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Christianity and the Arts*

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God and Man as Creative Artists

My desire in this essay is to help us to think scripturally about the arts as Christian believers, for this is one of those areas where, at this present time, there appears to be great confusion in our churches. On the one hand, many Christians seem to think that we ought only to listen to music, read books, or watch films that have been produced by fellow believers. On the other hand, almost all Christians will read newspapers and books, watch television shows and movies, go to plays and musicals, listen to music, and buy art cards and pictures for our walls simply because we *like* these things—and we will do this without much reflection unless we encounter something that is obviously blasphemous, gratuitously violent, or clearly pornographic. Even those who suggest most passionately that Christians should only enjoy art by other Christians will take delight in buildings, bridges, roads, interior decoration, clothes, or beautifully prepared and presented meals, and they will take this delight without asking whether the architect, builder, designer, or chef is a committed believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. So, how are we as Christians to think about the arts? To approach this subject, we begin with the biblical doctrine of creation.

God, the Creator of All Things Visible and Invisible

Every orthodox creed and every believing theologian throughout the history of the Church has affirmed the Christian's faith in God, who is the Creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. We all have our favorite scriptural passages that affirm this doctrine, that express our hope in the Lord who made all things, and that communicate this faith and hope with words of marvelous beauty—such as Psalm 8:1: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth"; or Psalm 19:1: "The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."[1] We praise God now for the wonder of His creation and we will praise Him for this for all eternity: "Worthy are you, our LORD and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rev. 4:11). Many other Scriptures also explore this conviction—sometimes at great length as well in glorious poetry; see, for instance, Job 38–41, Psalm 148, and Psalm 19 (a psalm that C. S. Lewis called one of the greatest lyric poems ever written).

John Calvin, in exquisitely beautiful French prose, writes of the wonder of God's creation in words that retain their remarkable power even in our English translations and are worth quoting at length:

> Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God, he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, Bible verses quoted in this essay are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

> have already spoken, but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him. His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse. . . . And because the glory of his power and wisdom is more refulgent in the firmament, it is frequently designated as his palace. And, first, wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory. Hence, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible (Heb. 11:3), the elegant structure of the world serving us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible . . . .
>
> In attestation of his wondrous wisdom, both the heavens and the earth present us with innumerable proofs, not only those more recondite proofs which astronomy, medicine, and all the natural sciences, are designed to illustrate, but proofs which force themselves on the notice of the most illiterate peasant, who cannot open his eyes without beholding them. It is true, indeed, that those who are more or less intimately acquainted with those liberal studies are thereby assisted and enabled to obtain a deeper insight into the secret workings of divine wisdom. No man, however, though he be ignorant of these, is incapacitated for discerning such proofs of creative wisdom as may well cause him to break forth in admiration of the Creator. . . . Still, none who have the use of their eyes can be ignorant of the divine skill manifested so conspicuously in the endless variety, yet distinct and well ordered array, of the heavenly host; and, therefore, it is plain that the Lord has furnished every man with abundant proofs of his wisdom.[2]

[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), I.v.1–2.

The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins delights us with his poetic paean of praise in one of his best known works, "God's Grandeur":

> The world is charged with the grandeur
> of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;[3]

Another of Hopkins' poems, "Pied Beauty," I will quote in full. Hopkins holds up for our pleasure his exploration of the amazing diversity of color, texture, taste, and action in creation:

> Glory be to God for dappled things–
> For skies of couple-color as a brinded cow;
> For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that
> swim;
> Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; finches wings;
> Landscape plotted and pieced–fold, fallow and
> plough;
> And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
>
> All things counter, original, spare, strange;
> Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
> He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
> Praise him.[4]

Daniel Loizeaux considers God's creativity under four headings. He writes: "How God's imagination daily loads us with benefits. Contemplate this embarrassment of riches from a four-fold aspect: their perfection, diversity, profusion, inventiveness."[5] I am indebted to Loizeaux's discussion in my own exploration of these four aspects of God's creative genius.

Perfection

If we look at anything God has made under a microscope to see it in all its detail, we will

[3] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed., rev. and enlarged (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 66.

[4] Hopkins, "Pied Beauty," in ibid., 69–70.

[5] Daniel Loizeaux, "The Imagination of God," *Genesis: Journal of the Society of Christians in the Arts, Inc.* 1, no. 2 (1975): 72.

discover that the more we see, the more amazing is His creative genius. A closer view enables us to see new and unimagined beauties and infinitesimally tiny wonders. Look at the structure of a leaf, a diamond, a snowflake, or a human cell. If we compare any product of human technology to any work of God—for example, try looking at an object made of polished steel, copper, or bronze—and try the same experiment, we very soon will observe the difference. It is lovely to our eyes, but if we look at our own works under a microscope, we will soon see the flaws.

Diversity

Think of the many different varieties of birds, insects, trees, and flowers; or, for an even more extraordinary example, the infinite variety of snowflakes, sunrises, sunsets, or, more importantly, human beings: no two are exactly the same.

Profusion

God loves abundance: think of the flowers in a meadow, or the stars in the night sky—if you can get away from bright city lighting to see them, such as out in a deep forest, in a desert, or high up on a mountain. In such a setting, the sky seems to be nothing but stars. Indeed, astronomers tell us that there are 60 billion galaxies in the universe.

Inventiveness

We admire men and women who come up with new designs—and rightly so. But just think how this activity is only a miniscule copy of the inventiveness of the Lord, who delights in making all things new—not just at the beginning of the creation, but every day.

No Asceticism—Rather, the Glad Receiving and Enjoyment of the Gifts of God's Creativity

It is evident as we read Genesis 1 that God believed that all He had made was good. Repeatedly during the account of the creation, this refrain occurs: "God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). At the high point, when He has created man, we find this expression of the Lord's delight in His work: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (1:31). Some Christians believe that this world and the created order are no longer good after the fall and have concluded, therefore, that the enjoyment of life and of God's daily gifts is no longer genuinely spiritual; they see this as somehow suspect. Calvin responded to this view with a resounding affirmation of the beauty of this world and the appropriateness of delight: "Should the Lord have attracted our eyes to the beauty of the flowers, and our sense of smell to pleasant odors, and should it then be sin to drink them in? Has he not even made the colors so that the one is more wonderful than the other?"[6]

Scripture itself insists that delight in creation and the enjoyment of God's gifts is not only right and good, but that asceticism—the insistence that taking pleasure in our creaturely life is somehow unspiritual or even sinful—is in fact a heretical teaching. See Paul's passionate words in 1 Timothy 4:1–5 as an example of this:

> Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

In these words, Paul insists that food, sex, marriage—indeed all the gifts of creation—are good and holy, for God Himself has declared them to be so in His Word. Paul demands that we see that asceticism, even if it comes under the guise of spirituality, is heretical, even demonic. Why does he speak with such strong language? The simple answer is that the teaching that it is sinful to enjoy

[6] John Calvin, *On the Life of the Christian Man* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1952), 88.

the gifts of creation is blasphemous because it is a rejection of God's own valuation of creation.

