

According to  
His Excellent Greatness

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The Practice of Aesthetics for  
Christians Today

Michael Minkoff, Jr.

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*—To Selah, Amity, Miles, and Ephrem*

May the realization of God's work in me  
lead to the revelation of His beauty in you.



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## Foreword

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**M**any years ago, when my son Michael was about eight, he and his mother visited the High Museum of Art in downtown Atlanta, Georgia.

The museum is a sculptural edifice featuring some of the most famous of past and present artists—the likes of Rembrandt, Picasso, and Warhol. As they came to one open exhibit area, they were confronted by an extremely large painting almost filling an entire wall. There was a couple standing in front of the painting in apparent contemplation. It was an unframed canvas, covered completely with blue paint with very visible brush strokes and two large white elliptical splotches. Michael approached the painting, pondered it for a few seconds, and exclaimed rather loudly, “You call that art?” The woman standing next to him replied, “My sentiments exactly!”

Although Michael’s comment was more an exclamation than a question, it does bring up some important issues: How do we as Christians distinguish between good and bad art? Between good and bad music or good and bad movies? By what measure do we define beauty? Is it true that beauty is in the eye of the beholder? Or are there objective principles by which we can evaluate and distinguish between beauty and ugliness, or even between more beautiful and less beautiful? Are we left to mere opinion as the ultimate determiner of all things beautiful?

Many artists, art critics, and philosophers past and present have offered their opinions regarding the useful-

ness of art. John Ruskin, one of the leading 19<sup>th</sup> century English art critics, said, “Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts—the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art.” Leo Tolstoy wrote a treatise entitled “What Is Art?” in which he said, “Art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen.” Oscar Wilde had a less optimistic opinion than his contemporaries: “All art is quite useless.” More recently, Pablo Picasso, arguably the most influential artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had a more pragmatic view: “I am only an entertainer who has understood his time.”

Do these responses answer the questions we have posed above? Although they may contain elements of truth, they miss the crux of the matter. If, in our investigation, we begin with man’s opinion, we will not arrive at the truth, no matter how sincere our motives or how diligently we search. We must begin with God’s Word if we are to have any hope of finding the truth in any issue.

But does the Bible even speak to these things?

As this book will show, the Bible has much to say on the subject. My son begins to answer all these questions by careful exposition, laying a biblical foundation for the discipline of aesthetics—for both the consumer (or commissioner) and the artist. He anticipates the reader’s questions and concerns by offering biblical precedents and practical examples that illuminate principles and put flesh on them. This book is shorter than you might have expected (or desired) for a study of this magnitude. After I read it, I wanted to read more. However,

its purpose is to lay the basic foundation for this study without exhausting the reader. *Applying* these principles to every conceivable art is for *us* to do.

I'm not an artist, art critic, or even a would-be philosopher, so why would I want to read a book about the discipline of aesthetics? This book is written for all of us—those involved in creating art, those involved in enabling artists in their work, as well as those of us who merely want to enjoy the artists' creations. Whether you're a person with no formal artistic training, an artist who wants to make better artistic choices, or a parent wanting to give your children a stronger biblical foundation in every endeavor of life—including art—this book has something to offer you.

Let me encourage the reader to take full advantage of the footnotes, and particularly the Scripture references. We must carefully and faithfully examine and sift these principles in the light of God's Word, retaining the wheat and discarding the chaff. In addition, the footnotes help to build a broader, richer understanding by adding humorous anecdotes, literary/historical/political insights, and intriguing "rabbit trails."

There will be some concepts or principles that may be new to you—as they were to me. Some ideas may challenge you, not necessarily in your ability to *grasp* them, but in your willingness to *accept* them. These concepts may never have occurred to you before or may vary from what is currently in common acceptance. Again, our evaluation of these principles must not be based on their common acceptance or our comfort level. Rather, we must consider whether or not they line up with the Bible. As my son says:

Recognizing the intrinsic monotony of merely human *experience* (Eccles. 1:9) and the manifest incompleteness of *reason* (Prov. 3:5–6), the Christian artist rests his hope on *revelation*—the evergreen Word of God which never perishes or loses its freshness (Isa. 40:7–8). Rather than stifling or marginalizing the artist’s work, revealed truth actually sets the Christian artist free from the constraints of his culture and the tyranny of his limited perspective (John 8:32). Revelation—the contact point of God’s transcendence and immanence—empowers the artist to discern the most fitting avenues for the expansion of Christ’s Kingdom in the arts.

This work is the culmination of years of research and careful consideration. It germinated in the mind of an eight-year old boy over two decades ago. It is the expression of his vision and commitment that we bring all areas of life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, including the discipline of aesthetics—both art and artist. I heartily commend this work for your instruction, edification, and enjoyment. May the Lord God be praised “according to His excellent greatness!”

