything in F was the best range for my voice, or fit the song I was trying to convey."

She thought she was in a musical rut. She prayed to get out of the rut, and still wrote in F. She got frustrated that nothing changed.

"But as one season changed into the next, I started writing in other keys. I thought maybe it was the lovely colors of fall, and maybe they evoked different keys in me.

I got so happy that I was writing in other keys. I thought, 'I'm over my rut! Yay!!'

But one day, the heater was too much, and I went and turned on the fan...

...and I started playing even the new pieces I had written back in F."

What's up with *that*? She looked up and had this epiphany. The ceiling fan's mechanical "hum" was in the key of F!!

All through the summer, she could only write in F because the background noise of the fan was her internal tuning fork. She kept going back to the F major key because the music in her head was tuned to the fan! She turned off the fan—and was able to think in other keys.

In Romans 8, Paul tells us to set our minds on the spirit instead of the flesh. And when we do that, the music of our lives is in the key of Jesus.

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## 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 about 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 Jekyll 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 lies 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 craftsmanship<sup>3/4</sup> dismissing and repudiating the former while fully appreciating and enjoying the latter. Christians, beyond all others, possess 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 form; 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 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 find 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 art 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 Almightyness 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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## Is It Just Entertainment?

*The Christian enters the world of entertainment equipped with the knowledge of the clear biblical statements of God's will. He then applies that knowledge to the decisions he makes in regard to entertainment.*

Picture a grocery store in your mind. There are many aisles filled with a variety of products. Fresh fruit, vegetables, canned foods, bread, cereal, meat, dairy products, frozen foods, soap, and numerous other items can be found. When we shop in such a store we need to be aware of certain things. These may include the price, size, weight, variety, brand, quality, and freshness. After analyzing all of this, we are left with the most important part of the shopping trip—the decision! We must decide which of the products we will buy.

Our world is a lot like a grocery store. There are a variety of ideas (worldviews) to be considered. Those ideas can be seen and heard through television, music, movies, magazines, books, billboards, and bumper stickers, and other sources. In a sense, we are shopping in the grocery store of ideas. As Christians, we need to be aware of the products. We need to consider what is being sold. Then we need to decide if we should make a purchase.

Most of us want to be physically healthy. Unfortunately, sometimes we don't eat as if that were true. The same is true of our minds. We want to be mentally healthy. But too often we don't "eat" as if that were true! Our minds are often filled with things that are unhealthy. This can be especially true of the entertainment we choose.

How can we become more aware of the products and make the right purchases when we "go shopping" in the world of entertainment? It is our intent to help answer this question.

A Christian is usually encouraged to think of God's Word, the Bible, as the guide for life. Of course the challenge of such a position is found in practice, not theory. Living by the tenets of Scripture is not always an easy thing. And we can be tempted to think that God's ideas are restrictive, negative, and life-rejecting. The "don'ts" of biblical teachings can appear to overshadow a more positive, life-affirming perspective.

## **Does God Intend for Us to Enjoy Life?**

Think of a series of three questions. First, if you make the Bible your standard for living, do you think that means life will be dull? Some Christians tend to live as if the answer is "yes." This certainly applies to entertainment. It appears that we are to be so separate from the world that we can't enjoy any part of it. Second, if you wrote a song, a poem, a novel, or if you painted a picture, sculpted a statue, etc., do you think you would know best how it should be sung, read, or understood? Of course the answer is "yes." It came from your mind and imagination. You "brought it to life." Third, if God created all things and knows everything about you, do you believe He knows how to bring true joy into your life? Again, the answer is obviously "yes." You came from His mind and imagination. He "brought you to life." He knows best how you should be sung, read, and understood. And He relays that information through His word, the Bible. He wants you to enjoy

life, but with His guidelines in mind.

## **What is God's Will for Entertainment?**

Just what are those guidelines? What is God's will for us concerning entertainment?

Before this question is answered, it is important to understand that the Bible clearly teaches God's will for much of life. Too often we tend to think of pursuing God's will for reasons that include such things as a particular occupation or marriage partner, and other such important decisions that are not stated clearly in Scripture. But the Bible frequently teaches the will of God for daily living in obvious ways. The following passages demonstrate this:

- A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless (Prov. 14:16).
- Flee immorality (1 Cor. 6:18a).
- Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things (Phil. 4:8).