Repeatedly in the history of the Church, Christians have been tempted to devalue the richness of creation and therefore to devalue also the arts, as if it would be somehow more "spiritual" to live a life devoid of beauty, of good things, of music, of literature, of painting, of color, etc. It is as if bare simplicity, barrenness, and even ugliness were somehow considered to be more pleasing to God. Behind this idea is the conviction that it is only what is "spiritual" that matters, and that the physical, therefore, is only of secondary value at best. In this view, the arts are thought of as an optional, rather extravagant, and unnecessary extra in life. But this belief is nonsense, and is, according to Paul, a heresy of the most serious kind, for in the end it is a denial of the goodness of creation. George Herbert, in his poem "Teach Me, My God and King," captured this obligation of the Christian to value as good all that God has made. This poem may be found in many hymnals; I include here stanzas one, three, and four:

> Teach me, my God and King,
> In all things thee to see,
> And what I do in anything
> To do it as for thee.
>
> All may of thee partake:
> Nothing can be so mean
> Which with this motive, "For thy sake,"
> Will not grow bright and clean.
>
> This is the famous stone
> That turneth all to gold;
> For that which God doth touch and own
> Cannot for less be told.

Reflecting further on this theme, we may point to five foundational doctrines that affirm the value of the richness of life here in this world:

Creation

See Genesis 1 with God's repeated "it is good," and Paul's words in 1Timothy 4:1–5 (noted above).

Common Grace—or, God's Providential Care for All Creation

See Genesis 9:8–17 and the everlasting covenant that God makes with all creatures after the flood. God cares for *all* creation, as evidenced in Psalms 103 and 145, and also by Jesus' words in Matthew 6:26–29 and 10:29–31, where He speaks of God watching over and providing for the flowers and the birds, and, even more, for all people.

The Incarnation

The eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, became flesh; He became a man; He became a part of this physical universe—not merely for the thirty years of His earthly life, but for all eternity to come.

Bodily Resurrection

See Paul's joyful words about our physical resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5:1–5. Nothing expresses with greater clarity that our physical life in this world is precious than this conviction of God's commitment not "to unclothe us, but to further clothe us, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

The New Creation

There will be a renewed earth, with the curse removed (see Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1–4). This promise of the glory of the earth to come underlines the significance and value of all that God has made for our enjoyment here and now. Redemption will not be complete until our human life is restored to its full delight in the wonder of God's good creation.

Man and Woman, God's Image Bearers, Are Made to Be Sub-Creators Following After Their Creator

The God who made all things made us to exercise dominion under Him over this good creation (Gen. 1:26–28). In Psalm 8, David declares that it is this likeness to God as we rule over this earth

and its creatures that constitutes our glory as human persons. He asks:

> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
> what is man that you are mindful of him?

He replies to his own question:

> You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.
> You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.

In exercising dominion over God's good creation we are not creators in an absolute sense, like God, but, rather, sub-creators at best. We never create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) like God, for we are always working with some aspect of what He has already made. We might say that our dominion over this earth means that we "till the garden" of color, words, form and texture, sound and harmony, stone and clay, imagination, God's works in creation, and human works in history and in society. Sir Isaac Newton likened our ruling the earth with the arts and sciences to the playing of a child:

> I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.[7]

C. S. Lewis recognized that all great artists acknowledge that there is something outside themselves that is greater than they are, and that is greater than the works that they make: "The greatest poems (*indeed all of the greatest artistic works*) have been made by men who valued something else much more than poetry."[8] For the Christian, there needs to be the humble bowing before God the Creator and the glad acceptance of the gift of His created order with which we all do our work.

We exercise dominion now by "making things" with our hands, minds, and imaginations. This task will be ours forever, for on the renewed earth all the creative glory of all the nations will be brought into the kingdom of God to honor Christ (Rev. 21:24–26).

Sometimes, Christians will insist that the only work that is truly worthwhile, pleasing to God, and spiritual is the work of serving the proclamation of the Gospel across the world. This view suggests that if we were all truly earnest Christians, we would leave our "secular" jobs, in which we are simply making a living and ruling the world, and we would all join the "sacred" work of mission. But if we stop and think about Jesus' life, we see that He was doing so-called "secular" work as a carpenter or a fisherman for many more years than He was a preacher and teacher. It is impossible to suppose that during these years Jesus was living in a manner that was not fully godly and completely pleasing to His Father in heaven.

The import of this reflection on our human calling to "till the garden" of this world with body, mind, and imagination is that the arts need no justification; they are good gifts of God, a basic part of the creation order. Our calling is simply to be thankful for these gifts of sub-creativity.

We may say, however, that there are five aspects of our God-given creativity, or, rather, five "callings," as we engage in the work of creating:

- We are to seek to ***glorify God*** in all we do.
- We are designed to ***find fulfillment for ourselves*** in using, developing, and expressing the gifts God has richly given us.

[7] Quoted in Loizeaux, "The Imagination of God," 74.

[8] C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," *Genesis: Journal of the Society of Christians in the Arts, Inc.* 1, no. 2 (1975): 22.

- We are to seek to ***be of benefit to others,*** so that they may be able to look at what we create and say of it: "It is good." The Christian artist always lives in community and is called to serve others in the development and expression of the gifts God has given to each one for the blessing of all.

- In being creative, we fulfill our human design by ***exercising dominion*** over the earth.

- We are called, in all we do, including in our creative work, to ***set back the boundaries of the Fall***—to restrain the abnormality of our present human life in its brokenness and sorrow, and of our present world that is under the curse and that resists our dominion.

The Heart of the Christian's Approach to Creativity Will Be Imitation

In acknowledging that we live in God's world and that we are His creatures, the Christian ought to have a rather more humble approach to the work of art than is sometimes found in the reflections of those who see themselves at the center of reality. Shakespeare had this humility about his work, though if we consider both the dramas and the poetry that poured out from him, we might justly call him a creator. The poet Dryden said of Shakespeare: "After God, he has created most." Yet Shakespeare said of himself that he simply held "a mirror up to nature." George Herbert, like Shakespeare a Christian, wrote: "True beauty lives on high. Ours is but a flame borrowed thence."

Lewis comments on this understanding of the artist as being an imitator rather than an original creator, and in the process he challenges much contemporary reflection about the work of the artist:

> What are the key-words of modern criticism? *Creative*, with its opposite *derivative*; *spontaneity*, with its opposite *convention*; *freedom*, contrasted with *rules*. Great authors are innovators, pioneers, explorers; bad authors bunch in schools and follow models. Or again, great authors are always "breaking fetters" and "bursting bonds." They have personality, they "are themselves." I do not know whether we often think out the implication of such language into a consistent philosophy; but we certainly have a general picture of bad work flowing from conformity and discipleship, and of good work bursting out from certain centres of explosive force—apparently self-originating force—which we call men of genius.[9]

Lewis then draws our attention to the way in which the New Testament speaks about the Christian life in very different terms:

> Thus in Gal. iv. 19 Christ is to be "formed" inside each believer—the verb here used meaning to shape, to figure, or even to draw a sketch. In First Thessalonians (i. 6) Christians are told to imitate St. Paul and the Lord, and elsewhere (1 Cor. x. 33) to imitate St. Paul as he in his turn imitates Christ—thus giving us another stage of progressive imitation. Changing the metaphor we find that believers are to acquire the fragrance of Christ, *redolere Christum* (2 Cor. ii. 16); that the glory of God has appeared in the face of Christ as, at the creation, light appeared in the universe (2 Cor. iv. 6); and, finally, if my reading of a much disputed passage is correct, that a Christian is to Christ as a mirror to an object (2 Cor. iii. 18).[10]

Lewis points out that thinking of oneself as "original" and as a "creator" is very close to summing up the reality of the fall, where humans turned from what is better and greater than themselves—God, who is the Originator—to what is lesser and derived—themselves. He then applies this biblical insight to the work of the writer and the artist:

> Applying this principle to literature, in its greatest generality, we should get as the basis of all critical theory the maxim that an author should never conceive of himself as bringing

[9] This and the next several quotes are taken from Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," 18–20.
[10] Ibid.