Obviously various types of contemporary entertainment are not mentioned in these verses. The Bible "does not endeavor to specify rules for the whole of life." (1) Thus we are challenged to make decisions about entertainment based upon the application of biblical principles. The Christian must know the "principles for conduct: which apply here, which do not, and why. Then he must decide and act. Thus, by this terrifying and responsible process, he matures ethically. There is no other way." (2) In fact, this process signifies our continual spiritual growth, or sanctification. As Hebrews 5:14 states: "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Most of us probably don't think of "training our senses," but such a

concept surely should be a part of our thinking continually. And the application of such training to entertainment should be clear.

Years ago I had an opportunity to demonstrate the use of “trained senses” when I attended a heavy metal rock concert at the invitation of a sixteen-year-old friend. He was a new Christian then, and we were spending a lot of time together. He had entered his new life after years of attachment to a certain popular rock musician who was the main act of the concert.

During the evening the musicians heavily emphasized the themes of sex, drugs, and violence, and the crowd of adolescents and pre-adolescents was encouraged to respond, and did. After awhile I asked my friend how Jesus would respond to what we heard and saw. His response indicated that for the first time he had begun to think about this form of entertainment—which had been very important to him—with Christian principles in mind.

Perhaps the most succinct statement of Christian ethical principles is found in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Can you think of anything more than “whatever” or “all”? These all-encompassing words are to be applied to all of life, including our entertainment choices. My young friend made this discovery that night.

## **What Types of Entertainment are Evil?**

What types of entertainment are evil? A simple answer to this is, “None!” For example, the rhythm of rock music is not evil; television is not evil; movies are not evil; video games are not evil; novels are not evil, etc.

Of course it is possible for some to claim, for instance, that pre-marital sex is legitimate entertainment. But the clear

admonition of Scripture forbids such activity. And the underlying point is that sex is not intrinsically evil. The one who is engaged in such activity is taking what is good and misusing it for evil. So evil does not reside in sex, rock music, television, etc. Types of entertainment are conduits for good or evil. People are evil. People who provide entertainment and people who use it can abuse it. A basic premise of theology is that man has a sin nature. We are prone to abuse all things. As Genesis 8:21 states, The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.

## **What About Content?**

So the Christian is free to make entertainment a part of his life with an understanding that evil resides in people, not forms. But caution and discernment must be applied. We must be alert to the importance of our minds and what they can absorb through entertainment.

Perhaps we need to stop doing some of the things we normally do while listening to music, watching television, etc., so we can concentrate on the ideas that are entering our minds. We might be amazed at the ideas we'll notice if we take the time to concentrate. For example, an old TV commercial says, "Turn it loose! Don't hold back"! We may want to ask what "it" refers to, and we may want to know what is to be "held back." Such a commercial is a thinly-veiled espousal of hedonism, an ancient philosophy that says pleasure is the ultimate good. Ideas are powerful, and they have consequences, even when they come from something as seemingly innocuous as a TV commercial.

Consider the following illustration. Think of your mind as a sponge. A sponge absorbs moisture not unlike the way your mind absorbs ideas. (The difference is you are making choices and the sponge is not.) In order to remove the moisture, you must squeeze the sponge. If someone were to do the same with your "sponge brain," what would come out? Would you be embarrassed if the Lord were to be present? Biblical teaching says He is

always present. If we honor Him, we'll enjoy life in the process.

If we are using our minds and thinking Christianly about entertainment we will be more alert concerning content. All entertainment is making a statement. A worldview, or philosophy of life, is being espoused through what we read, hear, or watch. Movies, for example, can range from the introspective existential comedies of Woody Allen to the euphoric pantheistic conjectures of Shirley MacLaine. We are challenged to respond to such content with our Christian worldview intact.

## **Are We in a Battle?**

We must take care of our minds. A battle is taking place in the marketplace of ideas. Entertainment can be seen as one of the battlefields where ideas are vying for recognition and influence. As 2 Corinthians 10:5 states, "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." And Colossians 2:8 warns us: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."

## **What About the Conscience?**

The place of the conscience should also be considered. We must be aware of the possibility of defiling our conscience (1 Cor. 8:7). As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable." The believer who cannot visit the world without making it his home has no right to visit it at his weak points.<sup>(3)</sup> It is the responsibility of each of us to be sensitive to what the conscience is telling us when we encounter those weak points and respond in a way that honors God.

Thus I suggest three steps in cultivating sensitivity to our consciences. First, we should consider what our conscience is relating prior to the entertainment. Is there something about what we've heard or seen that brings discomfort? If so, it may be a signal to stay away from it. Second, consider the conscience during the entertainment. If we're already watching and listening, are we mentally and spiritually comfortable? If not, we may need to get away from it. Unfortunately, too often the tendency is to linger too long and in the process we find that what may have disturbed us previously is now taken for granted. Third, consider the conscience after the entertainment. Now that it's over, what are we thinking and feeling? We should be alert to what the Lord is showing us about what we have just made a part of our lives.

## **What Do Others Say?**

In addition to an awareness of the conscience, we may benefit from what others have to say. Perhaps the advertising will provide information that will prove to be of help before we decide to participate. Frequently ads will tell us things about the content and the intent of the producers. Also, we may find it beneficial to be alert to what friends may say. The things we hear from them may indicate warning signs, especially if they are Christian friends who are attempting to apply biblical principles to their lives. In addition, some objective critics can offer insightful comments. There are ministries around the country, for example, dedicated to analyzing the latest movies. And there are others that attempt to cover a broader spectrum of entertainment from a Christian perspective. You may benefit from subscribing to their publications.

Of course this encouragement to consider what others say cannot exempt us from personal responsibility. To rely completely on others is an unhealthy practice that can lead to mental and spiritual stagnation. Each of us must be mentally

and spiritually alert to the content of entertainment.

## **Isn't It "Just Entertainment"?**

Maybe you've heard someone say, "It's just entertainment"! Is this true?

The principles we have affirmed can lead to several common objections. Our answers to these objections can help us gain additional insight into how we think about contemporary entertainment.

First, some may say that what has been shown in a movie or some other entertainment is "just reality." But is reality a legitimate guideline for living? Do we derive an "ought" from an "is"? Saying that reality has been portrayed says nothing about the way things ought to be from God's perspective. Reality needs analysis and it often needs correction.

Second, a common statement is, "I'm just killing time." The person who says this may be doing exactly that, but what else is being killed in the process? The Christian redeems time; he doesn't kill it. As Ephesians 5:15-16 states, "Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil."

Third, "It won't affect me" is a common objection. Tragically, these can be the proverbial "famous last words" for some. Ted Bundy, a serial killer who was executed for his crimes, began to look at pornography when he was very young. If you had warned him of the potential consequences of his actions in those early years, he probably would have said it wouldn't affect him. We can't predict the outcome of our actions with absolute clarity. In addition, we may not recognize the consequences when they appear because we have been blinded subtly over a period of time.

Fourth, others may say, "There's nothing else to do." This is a sad commentary on contemporary life. If that is true, then



God has done a poor job of supplying us with imagination. Spending hours watching TV each day, for instance, says a great deal about our priorities and use of our God-given abilities and spiritual gifts.

Fifth, young people in particular tend to say, "Everybody's doing it." It is highly doubtful that is true. More importantly, though, we must understand that God's principles don't rely on democracy. We may be called to stand alone, as difficult as that may be. Sixth, some may say, "No one will know." Humanly, this is absurd. The person who says this knows. He's somebody, and he has to live with himself. And if he is a Christian his worldview informs him that God knows. Is he trying to please God or himself?

Seventh, "It's just entertainment" can be the response. No, it's not just entertainment. We can't afford to approach contemporary entertainment with the word just. There is too much at stake if we care about our minds, our witness, and our future.

So what should we do? Should we become separatists? No, the answer to the challenge of entertainment is not to seclude ourselves in "holy huddles" of legalism and cultural isolation. Should we become consumers? No, not without discernment. As we said in the beginning of this series, when it comes to entertainment, we should be as selective in that "grocery store of ideas" as we are in the food market. Should we become salt and light? Yes! We are to analyze entertainment with a Christian worldview, and we are to "infect" the world of entertainment with that same vision.

## Notes

1. Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1957), 419.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 428.

## Additional Reading

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# Music and the Christian

*Jerry Solomon encourages Christians to begin to think about the place and influence of music in their lives.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

Music is a pervasive part of contemporary culture. We hear it on elevators, in restaurants, on telephones while we wait for our party to answer, in offices, in hotel lobbies, and in virtually every corner of contemporary life. In fact, it permeates the airwaves so thoroughly we often do not realize it is there. Television uses music not only in musical programs but also in commercials and program soundtracks. Movies also utilize music to enhance the events shown on the screen. Radio offers a wide variety of music around the clock. The availability of recordings allows us to program music to suit our own listening tastes, and we can hear them in virtually any location. Concerts, especially in large cities, offer a potpourri of music to choose from.