> into existence beauty or wisdom that did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom.[11]

He comments on the difference between the Christian and the man who sees himself at the center of reality:

> St. Augustine and Rousseau both write *Confessions*; but to the one his own temperament is a kind of absolute (*au moins je suis autre*), to the other it is "a narrow house, too narrow for thee to enter—oh make it wide. It is in ruins—oh rebuild it."[12]

Lewis explicitly acknowledges the similarities between a Christian and a Platonic view in seeing the arts as imitative of something transcendent. For the Platonist and Neo-Platonist, this world is a copy, a shadow of the divine world above. The arts will not be satisfied with exploring what is found here—the copies—but will seek to enter into heaven itself to imitate the true origin of all that we see here on earth. Lewis quotes Plotinus: "The arts do not simply imitate what they see but re-ascend to those principles from which Nature herself is derived."[13] Art and Nature thus become rival copies of the same supersensual original, and there is no reason why Art should not be the better of the two.

Using Sir Philip Sidney as an example, Lewis further notes that:

> The poet, unlike the historian, is not "captived to the trueth of a foolish world," but can "deliver a golden." Sidney . . . inherited, in a Christianized form, the Platonic dualism. Nature was not the whole. Above earth was heaven; behind the phenomenal, the metaphysical. To that higher region the human soul belonged. The natural world, as Bacon said, was "in proportion inferior to the soul." The man who... improved on Nature, and painted what might be or ought to be, did not feel that he was retreating from reality into a merely subjective refuge; he was reascending from a world which he had a right to call "foolish" and asserting his divine origin.[14]

We may describe a Christian understanding of the arts in the following way: Our work in any field of the arts will be imitative. We will be thinking God's thoughts after Him—painting with His colors; speaking with His gift of language; exploring and expressing His sounds and harmonies; working with His creation in all its glory, diversity, and in-built inventiveness. In addition, we will find ourselves longing to make known the beauty of life as it once was in Paradise, the tragedy of its present marring, and the hope of our final redemption. All great art will contain this element of being an echo of Eden: Eden in its original glory, Eden that is lost to us, and Eden restored.

I do not mean to suggest that there is no room for creativity or originality in a Christian understanding of the arts. Lewis thought it appropriate to use the term "sub-creation" for his friend J. R. R. Tolkien's work *The Lord of the Rings*. We may use the terms "creative" and "original" as long as we understand that we do not mean them in an absolute sense, for everything we do we do as those who are created and as those who are working within the boundaries of this created universe.

In this secondary sense of "sub-creation," we delight in the work of a Christian poet who designs new forms (as did John Donne or T. S. Eliot); or the compositions of a Christian musician who writes music in styles that are original (as did Bach); or the canvases of the Christian painter who paints in a manner that breaks with tradition (as did Rembrandt or Van Gogh). However, a Christian will just as gladly use forms already in existence if those forms fit the purposes and passions of one's work.

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Plotinus, *Ennead*, V.viii, 320. Quoted in C. S. Lewis, "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama," *Oxford History of English Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 320.
[14] Lewis, "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century," 320–21.

Another way to express this recognition of the secondary nature of all our art would be to understand that all creative work is a form of praise and worship: by creating we declare the glory of God, who made us in His likeness.

The Arts Should Not Be Simply an Expression of the Self

Since the Romantic period, the arts have become increasingly a matter of mere self-expression. The artist is seen as having a special sensibility that gives him a higher understanding of and insight into the human condition and which therefore elevates him above the average person as one to be admired. The Christian who works in the arts will not see himself as the great revealer, as another god, as the prophet or priest of the age, a special mentor breaking new barriers. To do so is to become the priest in a smaller and smaller cult. The more inward and purely self-expressive art becomes, the more inaccessible it is to others. For artistic communication to occur, art cannot be simply an expression of the self. True art must have some contact with life, with reality, with other people who exist alongside the artist. Lewis puts it this way: "Great writing (and all great art) exists because there is a world not created by the writer."[15]

In contrast to the Romantic view, the artist needs to see himself as a creature of God, using gifts given by God, to the glory of God, for the enrichment of the lives of others.

The Creativity of Others Helps Us Enter into God's Creativity

We are finite, and that is good, for this is the way God made us; yet, God's world surrounds us with all its extraordinary variety, beauty, order, and richness. Lewis reflects on how we may experience more of the wonder of God's world as we read and so enter into someone else's perspective on this world. This is true of all the arts—each painter, sculptor, writer, composer, musician, or designer sees something of the world that we do not see, and so, as we look or listen or read, we are enriched by each artist's vision. Lewis asks why we enjoy reading (and we may apply this to all the arts). He answers:

> The nearest I have yet got to answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. And even when we build disinterested fantasies, they are saturated with, and limited by, our own psychology. To acquiesce in this particularity on the sensuous level—in other words, not to discount perspective—would be lunacy. We should then believe that the railway line really grew narrower as it receded into the distance. But we want to escape the illusions of perspective on higher levels too. We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own. We are not content to be Leibnitzian monads. We demand windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors. One of the things we feel after reading a great work is "I have got out." Or from another point of view, "I have got in"; pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside.[16]

Lewis points out how reading (or the enjoyment of any artwork) is similar to love, moral activity, and the exercise of the mind, for in each of these activities we are called out of ourselves into the life of another. This would be a joy and an enlargement of us even if we were not fallen creatures, for even before the fall it was "not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). We need others to complement us in every aspect of our lives.

God has not made us to be isolated individuals who find fulfillment simply by ourselves, or even—and I say this carefully—only in relationship with Him. He has made us for others so that, together as finite persons, we can reflect the unity and

[15] Ibid.

[16] This and the following quotation are excerpts from C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 137–141.

diversity within the godhead, and so that, together, we can take delight in the gifts, wisdom, and insight of our fellow men and women.

When we add to this the fact that we are fallen and that the essence of the fall is to worship and serve oneself, we begin to see how important are the arts, for they give us a wider and fuller view of God's good world. The arts enable us to look beyond ourselves and the horizons of our own experience. They help us to stop being so self-centered. Lewis writes:

> Good reading, therefore, though it is not essentially an affectional or moral or intellectual activity, has something in common with all three. In love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person's place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favour of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this. Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox; "he that loseth his life shall save it". . . .
>
> This, so far as I can see, is the specific value or good of literature considered as Logos; it admits us to experiences other than our own. They are not, any more than our personal experiences, all equally worth having. Some, as we say, "interest" us more than others. The causes of this interest are naturally extremely various and differ from one man to another; it may be the typical (and we say "How true!") or the abnormal (and we say "How strange!"); it may be the beautiful, the terrible, the awe-inspiring, the exhilarating, the pathetic, the comic, or the merely piquant. Literature gives the entrée to them all. . . .
>
> Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.[17]

De Quincey expressed this same thought very simply. He said that "Literature makes us feel more about things, and feel about more things." Again, what is true of literature is true of all the arts. In the enjoyment of others' creativity, I enter into a vision and richness beyond my own: "Familiar things made new; new things made familiar." Chesterton understood this and sums it up for us: "Fiction is common things seen by uncommon people." T. S. Eliot also writes of this as he thinks about the nature of poetry. The poet, he suggests, leads us into a new level of consciousness,

> . . . making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves. But he is not merely a more conscious individual than the others; he is also individually different from other people, and from other poets too, and can make his readers share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before.[18]

In this expansion of the self, the arts are indeed like love or moral action. One gives oneself to another, yet is never more fully oneself.