There is also a wide variety of musical genres. Rock (with its assortment of styles and labels), rap, country and western, jazz, Broadway, folk, classical, New Age, and gospel provide us with a dizzying assortment of listening and performing options. Such permeation and variety provide us with a unique opportunity to practice discernment. Some may think this is unnecessary because they claim to listen only to “Christian” music. Nevertheless, the broader population of the evangelical community spends innumerable hours absorbing music, whether “Christian” or “secular.”

Why should a Christian be interested and involved in the arts, music in particular? In his excellent work *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms*, John Newport lists several helpful points:

The first reason Christians should be interested in the arts is related to the biblical teaching that God reveals and carries on his redemptive purpose in time and history. The Christian community ...cannot cut itself off from the characteristic artistic vitalities of history—past and present. Second...the arts give a peculiarly direct access to the distinctive tone, concerns, and feelings of a culture... The artists not only mirror their age in its subtlest nuances, but they generally do it a generation ahead of more abstract and theoretical thinkers. Third...the arts focus (in a remarkably vivid and startling way) on the vital issues and themes which are the central concern of theology. Fourth...the arts spell out dramatically the implications of various worldviews.(1)

The second, third, and fourth points are especially applicable to music. If music mirrors culture, if it tells us of important issues and themes; and if it shows the implications of various worldviews, it can tell us a great deal about our culture. Lyrically, music can be used as a medium for criticism, commendation, reflection, questioning, rebellion, and any number of other thoughts or emotions. When the musical language is employed to relay these thoughts or emotions the result can be significant.

History is replete with examples of the ways music has been vitally employed in various cultures. One of the more prominent examples of this can be found in the Psalms, where lyrics were merged with music to form a strategic voice for Israel's life. The same is true in contemporary life. The themes of rock, rap, and country music demonstrate how music can be a notable voice for the spirit of a culture, whether for good or evil.

In order to affect our culture we must listen to that voice. We must hear its questions and be sensitive to the needs that cry out for the answers God provides.

## Can Music Be “Christian”?

One of the continuing debates among evangelicals centers on how music is to be judged. Some say there is a particular musical style that is distinctly Christian. Others reject such a proposition. Some believe that certain musical styles are intrinsically evil. Others reject this. The examples of such conflict are numerous. It is important that we join the dialogue. In the process we will observe several ways we should respond to the music of our culture.

First, the term “Christian music” is a misnomer. Music cannot be declared Christian because of particular ingredients. There is no special Christian musical vocabulary. There is no distinctive sound that makes a piece of music Christian. The only part of a composition that can make it Christian is the lyrics. In view of the fact that such phrases as “contemporary Christian music” are in vogue, this is a meaningful observation. Perhaps the phrase “contemporary Christian lyrics” would be more appropriate. Of course, the lyrics may be suspect doctrinally and ethically, and they may be of poor quality, but my point is concentrated on the musical content.

It is possible that misunderstandings regarding “Christian music” are the product of cultural bias. Our “western ears” are accustomed to certain sounds. Particular modes, scales, and rhythms are part of a rich musical heritage. When we hear music that is not part of that heritage we are tempted to label it, inaccurately, as unfit for a Christian’s musical life.

We should realize that music is best understood within its culture. For example, the classical music of India includes quarter tones, which are foreign to our ears. They generally sound very strange to us, and they are often played on instruments that have a strange sound, such as the sitar. But we would be guilty of flagrant prejudice if we were to maintain that such music is un-Christian because it does not

contain the tones we are used to hearing. Another example of the way evangelicals tend to misapply the term Christian to music can be understood by reflecting on how music may have sounded during biblical and church history. Scholars have begun to demonstrate that the music of biblical history may have been comprised of tonal and rhythmic qualities that were very different from what we are accustomed to in western culture.

The attitudes of Luther and Calvin toward the use of music show a disagreement concerning the truth of a particular Christian style. Charles Garside provides intriguing insights:

Luther had openly proclaimed his desire to use all available music, including the most obviously secular, for the worship of the church. . . . Calvin, to the contrary, now absolutely rejects such a deployment of existing musical resources.(2)

It is obvious that these great men did not agree on the nature of music.

Our musical preconceptions do not die easily, and they seem to recur periodically in church history. Once a style becomes familiar enough, it is accepted. Until then, it is suspect. More recent examples can be found in the controversies surrounding the use of instruments such as drums and guitars during worship services. Evangelicals need to be alert to their biases and understand that “Christian music” is a misnomer.