Art by Christians and by Non-Christians

An important question arises here that takes us back to an idea brought up at the beginning of this essay: Are Christians better artists than non-Christians? Put this way, the question seems absurd! But many believers speak as if it is impossible for the Christian to enjoy or to be edified by the creative works of unbelievers. As I

[17] Ibid.

[18] T.S. Eliot, "On Poetry and Poets," quoted in *Reading Literature: Some Christian Approaches*, ed. David Baratt and Roger Pooley (Leicester, UK: UCCF Literary Studies Group, 1985), 8.

pointed out earlier, the truth is that there is not a single Christian in the world who does not daily benefit from the creative gifts and hard work of the unbelievers around him. Our clothes, our food, our homes, our public buildings, our transport, our furnishings, our machinery, our technology—the greater part of all of this has been designed and made by people who are not Christians.

On even the briefest reflection, it is obvious that God has given His creative gifts to believers and unbelievers alike. Scripture acknowledges this in many ways, and we should need no other evidence than the insistence of God's Word that all human persons are made in His image (see Ps. 8 once more, or James 3:9–10).

In Acts 14:17, we see Paul talking to the idolatrous pagans in the city of Lystra about God's generosity. He says, "God has not left himself without a testimony; but has shown kindness by giving you gifts from heaven." Jesus calls us to be like our heavenly Father, who gives His good gifts to the believer and the unbeliever, the righteous and the wicked (Matthew 5:43–48). The writer of Proverbs declares that God's wisdom raises her voice not just to the people of Israel but to the whole human race so that there can be good laws and just rule in every nation (Prov. 8:1–4, 15–16). In 1 Kings 5, we read how God is pleased that Solomon is hiring the finest craftsmen of the day, unbelievers from Hiram, king of Tyre, to build the temple and to work on its interior design.

This is a particularly interesting example, for it teaches us that it is perfectly appropriate for us to use the gifts of non-Christians to help us build our houses of worship or to aid our worship in other ways (we will return to this issue later). On this subject of what is generally called the "common grace" of God, John Calvin writes with great passion about the folly and blasphemy of denying that God has given his gifts liberally to unbelievers:

> Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that 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 fountain 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.[19]

And again:

> The sum of the whole is this: From a general survey of the human race, it appears that one of the essential properties of our nature is reason, which distinguishes us from the lower animals, just as these by means of sense are distinguished from inanimate objects. For although some individuals are born without reason, that defect does not impair the general kindness of God [*the Battles translation here has "general grace"; the French is "la grace generale de Dieu"*], but rather serves to remind us, that whatever we retain ought justly to be ascribed to the Divine indulgence. Had God not so spared us, our revolt would have carried along with it the entire destruction of nature. In that some excel in acuteness, and some in judgment, while others have greater readiness in learning some peculiar art, God, by this variety commends his favour toward us, lest any one should presume to arrogate to himself that which flows from His mere liberality. For whence is it that one is more excellent than another, but that in a common nature the grace of God is specially displayed [*Battles translates here "Why is one person more excellent than another? Is it not to display in common nature God's special grace?" The French is "la grace special de Dieu"*] in passing by many and thus proclaiming that it is under obligation to none. We may add, that each individual is brought under particular influences according to his calling.[20]

Calvin in this passage speaks of "general grace" and also of "special grace" as he reflects on the generous giving of gifts by God to the whole human race. He is quite happy to acknowledge that in many areas of human activity unbelievers may be more gifted and have more wisdom than believers. If in reading this statement you are troubled by it, just think of the planes in which

[19] Calvin, *Institutes* II.ii.15.
[20] Ibid., II.ii.17.

you fly, the buildings that you admire, the technology or medical care from which you benefit—almost certainly the majority of these have been designed and made by non-Christians. This truth should not trouble us at all, but rather cause us to magnify the grace of God, who gives to all so generously. The question we need to ask about any human artifact is not "Is this made by a Christian or a non-Christian?" Rather, we should ask the question that Genesis 1 prompts us to ask: "Is this good?"

Arts and Crafts

In this section, we will briefly address the issue of the unity between what tend to be called "arts" (such as music, literature, painting, etc.) and "crafts" (such as the making of household furnishings, clothes, buildings, etc.). Hans Rookmaaker, who was for many years professor of art history at the Free University of Amsterdam, and also a director of the L'Abri Fellowship in Holland, wrote very helpfully on this subject. Rookmaaker points out that at one time—through the Middle Ages and on beyond the Reformation—what we now refer to as the arts were all considered crafts; artists were workmen and women like any other laborers. Young people were apprenticed in painting or music just as they were in furniture making or metalwork or dyeing. "Art" was simply the beauty that one expected to find in things made by skilled craftsmen and artisans. Christians were a part of this cultural way of seeing, recognizing their abilities in these areas as gifts and callings from God. The result was a great wealth of music, literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, furniture, and many other things which people still flock to see, hear, and enjoy. Consider the examples of Bach, Rembrandt, and Shakespeare—each of them is an outstanding artisan in his particular craft.

A change began to take place in this perception about the arts during the Romantic period. Art came to be seen as ART—, that is, as "fine art" or "high culture"; the crafts came to be considered inferior. The arts became disconnected from life; the artist began to be thought of as a kind of noble genius. What were some of the results of this shift in thinking about the nature of the arts? Here we will summarize some of the points that Rookmaaker makes in his writing on this subject (see, in particular, his essay *Art Needs no Justification*).[21]

One result of this shift was that art became museum art. Instead of artistically made objects that were part of the everyday life of the ordinary person, we now go to museums to see the works of "great artists"—works which may be beautiful and meaningful in many ways, but which have been set apart from the "ordinary" by the fact that they are ART. Think in comparison of the great outpouring of paintings that decorated the churches and public buildings in the late medieval period or at the time of the Renaissance. These works were part of people's lives; wherever they went in the course of a day or a week, they met with artistic works created to beautify everyday existence. With the rise of ART, this became less and less the case.

Along with this shift in thinking and the divorce of artistic endeavors from the everyday, ART also became very expensive. Unlike at the time of Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci, the common man and woman had very little access to the works of the great artists until the rise of public museums.

In addition, there developed a separation of ART from "commercial art" or "entertainment art," though in every field, a few artists managed to bridge the gap: Toulouse-Lautrec, Johann Strauss, Duke Ellington. Nowadays we are able to enjoy at a popular level some of the works of the great artists of a previous time—artists who did not think of themselves as working away at some "higher calling," but who saw themselves as serving the men and women of their day with the gifts God had given them. Think here of some of the excellent recent films made of the plays of William Shakespeare or of the novels of Jane Austen,

[21] Hans Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978).

which are fine examples of how great ART and commercial art can come together.

Another consequence of this separation of arts and crafts is the alienation of most ordinary people from the arts (again, consider the contrast with the plays of Shakespeare, which, in his day, were enjoyed by king and commoner alike). Along with this alienation of ordinary people there has arisen the development of a special class of "art interpreters"—reviewers and critics whose job it is to educate the rest of us so that we are able to understand the ARTS. Romantic notions of ART create practical difficulties for the artist and art student who are sensible enough to see the problems of this approach. Indeed, we currently see a crisis in the arts, a crisis that leads to the question: "Why am I working at this?" By the Romantic vision of art, the artist is driven inward to find his identity in and through his work. But a problem arises here: what if one finds only emptiness inside?

The Romantic conception of the artist as a tortured genius expressing his inmost being creates particular difficulty for Christians, for "the arts are the epitome and very clear expression of the non-Christian Spirit of the age." This generates a reaction among the vast majority of Christians and raises two problems that have constantly to be faced by the believer who senses that God is calling him or her to be an artist:

First, art is considered by many in our churches to be unnecessary and unspiritual, even worldly. Therefore, Christians who desire to be artists are told, "Leave art to the pagans. Our Christian calling is to be spiritual and to bear witness to Christ." But, even if we take this negative attitude towards the arts, we still find that art is inescapably part of our lives.

Second, the Christian who perseveres and enters the arts has to face all sorts of criticisms: the charge of hedonism, of worldliness, of being sinful or carnal. Artists are considered by many people to be lazy, for art is not "real work." The artist is in danger from the world. If a young believer persists in following his calling he is told, "If you have to be an artist, then at least use your art for evangelistic purposes. This can be your only justification for pursuing such a life."

How are we as Christians to respond to such charges, criticisms, and challenges? We do need to make a response for the sake of Christians who have been gifted by God and who wish to pursue this calling. And our response will have to be:

- ***Art needs no justification.*** It is simply a gift of God, part of His created reality, to be received like any other gift—with gratitude.

- ***We must not say that "art is for art's sake," for this is the Romantic heresy.*** Art is to be tied to the reality of God's creation and to our human calling to live as His image bearers.

- ***The Christian artist will regard himself or herself as a craftsman.*** The artist will not see himself as a self-serving visionary, but as an ordinary human (that is glorious enough!) with a particular calling from God to serve Him and one's fellows by working with words, music, color, stone, metal, etc.

- ***Most importantly, the Christian in the arts will commit himself or herself to humility.*** The true artist does *not* say, "I will be an ARTIST, an "inspired voice of the gods" (this is too religious a claim); or the "revealer of truth," as if I were a prophet or a "self-revealing genius" (these suggest that only the artist can truly see reality). Rather, the true artist sees his or her work within the context of and as a sub-set of God's own larger and infinitely more creative work. The true artist values something more than self.

Building a Christian Understanding of the Calling of the Artist

Now that we have explored various attitudes toward the arts and seen how human artistic endeavors are actually echoes of the greater

creative activity of God, we are prepared to ask several questions that will help us develop a truly Christian understanding of the calling of the artist.

Are There "Christian Subjects" for Art and Is There Any Such Thing as "Christian Art"?

The expressions "Christian subjects" and "Christian art" are often used, and we need to ask ourselves, what is intended by such language. Do we mean that there are particular subjects, and only those subjects, that are appropriate for a Christian artist to explore in painting, music, writing, or any other area of the arts? Do we believe that only some particular kinds of work should be called "Christian art"?

I suppose we might mean by these expressions that "Christian art" is art that is designed for use in worship or devotion, such as: hymns, sacred music, devotional literature, meditations, prayers, paintings and banners for churches, stained glass windows, and the like. There is, of course, a need for such art, but rather than lumping it into a separate category called "Christian," we must learn that this kind of art will have to be judged by the same criteria as all other art. C. S. Lewis is once again a great help to us here:

> The rules for writing a good passion play or a good devotional lyric are simply the rules for writing tragedy or lyric in general: success in sacred literature depends on the same qualities of structure, suspense, variety, diction, and the like which secure success in secular literature. And if we enlarge the idea of Christian Literature to include not only literature on sacred themes but all that is written by Christians for Christians to read, then, I think, Christian Literature can exist only in the same sense in which Christian cookery might exist. It would be possible, and it might be edifying, to write a Christian cookery book. Such a book would exclude dishes whose preparation involves unnecessary human labour or animal suffering, and dishes excessively luxurious. That is to say, its choice of dishes would be Christian. But there could be nothing specifically Christian about the actual cooking of the dishes included. Boiling an egg is the same process whether you are a Christian or a Pagan. In the same way, literature written by Christians for Christians would have to avoid mendacity, cruelty, blasphemy, pornography, and the like, and it would aim at edification in so far as edification was proper to the kind of work in hand. But whatever it chose to do would have to be done by the means common to all literature; it could succeed or fail only by the same excellences and the same faults as all literature; and its literary success or failure would never be the same thing as its obedience or disobedience to Christian principles.[22]

A second possible use of such terms as "Christian art" is to describe art with what we might call "Christian content." By this is usually meant art containing depictions of biblical scenes, or scenes from church history. However, people generally have a narrow view of this type of art and usually mean "sacred," "holy," "edifying," or even "nice" (whatever "nice" means) works of art. Yet, consider in contrast to this some of the not-so-edifying scenes to be found in the Bible. Read the rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13), for instance; or the gang rape unto death of the Levite's concubine, whose body is cut up, and the subsequent war (Judg. 19); or the Song of Solomon, with its explicit sex and graphic nudity; or the book of Ecclesiastes, with its pessimistic themes. In other words, there are sections of the Bible that would seem to fail this test for "Christian Art" or "Christian subjects."

A third way to use this language is to refer to art that is didactic, teaching us spiritual or evangelistic lessons. But, again, many scenes in the Bible itself would fail this test (see again the passages mentioned above). There are no spiritual lessons in the Song of Solomon, though many Christians, uncomfortable with the idea that God might have included in His infallible Word a book

[22] Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," 14.

that appears to be mainly about sex, have tried to make the book be about the marriage of the soul to Christ or the union of the Church to her Lord. Of course, some art will be "spiritual" in this sense, but some will not. Art does not need this justification for it to be considered good art, or art that a Christian can produce or enjoy.

A fourth manner in which this language is used is to refer to art produced by Christians. But this is also problematic. Some of the best-loved hymn tunes, for example, were borrowed from folk melodies rather than being composed specially for the purpose of worship; think of the tunes we use for "Fairest Lord Jesus," "Amazing Grace," "What Wondrous Love Is This?" and "I Cannot Tell." In addition, some of the greatest composers of sacred music were not believers (Vaughan Williams is an example here), and many great hymn tunes were taken from the music of composers who were not believers, or from contexts that were not "Christian" (such as Beethoven's rousing "Ode to Joy" or Sibelius' beautiful "Finlandia," both of which are used for dearly loved hymns).

This is also true within the Bible itself. The book of Proverbs contains many sayings from ancient Egypt. The poetic form of the psalms, and many of the metaphors used—even for God— are part of the poetic language of the surrounding culture and are not unique to the Old Testament. We find some of those metaphors used of Baal and of other gods, one common one being the description of God as the one who rides on the clouds and on the wings of the wind. This should not bother us any more than it would if we discovered that the most beautiful and acoustically perfect church building in our city was designed by a non-Christian architect.