## **The “Power” of Music**

It is often claimed that music has “power” to manipulate and control us. If this were true, Skinnerian determinism would be correct in asserting that there is no such thing as personal choice or responsibility. Music, along with other “powers” found in our cultural settings, would be given credit that is not legitimate.

Best and Huttar address this by saying:

The fact that music, among other created and cultural things, is purported by primitives and sophisticates alike to have power is more a matter of the dislocation of priorities than anything else.(3)

Such beliefs not only stimulate a “dislocation of priorities,” they also stimulate poor theology.

The Bible tells us that early in their relationship David played music for King Saul. On one occasion what Saul heard soothed him, and on another occasion the same sounds infuriated him. In reality, though, the reactions were Saul’s decisions. He was not passive; he was not being manipulated on either occasion by the “power” of the music.

Much contemporary thinking places the blame for aberrant behavior (sexual misconduct, rebellion, violence, etc.) on the supposed intrinsic potency of music to orchestrate our actions. Some extend this to the point of believing that music is the special tool of Satan, so when such behavior is exhibited he is the culprit. Again, Best and Huttar offer pertinent thoughts. They write:

Ultimately the Judeo-Christian perspective maintains that man is interiorly wrong and that until he is right he will place the blame for his condition outside himself.(4)

Admittedly, my point is a subtle one. We must be careful not to imply music cannot be used for evil purposes. But we must realize that the devil goads people who use music; he does not empower the music itself.

Current controversy among Christians concerning the rhythmic content of rock music is an example of the tendency to believe that some musical styles are intrinsically evil. For example, Steve Lawhead has demonstrated that the music of the early slaves probably did not include much rhythmic substance at

all. The plantation owners would not have allowed drums because they could have been used to relay messages of revolt between the groups of slaves. This observation is central to the issue of rock music, because some assert that the syncopated rhythm of rock is the product of the pagan African backgrounds of the slaves. In reality, American slave music centered around the playing of a “banya,” an instrument akin to the banjo, and not drums or other rhythmic instruments.(5)

Rock music is not intrinsically evil. It did not originate in a pagan past, and even if it did that would not mean that it is evil. Nevertheless, since it has been a prominent and influential part of American culture for several decades, it demands the attention of evangelicals. The attention it is given should begin with the understanding that the problems that are a part of rock do not reside in the music itself; they reside in sinful people who can and often do abuse it. The same can be said about any musical style, or any other art form.

## **The Quality of Music**

So far I have asserted two propositions concerning how Christians can respond to the music of their culture: the term Christian music is a misnomer, and no musical style is intrinsically evil. While both of these statements are true, they say nothing about the quality of music we choose to make a part of our lives. Thus my third proposition is that music should be evaluated based on quality. A proposal that includes judgments of quality is a challenging one. Evangelicals will find this especially difficult, because the subject of aesthetics is not a prevalent part of our heritage.

Evangelicals tend toward lazy thinking when it comes to analyzing the music of their culture. As Frank Gaebeline said, “It is more difficult to be thoughtfully discriminating than to fall back upon sweeping generalization.”(6) There are several factors to be weighed if discriminating thought is to



occur.

We should focus attention on the music within Christian life. This applies not only to music used in worship, but also to music heard via radio, CDs, concerts, and other sources.

Lack of quality is one of the themes of those who write about contemporary church music. Harold Best states: "Contentment with mediocrity as a would-be carrier of truth looms as a major hindrance to true creative vision among evangelicals." (7) Robert Elmore continues in a similar vein:

*There are even ministers who feed their congregations with the strong meat of the Word and at the same time surround their preaching with only the skimmed milk of music. (8)*

If negative declarations such as these are the consensus of those who have devoted ardent attention to the subject, what are the contents of a positive model? The answers to this are numerous. I will only relate some of the insights of one thinker, Calvin Johansson.

The first insight refers to movement. Music must move:

The principle here is that music needs to exhibit a flow, an overall feel for continuity, that moves progressively and irresistibly from beginning to end. It is not intended to hammer and drive a musical pulse into the mind.

This principle can be applied to the incessant nature of the rock rhythm we have previously discussed. The second insight has to do with cohesion:

Unity is an organic pull, a felt quality that permeates a composition so thoroughly that every part, no matter how small, is related.

The third insight relates to "diversions at various levels.... Without diversity there would only be sameness, a quality that

would be not only boring but also devastatingly static.”