At the most basic level, when it comes to the arts, we must hold Christians to the same standards of judgment as we would any other artist—just as we hold Christians in medicine, or teaching, or business, or any other calling to an objective set of standards. We might do well to speak of Christian artists, or of Christians who are called to be artists, in the same way that we speak of Christians who are doctors, lawyers, teachers, homemakers, or cooks, rather than speaking of Christian medicine or Christian cooking. Then, once we learn to speak this way, our challenge to all believers will be to pursue their callings with heart, soul, mind, and strength to the glory of God.

What Will This Mean for Topics?

The above conclusion will also help us as we think about appropriate topics for the Christian who is an artist. There are no "secular" topics. All creation is God's and therefore is proper material for artistic expression. The world and human life in all its fallenness and brokenness is appropriate subject matter. The hope for redemption from this state of brokenness is also appropriate.

The themes of all great art—whether produced by Christians or non-Christians—are the world and human life as they came from the hand of God; the world and human life as they now are subject to sorrow, sin, and death; and the world and human life as they will be when restored. Which theme predominates will vary from piece to piece in the work of any particular artist, and will vary from artist to artist depending on his or her belief system and experience of life. It is hard to imagine Tamar in her desolation after her rape, for instance, writing upbeat songs of joy. Indeed, it would be false if she were to write and sing such songs. Her life in this world was ruined by the wicked act of her half brother.

This means, too, that there will be no room for sentimentality in a Christian approach to the arts. Hagiographies, for example, which many Christian biographies are, have no place here. The Bible itself does not glorify human beings in this way. Rather, it speaks with deep and sometimes brutal honesty about the failures of the people of God. This, of course, is why we find reading the Bible to be such a comfort, for God's Word is about people like us, not plaster saints. Related to this issue are the many paintings of Christ in which his humanity is diminished to make Him appear "sweet." Simple integrity constrains us to communicate faithfully and truthfully, not only about people in the Bible, but about our current

human condition as well. Honest art will delineate human shame as well as human glory, not because we wish to wallow in that shame, but because it represents the truth about who we sometimes are.

Of course, the Christian artist should also be ready at all times to say simply and plainly, "My God and King!" We have many glorious examples of this in the poetry of George Herbert, John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T. S. Eliot.

Is Representational Art Forbidden by the Second Commandment?

Is representation forbidden in the visual arts? We all are familiar with the commandment that we are not to make a graven image, but if we read the whole commandment, we see that what is forbidden is idolatry, not representation in and of itself. This is simple to demonstrate by considering some of the examples of artwork that God commissioned specifically for His houses of worship. There were to be representations of cherubim (things in heaven above) in both the tabernacle and the temple; representations of pomegranates, almond blossoms, bells (things created by God and by man on the earth beneath) in the tabernacle; and lions, bulls, lilies, gourds, palm trees, wreaths, wheels, and other things, in the temple. These were designed at God's command, some according to exact instructions given by Him, others with considerable artistic freedom.

Some Christians attempt to resolve this issue of representational art by insisting that we no longer need such art now; they see it as "carnal," "unspiritual," or given specifically "for a time of spiritual immaturity or infancy." This view, however, is foolish, for the Bible tells us that both the tabernacle and the temple were patterned after a heavenly design, and the basic requisitioning was given by God Himself.

Nor will it do to declare that we only need the spoken and written Word now that Christ is come, for when we see Him face to face heaven itself will contain the cherubim and all the other realities that the tabernacle and temple decorations represented. And, most probably, we will find other representations in heaven as well, even though we will be in the presence of the realities. In fact, we might say that all sacraments, representations, and symbols we have been given will find fulfillment in the kingdom to come; they will not disappear, but rather, they will be fully present in all their glory. We will partake of the marriage supper of the Lamb, and the Lord's Supper will then find its consummation, for Christ Himself will serve us at his table. The tree of life will also be present for the healing of the nations.

The key here, of course, is that we ourselves will still be physical beings in the new heavens and the new earth, rather than being disembodied spirits. Therefore, we may conclude that physical representations of heavenly and spiritual things are always appropriate, for God created us to be eternally bodied.

This leads to a second area of consideration: what about representations of the Godhead in the visual arts and in literature? Are these necessarily blasphemous and idolatrous? What, exactly, is forbidden by the second commandment? Consider all the paintings people have made of Jesus, all the Christmas cards with manger scenes and the infant Christ, all the crèches, all the literary presentations of Christ (such as Aslan the lion in C. S. Lewis's Narnia stories)—are all of these idolatry? Are all of these blasphemous? Again, the answer here is not quite as obvious as some suggest.

Think of the many images and metaphors used for God in Scripture. God is a shepherd, He is a physician, He is the owner of a vineyard, He is one who rides His chariot in the clouds. Christ is vine, door, bridegroom, lion, lamb. The Spirit broods over the waters in metaphorical language that suggests a bird; and the Spirit also appears in the form of a dove. When we read such images, is it possible for us to read them and reflect on them without imagining a form in our minds? I do not think so, for feeding the imagination is the very purpose and intent of this language.

Look at Ezekiel 1 or Revelation 1 and ask yourself if it is possible to read these chapters without imagining pictures in your mind of what

Ezekiel and John are describing. In both cases, the writers struggle with words to represent to us something of what they have seen in their prophetic visions. If it were truly illegitimate to represent the Lord to us, then these descriptions would not be in Scripture. In fact, we may go further and suggest that, because these word pictures are given to us in Scripture, it is appropriate for us to have paintings or sculptures that include representations of Jesus, and also to have acted representations of Jesus in plays and movies.

Thinking about this issue at an even deeper level, we have to acknowledge that the incarnation itself does, of course, give the second person of the Godhead a particular physical form. The Son of God was incarnate in the likeness of man—and not a generic man, but rather, an actual individual person, a specific man, just like any other man we meet every day—apart, of course, from His moral perfection and His full conformity to the likeness of God.

Jesus the God-man could be seen, heard, and touched. People met Jesus and went away with a visual image in their minds and hearts of who He was and what He looked like. This was not a problem; it is impossible to suppose that His mother was disobeying the commandment against images when she cradled her infant son in her lap and looked at Him with love, or that later she was sinning whenever she pictured Jesus in her mind. In the same way, who can doubt that the disciples and all those whom Jesus healed kept glad memories of His face and form in their minds.

Seeing Jesus, the Son of God, very God of very God, and remembering Him cannot have been, then, for His contemporaries, a violation of the second commandment, nor will it be for us when we shall see Him face to face one day. Surely we cannot imagine that having seen Him in His glory we will ever forget His appearance!

If Jesus had become incarnate in our own time, photographs could have been taken of Him. We have to suppose that some of the children He played with as a young boy would have had artistic gifts and might have made sketches of Him; or that later in His life a few of the many thousands who heard Him speak might have made pictures of scenes of His teaching, just as our children's story Bibles have such pictures. In other words, we are saying that it is perfectly acceptable to visualize Christ.

We all have pictures of Jesus in our minds, first of all because He was fully human, and second, because of the vivid word pictures in Scripture. Indeed, I think that much of the time when we think about Jesus and events in His life, we picture Him, and we do this because it is completely natural for us to think this way. This means that all that is happening when we see a painting, sculpture, or acted portrayal of Jesus is that we get to see someone else's picture of Jesus. As long as it is faithful to Scripture, and as long as the intention of the artist is not to encourage worship of the image, surely this can only enrich our understanding of our Lord.