The fourth insight focuses on “the principle of dominance... A certain hierarchy of values is adopted by the composer in which more important features are set against the less important.” The fifth insight shows that “every component part of a composition needs to have intrinsic worth in and of itself... The music demonstrates truth as each part of the composition has self-worth.”(9)

These principles contain ideas that the non-musician might find difficult to understand. Indeed, most of us are not accustomed to using language to discuss the quality of the music we hear other than to say we do or do not “like” it. But if we are going to assess the music of the broader culture accurately, we must be able to use such language to assess music within our own subculture. We must seek quality there.

## **Pop Music**

Another factor in musical discrimination applies to the way we approach music outside our subculture. The Christian is free to enter culture equipped with discernment, and this certainly applies to music. We need not fear the music of our culture, but we must exercise caution.

Assessments of quality also apply here. The Christian should use the principles we discussed above to evaluate the music of the broader culture.

We should also be aware of the blending of music and message, or lack of it. The ideal situation occurs when both the medium and the message agree.

Too often the music we hear conveys a message at the expense of musical quality. Best explains:

The kind of mass communication on which the media subsist depends on two things: a minimal creative element and a

perspective that sees music only as conveying a message rather than being a message. Viewed as a carrier, music tends to be reduced to a format equated with entertainment. The greater the exposure desired, the lower the common denominator.(10)

The messages of our culture are perhaps voiced most strongly and clearly through music that is subordinated to those messages. The music is "canned." It is the product of cliches and "hooks" designed to bring instant response from the listener. As Erik Routley stated, "All music which self-consciously adopts a style is like a person who puts on airs. It is affected and overbearing."(11) This condition is so prevalent in contemporary music it cannot be overemphasized.

Another concern is found in certain features of what is usually called "popular culture." Music is a major part of pop culture. Kenneth Myers, among others, has identified certain culture types beginning with "high," diminishing to "folk," and plummeting to "popular." Popular culture "has some serious liabilities that it has inherited from its origins in distinctively modern, secularized movements." Generally, these liabilities include "the quest for novelty, and the desire for instant gratification."(12) In turn, these same qualities are found in "pop" music.

The quest for novelty is apparent when we understand, as Steve Lawhead states, that the whole system feeds on the "new"—new faces, new gimmicks, new sounds. Yesterday in pop music is not only dead; it is ancient history.(13)

The desire for instant gratification is the result of the fact that this type of music is normally produced for commercial reasons. Continuing, Lawhead writes that

...commercialism, the effective selling of products, governs every aspect of the popular music industry. From a purely business point of view, it makes perfect sense to shift the

focus from artistic integrity to some other less rigorous and more easily managed, non artistic component, such as newness or novelty. Talent and technical virtuosity take time to develop, and any industry dependent upon a never-ending stream of fresh faces cannot wait for talent to emerge.(14)

We do not offer God our best when we employ this approach. Additionally, we do not honor God when we make the products of such thinking a consistent part of our lives.

## Notes

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3. Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary, s.v. "Music," by Harold M. Best and David Huttar.
4. Ibid.
5. Steve Lawhead, *Rock of This Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 51-52.
6. Frank E. Gaebelin, "The Christian and Music," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 446.
7. Harold M. Best, "Christian Responsibility in Music," in *The Christian Imagination*, 402.
8. Robert Elmore, "The Place of Music in Christian Life," in *The Christian Imagination*, 430.
9. Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), 93-95.
10. Ibid., 412-13.
11. Erik Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Agape, 1978), 89.
12. Kenneth Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 59-64.

13. Steve Lawhead, *Turn Back the Night: A Christian Response to Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1978), 97.  
14. Ibid., 98.

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# The Theology of Christmas Carols – A Godly View of This Sacred Holiday

*Dr. Robert Pyne looks at the theological message found in five different popular Christmas carols. For the most part, these carols, when listened to for their content, help us remember a biblical worldview perspective of this popular holiday.*

## Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Most radio stations play some type of Christmas music during the holiday season, but many of the songs have become so familiar to us that we no longer consider their content. In between the secular songs like “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Up on a Housetop,” you may hear the strains of an old hymn by Charles Wesley called “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” It was written in 1744, and it reads,

**Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in  
Thee.**

**Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth  
Thou art;**

**dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.**

**Born Thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a King,**

**born to reign in us forever, now Thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By Thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;  
by Thine own sufficient merit, raise us to Thy glorious  
throne.**

“Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus” is a little heavier than most of the music we are used to hearing today, and if we are not careful we will miss much of the meaning. The first verse focuses on the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled Israel’s longing for the Messiah. As the one whose coming was prophesied in the Old Testament, He is the “long-expected Jesus.”