What about representation in drama? Again, this subject cannot be dismissed as lightly as it often is. God himself uses dramatic signs to communicate to us. Consider the rainbow, or the whole sacrificial system, or the Passover. The Lord's Supper and baptism are simple dramas displaying for us the nature of our redemption through Christ. The Old Testament is full of stories that are enactments in history of what God Himself has done and will one day do. See the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac; the life of David; the life of Joseph—each of these historical records pictures dramatically for us what God would do one day when Christ would come into the world. The incarnation itself is the greatest drama ever imagined or told, and whenever a preacher speaks about the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he is rehearsing this drama for those who are listening.

We also have several examples in Scripture of the prophets using drama to aid their spoken words. See the examples of Isaiah (8:1–4; 20:1–6), Jeremiah (13:1–11; 16:1–9; 18:1–11; 19:1–13), and Ezekiel (4:1–17; 5:1–4). Given these biblical illustrations of God commanding the use of dramatic actions and signs to go with the spoken

word, how can we possibly argue that the use of drama is an unspiritual accompaniment to the proclaimed Word? What possible biblical justification is there for frowning upon or condemning an appropriate use of drama within the context of the preaching of God's Word?

What about Abstract Art?

How should we think about abstract painting, sculpture, tapestry, and other visual forms of artistic expression? Some Christians think that all abstract art is somehow dishonoring to God and is necessarily uncreative. However, just think about some of the art in the tabernacle and temple; it is not all strictly representational. Consider as examples the seven-branched candelabra (almond branches and blossoms, but clearly not an exact likeness) or the pomegranates in various unrealistic colors on the garments of the high priest. Think also of every sunrise or sunset you have ever seen—each one is different and changes every second, producing a constantly shifting series of abstract designs made by the greatest master of all abstract painters! Think of moving sand dunes, or waves on the sea, or branches against the sky, or fall colors—everywhere we look, if we have eyes to see, we can begin to understand a little of where the abstract artist finds inspiration.

How Do We Judge the Arts?

We now come to another area about which Christians express a variety of passionate views. Often in magazine articles and on the radio, we can find preachers and commentators condemning all sorts of literature, music, and visual art. Certainly it is appropriate for us to test everything, to hold fast to that which is good, and to abstain from every form of evil, for Scripture commands us to do this. (In the context in 1 Thessalonians 5:20–22, these words of Paul are written about the discernment of prophecy, but we may quite appropriately apply them to the way we think about the arts as well).

There are objective standards by which we can judge any work of art, whether in music, literature, filmmaking, painting, sculpture, or dance. Our knowledge of the existence of such standards is partly a matter of giftedness and intuition, but perhaps even more a result of training and practice. In this the arts are like any other field of human endeavor, for the arts are not above judgment, nor is the artist. So, how do we judge the arts? Following are the beginnings of a list of appropriate criteria.

First, we need to ask whether giftedness from God is evident in the work of a particular composer or performer of music, poet or novelist, painter, sculptor, or film-maker. We should ask this question whether the artist is a Christian or not. We have already seen Calvin's thoughts about God giving gifts of grace to those who are not Christians. Now let us see how Abraham Kuyper applied Calvin's words in his own time:

> Calvinism, on the contrary, has taught that all liberal arts are gifts which God imparts promiscuously to believers and to unbelievers. "These radiations of divine light," he wrote, "shone more brilliantly among unbelieving people than among God's saints.". . . The highest art instincts are natural gifts, and hence belong to those excellent graces which, in spite of sin, by virtue of common grace, have continued to shine in human nature; it plainly follows that art can inspire both believers and unbelievers, and that God remains sovereign to impart it, in His good pleasure, alike to heathen and to Christian. . . . This applies not only to art, but to all the natural utterances of human life.[23]

Flannery O'Connor, the great novelist, wrote about art as a divine calling, and clearly believed that this calling is given by God to both believers and unbelievers:

> This is first of all a matter of vocation, and a vocation is a limiting factor which extends even to the kind of material that the writer

[23] Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1931), 160–1.

> is able to apprehend imaginatively. The writer can choose what he writes about, but he cannot choose what he is able to make live, and so far as he is concerned, a living deformed character is acceptable and a dead whole one is not.[24]

We have no space to develop this theme further here, but we should be able, I think, to express how we determine where we observe this gift for each area of the arts and in each particular form within that area.

Second, we should look for the dedicated development of the artist's gift through humble learning from others, through practice, and through faithful application—in other words, through hard work as the artist lives as a good steward of the gift God has given.

Third, we should find a commitment by artists to use their gifts for others as well as for their own fulfillment. For the Christian who is an artist, the most significant other to serve will be the Lord. For a Christian working in the arts, just as for a Christian working at anything else, there should be a commitment first to offer one's gift for the glory and delight of God (think of the movie *Chariots of Fire,* in which the Scottish racer Eric Liddell says, "When I run I feel God's pleasure"). There should also be the desire to use one's gift for the pleasure and enrichment of others. If either the creation of art or its performance is purely self-centered, even a great artist will not reach full potential, for God has made us to be other-centered. A Christian will also understand that every artist, both believer and unbeliever, will be seeking to express dominion over creation and to set back the consequences of the fall.

Fourth, there will be humble submission to the rules of one's discipline, respect for its traditions, and a readiness to find freedom of expression within these forms and within the forms of God's created order. No artist ever starts from an absolutely new beginning—except for the Lord Himself at the original creation. Any human artist is a sub-creator working within these creational and historical forms. Once more, remember that I am not suggesting that the development of new forms to express one's message and one's gifts is inappropriate, but rather, I am recognizing that all artists work within artistic traditions.

Fifth, we must ask ourselves: Is this work of art true? Is it in accord with reality? People cannot create their own universe. Rather, both Christians and non-Christians live, reflect, and work within the universe that God has made. This is true whether they acknowledge and worship him or not. The artist is bound by the reality of what God has created and cannot inhabit any other universe, for there is no other universe. Even when a person refuses to bow before the Lord, he or she must live in the Lord's world, and so, that person's art will have to be in touch with reality at some level, no matter what he or she may claim to believe. Only rarely will we find art that attempts to be completely consistent to some system of unbelief; but art that becomes pure propaganda for a totally false universe of the artist's making ultimately ceases to be art (consider the example of John Cage, with his chance music, which is no longer music, but merely noise).

All truly great art will appeal universally because of this element of truthfulness to the world as God made it and to the world of our human existence. Think of the worldwide appreciation of Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Consider also Jane Austen's appeal in a postmodern age; she is so evidently dealing with human relationships and moral questions that exist in all times and all places that, though her deeply held Christian convictions are thoroughly out of step with the beliefs and practices of our postmodern society, her novels have become increasingly popular, both in print form, and in the many movie versions of them. Austen's work touches deep chords in the human soul because she wrote truth.

Sixth, we need to bring any work of art before the bar of moral criteria. We must ask questions about the moral intention of the artist. Is the

[24] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1969), 27.

purpose of a work to deprave or corrupt? If a work contains immoral behavior or evil, what is the context? It should be evident to us that the Bible contains many accounts of wicked behavior, sometimes very graphically portrayed. Works of art must not necessarily be condemned because they contain such violence, but context and intention have to be considered.