A few of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled are Isaiah 7:14, which spoke of a virgin giving birth to a child whose name would mean “God with us;” Isaiah 9:6, which told of a child whose name would be called “Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, eternal Father, the Prince of Peace;” and Micah 5:2, which said that from Bethlehem would come a ruler whose “goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

These and many similar prophecies looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and many devout Jews prayed earnestly for the day when He would arrive. Luke 2 tells of Simeon, a man of faith who was “looking for the consolation of Israel” (v. 25). When he saw Jesus as an infant, Simeon knew that this Child was the fulfillment of his messianic hope. Charles Wesley was borrowing from this passage when he described Jesus in this song as “Israel’s strength and consolation.”

Although He fulfilled Israel’s prophecies, Jesus came to bring salvation to the entire world, which is what Wesley was referring to when he described Christ as the “hope of all the earth” and the “dear desire of every nation.” More than that, He is the “joy of every longing heart.” He alone is the one who can satisfy every soul.

The second verse tells us why Jesus can meet our expectations:

He was “born a child and yet a King.” As the One who is both God and man, Jesus was able to satisfy God’s wrath completely by dying on the cross for our sins. When Wesley wrote about Jesus’ “all sufficient merit,” he was referring to Christ’s ability to bring us to salvation.

“Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus” is a great song for Christmas, focusing on the “long-expected Jesus” who was born to set us free from sin and to bring us salvation by His death.

## **Hark! the Herald Angels Sing**

Charles Wesley’s best-known song is probably “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.” It has been altered slightly by editors, but most of it remains just as Wesley intended when he wrote it over 250 years ago.

As we generally hear it today, the song begins with a triumphant proclamation of Jesus’ birth, describes the fact that He is both God and man, and then praises Him for the salvation He was born to provide.

The first verse reads, in part,

**Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King;  
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”**

Talking about peace on earth is popular at Christmas time, and appropriately so, for Jesus did come to bring peace. Primarily, however, He came to bring us peace with God, which is what Wesley meant when he wrote, “God and sinners reconciled.” We have all sinned against God; we have broken His commandments and thus made ourselves His enemies. When people become enemies, they cannot go back to being friends until their differences are set aside. Sometimes reconciliation involves the payment of reparations, and which is essentially what Jesus did when He died on the cross. He paid the price necessary to reconcile us to God. The price was

really ours to pay, not God's, but Jesus was able to pay it because, though He was God, He became also a man, being born as a baby on that first Christmas day.

Charles Wesley described Jesus' birth in the second verse of this song. He wrote,

**Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.**

**Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity,  
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.**

Though He was the everlasting Lord, the second person of the Trinity (which is described in the song as "the Godhead"), fully equal in nature with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus became the "offspring of the Virgin's womb." He was "veiled in flesh," the "incarnate Deity." He was God, having become also a man. The name Emmanuel means "God with us," which is what Wesley was referring to when he wrote that Jesus was "pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel." He became a man, but in the process did not lose His deity. He was "God with us."

The idea that Jesus would lay aside His divine privileges for any reason is nothing short of incredible, but He did so in order to provide us with salvation. Wesley focused on this amazing occurrence in the third verse, where he wrote,

**Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.**

Jesus laid aside His own rights, coming to this earth and dying for our sins, that those who trust in Him might have eternal life. He was born that we might be born again, and that is good reason to sing "glory to the newborn King."



# **0 Little Town of Bethlehem**

“0 Little Town of Bethlehem” was written in 1867 by Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal pastor from Philadelphia. He had been in Israel two years earlier and had celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem. This song describes the city not so much as it was when Brooks observed it, but as he thought it might have appeared on the night of Jesus’ birth.

The first verse reads,

**0 little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee  
tonight.**

The streets of our own cities are quiet on Christmas day; stores are closed and most people are at home. It is possible that Bethlehem was quiet on the night that Jesus was born, but we know that the place was full of people from out of town, and chances are that there were even more people on the streets than usual. But this song does not say as much about the level of activity in Bethlehem as it does about the fact that very few people even noticed the Baby who was born. One line from the second verse reads, “While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love”—a situation that is true even today. The world goes on about its business, working, eating, sleeping, and playing, utterly oblivious to the spiritual realities around it. As Brooks wrote in the third verse of the song,

**How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.  
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ  
enters in.**

When Christ came into this world, He came quietly. The angelic announcement to the shepherds was the only publicity that accompanied Him. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough; He did not arrive with the pomp that one would expect of a King. For the most part, He still does not. When people today place their faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us that He comes to live inside them through the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14:16-23; Rom. 8:9-11). There is not a lot of flash associated with an entrance like that, and some of your friends might not even notice the difference at first, but when you trust in Jesus Christ an incredibly significant event takes place. Your sins are forgiven and you are made a new person (John 5:24; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Jesus' coming means that Christmas does not have to be the lonely time that it is for so many people. We can experience His salvation and enjoy His presence as individuals, even though the world around us does not understand what is really going on. As the last verse of the song reads,

**O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray,  
Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.**

## **O Holy Night**

The carol "O Holy Night" by John Dwight begins by describing the night Jesus was born. It reads,

**O holy night! The stars are brightly shining.  
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.**

The coming of Jesus Christ should make us feel valuable, and it should make us feel loved. John 3:16 tells us that Jesus came because "God so loved the world." First Peter 1 reminds

us that God has actually purchased us out of our slavery to sin, not with something perishable and comparatively worthless like silver and gold, “but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (vv. 18,19). The fact that Jesus gave Himself for us should cause our souls to feel their worth to God.

The second verse of “O Holy Night” calls us to consider the incredible fact that the King of kings was born as a human infant and placed in a manger. Most of us cannot relate to that kind of birth—our children are usually born in hospitals and nurtured in the most sterile of environments. Jesus was not. He was born in a stable. More than that, He lived a life of poverty, experienced severe temptation and persecution, and died a brutal death, abandoned by His friends and wrongly condemned by His enemies. Thus, although we cannot always relate to His experiences, He can relate to ours. This empathy is what Dwight was describing when he wrote,

**The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,  
In all our trials born to be our Friend.  
He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger.  
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend.**

It must have seemed ironic for grown men to bow down before a baby, but no act of worship was ever more appropriate.

Considering our Lord’s birth should cause us to worship Him, and it should cause us to respond to one another with humility. The third verse of “O Holy Night” reads,

**Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is love and His gospel is peace.  
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,  
And in His name all oppression shall cease.**

We no longer have slavery in this country, but we have many other forms of oppression, and Dwight was correct in writing that the oppression of human beings is inconsistent with the

worship of Christ.

The Bible tells us that we are to model the humility that Jesus demonstrated when He voluntarily laid aside His rights as God and became also a man in order to suffer for our salvation. Based on Christ's example, Paul writes,

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

Paul tells us that we are wrong when we put our own interests ahead of someone else's, whether through the slavery that John Dwight spoke against or simply through insensitivity toward others. Because He loved us, Jesus chose not to exercise all of His rights. May we follow that pattern of humility as we love one another, even after Christmas.

## **Joy to the World**

"Joy to the World" was written by Isaac Watts and published for the first time in 1719. The song is a paraphrase of the 98th Psalm, and it has become one of the most popular Christmas carols of all time. The popularity of "Joy to the World" has resulted in a number of revisions designed to fit the theology of those singing it. For example, in 1838 the song was revised by a group of religious skeptics, who apparently liked the song but did not want to sing about the coming of the Lord. They changed the words from

**"Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.**

**Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing,"**

to

“Joy to the world! The light has come [a reference to reason], the only lawful King. Let every heart prepare it room, and moral nature sing.”

Several years ago the song was used by a marching choir in a major televised parade. But the choir only sang the first four words, “Joy to the world,” and then just hummed the rest of the song!

People who do not believe in Jesus often do not mind singing about a baby born in a manger, but it is a little more awkward for them to sing about Him being the Lord of heaven and earth. And this song makes it very clear that Jesus did not just come to be an inspiring infant or a gentle teacher. He came as the Lord, the King of kings, fully deserving our praise.

“Joy to the World” continues with the words,

**No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.**

**He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found.**

This verse alludes to Genesis 3, where God told the first man that the ground itself would be cursed as a consequence of his sin. Instead of abundant crops, the ground would now produce thorns and thistles—weeds that would cause humankind to labor intensively in order to survive. With this verse of the song, Watts anticipates the day when the blessings of salvation in Christ will overturn sin’s consequences “as far as the curse is found.”

That day has not come yet, but someday Christ will return to reign in His glory and judge the nations. As the last verse of “Joy to the World” reads,

**He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove**

**The glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love.**

When Jesus came to this earth, He did not remain in the manger, where He might have been easily controlled. He did not even remain on the cross, where He might have been honored as a martyr. He rose from the dead, that He might reign over all creation. Whether people enjoy singing the words or not, Isaac Watts was right. "Joy to the world! The Lord is come."

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