The same is true with issues of cursing or blasphemy. It is not enough for Christians to say, "This movie or literature is full of blasphemy, therefore it is immoral and we are not to see or read such works." Think about the book of Job. It is full of blasphemy, for the trite comments about God and the easy answers to the problem of suffering that Job's comforters offer to him are false and ultimately dishonoring to God's name.

Christians can easily judge foul language and obvious blasphemy; I have no wish to defend such abuse of language or the dishonoring of God. But before we make such judgments about the way unbelievers curse and swear, we need to take the planks out of our own eyes. Think about the misuse of God's name by Christians—for example, saying, "God bless you!" when we do not really mean it; or, when we say, "I will pray for you," with no intention of actually doing so; or, when we pretend a devotion to the Lord and a deep spirituality that is far from genuine. Such misuse of God's name and such hypocrisy are as blasphemous as the open cursing in many movies or in some rap music.

So, we need to ask: What is the moral impact of reading or viewing this piece of work? There are, of course, "artistic" works that need to be judged and found wanting—such as the novels about the cannibalistic murderer Hannibal Lecter, where the intention clearly seems to be to create interest in appalling wickedness for its own sake. (Interestingly, the movies made from these novels have not been as bad in this regard as the books, for the actor who plays Lecter, Anthony Hopkins, is quite good and is able to invest the character with a humanity that is absent from the novels.)

Seventh, we must ask questions about appropriate continuity between the form and the content of a given work of art. Is the form the artist has chosen one that works with or against the message of the piece the artist is creating? Consider Eliot's fragmented form in *The Waste Land*, a poem of disconnected pieces, disparate images, constant variations in poetic form, and a lack of rational or linear progression. This structure (or, it might be better to say, lack of structure) is completely appropriate for Eliot's prophetic vision of a doomed postmodern world.

Eighth, in art as in any other area of human endeavor, we need to look for technical excellence. For the Christian especially, good work faithfully done is honoring to God.

Ninth, we should have a concern for how well a work of art reflects the integrity of the artist. Is the work true to who the artist is? Or is the work merely fashionable or commercial, or is it even false to the artist's own convictions and understanding? (We are not suggesting here that there is a problem with an artist getting appropriate pay for hard work; there is nothing inherently wrong with writing, making music, or painting in order to earn a living.)

Tenth, we should expect to see integrity in the work itself. For example, we all know that there is a difference between genuine sentiment and sentimentality. Does the artist seek to manipulate our emotional response by cheap tricks, or seek to generate genuine emotional response by the power of the work? Preaching is a helpful example here. Any experienced preacher knows how to make people cry or laugh, or how to produce many other responses through the power of the preached words; but, as the apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:2, God calls us to "renounce such disgraceful, underhanded ways and by the open statement of the truth commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." A preacher knows when he is manipulating people, and he also knows that such manipulation will not bring about deep repentance or genuine spiritual transformation in people's lives. What is true of the preacher is also true for the composer, hymn writer, filmmaker, poet, painter, and every other artist.

Eleventh, we must be aware that simple entertainment is fine in any of the art forms, for God created us to enjoy his gifts and one another's gifts. When we watch the sun going down or pick a rose for the table, we do not need to look for any thing other than the pleasure of the act itself. Human art, just like God's art, does not need to have a "higher" purpose. We may watch a movie, listen to music, read a book, or hang a painting simply because we like to do so. What matters here is the purpose or kind of the particular piece of art. The question is: Does this piece of art succeed at what it sets out to do?

There are additional factors we should take into consideration, as well as thinking about the matter of objective aesthetic criteria. Christians—and all others, for that matter—need to recognize that it is not appropriate to be elitist or snobbish about other people's likes and dislikes with regard to the arts. Of course, it is fine that we all enjoy books, films, and music that are not particularly good when judged by objective aesthetic criteria. Till the end of his life, C. S. Lewis enjoyed the stories of H. Rider Haggard, even though he did not regard them as great literature. Everyone has different tastes. My wife does not pretend to like fantasy literature, so she has never read *The Lord of the Rings*, even though it is a very great piece of literature. I do not think less of her because of this, though I myself have read the book at least twenty times. Another way to express this is to say that we must not regard artistic taste or pleasure as a moral issue or a matter of spiritual superiority; we should simply delight in the diversity of taste.

This is an important issue. It means that we must speak with great care about the pleasures of others. We do not want to make people feel inferior because they may like a work that is not great, or even good, by objective standards of quality. But, though we must respect people's likes and tastes, it is also essential to remember and to teach that there are objective standards by which books, films, or music, or any other art, should be judged. We ought to resist the "equalizing heresy" (about which Lewis wrote so well) that tells us that we must never regard some works as better than others, and that any mention of standards is necessarily elitist and snobbish.

It is important to teach that there are standards for judging the arts, no matter how popular a given work or artist may be, just as it is important to teach that we must judge theology, no matter how popular a given work may be. In some cases theological weaknesses and other problems must be pointed out, and appropriate questions about the quality of the writing (or filmmaking, or whatever) must be raised. No matter how carefully we speak, some people will be offended and will think we are being judgmental, or elitist, or snobbish; but this does not mean that we should be silent.

We also recognize that there is the matter of the heart. It may be that Aunt Jane, or Mr. Jones, or young Henry loves to play the piano and enjoys tapping out the music of hymns and songs of worship. Their hearts may be full of praise for the Lord as they do this, praise that He delights in, but this does not mean that it would be right and good to ask these persons to accompany the singing for our Sunday worship, if, objectively speaking, they are not skilled or trained musicians. King David appointed leaders for music and singing who were good at their work, and so must we.

In the same way, many of us love to sing, and even though we may be greatly out of tune as we do so, our heart devotion is most certainly pleasing to the Lord. But, we may be tone deaf, and therefore, out of love for our neighbors in worship, we need to restrain ourselves from singing loudly when we are in church so as not to distress their tuneful ears and make it difficult for them to sing their praises to the Lord. We must have skilled and competent musicians and song-leaders, but we also seek to encourage these musicians to serve the Lord in their hearts in the same way that Aunt Jane, Mr. Jones, or young Henry serve Him with love.

We need also to affirm that a person's artistic giftedness, even when it is great, does not make that person a better, greater, more virtuous, or more godly human being. Tolkien is a wonderful example here. He was, without doubt, the greatest

scholar of the past century in his field. He was also a gifted writer of stories and a thoroughly competent poet. However, he understood that this did not, in and of itself, make him a better person or a more important man in the kingdom of God. He realized that God had given him these gifts and that he was a servant who had an obligation to God to use his gifts faithfully. He knew that how God chose to use those gifts for the glory of His Kingdom was God's business. He also knew that how he loved God (including the way in which he used his gifts), how he loved his wife and children, and how he behaved to students, neighbors, colleagues, and tradesmen were the fundamental measures of his growth as a Christian—not the greatness of his gifts.

C. S. Lewis had this quality about him as well. He was a great scholar, teacher, and writer, yet he never became puffed up by the marvelous gifts God had given him. Both Lewis and Tolkien understood that they were stewards called to use their gifts wisely and well. But they also understood that it was their desire to please God by living a life of justice, mercy, and faithfulness in *all* they did that was important to the Lord. For Christians involved in the arts—or in anything else—there can be no higher calling than this.

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