–Mike Minkoff, Sr.  
Sugar Hill, Georgia  
November 7, 2012

# Preface

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Cicero once said, in so many words, “Nothing that can be said is so absurd that some philosopher hasn’t already said it.”<sup>1</sup> I tend to agree. There has never been a conjecture so stupid that its author could not with little effort claim the support of at least one credible source. I hope the reader will excuse me if I choose not to include certain pieces of information that *are* burdensome to me and *seem* useless to you. There are many times when I cannot remember the source of certain quotations or thoughts, cannot find them on the internet, and have no idea how to document that the thought is not completely my own.<sup>2</sup>

Few people actually check footnotes or even have the resources to do so.<sup>3</sup> So I wish to present this book as a long

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Treatises of M. T. Cicero: The Nature of the Gods; On Divination; On Fate; On the Republic; On the Laws; And on Standing for the Consulship*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878), 250. Now... wasn’t that helpful?

<sup>2</sup> It is probable that Pre-Modern authors had little documentation in their works because they did not have Google. Documentation, and even the writing process, must have been very tedious before the web-connected computer became widely available.

<sup>3</sup> Who owns a library so replete that he has multiple editions of numerous (possibly obscure) titles? I recently read an essay that contained quotations from a book that I happened to own, and, because the claims of the essay were rather speculative, I decided (with a friend) to look up the cited page numbers in order to analyze the context of the included quotations. But the author’s edition of the book was different from mine, the pagination was off, and my friend and I used the better part of two hours to look up three quotes. No wonder most readers don’t take note of citations.

essay similar to the ones published by thinkers of a time less stifled by futile aspirations to objectivity. In the end, please thoughtfully consider whether my opinions generally resonate with biblical truth, hold me personally responsible for any errors of thought or execution, and give God the credit for any truth you may find in this book, since all truth originates with Him anyway. This book is a *composition* in both the synthetic and creative senses of the word. As we all have heard many times (which in itself is no small irony), “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9).

On a different topic, it is difficult to balance the exposition of pure principle with the application of that principle to real circumstances. Many who sit under the expository preaching of pure doctrine long for more specific, practical advice for everyday living. Conversely, many who sit under the preaching of anecdotal application argue that the interpretations of men can sometimes corrupt the purity of biblical doctrine. I am not a preacher, but I have a similar difficulty. If this book proceeds no further than abstract principles, no matter how true or biblical those principles may be, some may claim that the book fails to apply to real circumstances. If I have too many applications, however, some will criticize me for straying too far from the Word into the realm of mere opinion.

I will attempt to use the applications in this book only as illustrations of how the aesthetic principles *may* be applied, but these applications are not intended as anything other than a way to make the principles more concrete to the reader. I encourage the reader to critically analyze my applications and to disagree with their relevance by all means, but one should

take the principles themselves seriously. I draw almost all of them directly from the Scriptures, and they are thus less subject to the errors of men.

God holds each man individually responsible for his deeds and opinions (2 Cor. 5:10). Many Christians defend the opinions they hold by citing respected leaders who hold those same opinions. God does not care how many men—even good men—hold a given opinion. If an opinion is wrong, it is wrong. My desire is that each person, considering his own unique circumstances, will apply the Bible to his life individually and take responsibility for the consequences of what he approves.<sup>4</sup>

I pray the Lord will give you discernment while you read this book, and that you will discard anything I write that is not true and edifying. After reading whatever portion of this book you find useful, I pray that you will no longer be unwittingly carried away by whatever tickles your fancy, but will rest more securely on God's Word, receiving art with more discernment and producing art with more wisdom, sacrificing whatever is necessary to prize whatever is profitable for God's glory and the expansion of Christ's Kingdom.

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<sup>4</sup> "Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves" (Rom. 14:22).



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# Introduction

**I**n Jay Adams' book, *A Christian Counselor's Manual*, Adams relates that one of his more sympathetic reviewers "claimed that using the Bible as a textbook for 'modern physics or geography or ship-building' [was] analogous to [Adams'] use of the Bible to meet human needs."<sup>1</sup> I thought to myself, "If well-intentioned Christians think the Bible unfit as a guide for counseling, how much more will they think the Bible unfit as a guide to aesthetics!"

But a biblical perspective on aesthetics is not only possible, it is *necessary*. In this introduction, I will give an account of the approach I am taking while arguing against some misconceptions concerning the Bible's application to aesthetics (and other purportedly neutral disciplines).

## WHAT IS THE BIBLE GOOD FOR?

I fully adhere to the declaration: "The Bible is infallibly authoritative on everything about which it speaks, and it speaks about everything."<sup>2</sup> Many, such as the sympathetic reviewer of Adams' book, would say that this statement

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, [1973] 1986), 18n23.

<sup>2</sup> I borrowed this phrase from Reverend Joe Morecraft, III. He is the teaching elder at Chalcedon Presbyterian Church in Cumming, Georgia, the church into which I was born.

could not be true since the Bible says virtually nothing on the subjects, for instance, of “modern physics or geography or ship-building.” Such a contention would indicate a very limited perspective on the application of God’s Word.

Consider that the three subjects mentioned, to which list could be added an almost infinite litany of other subjects, concern the physical world and its properties. This physical world in which we live is one of two distinct revelations of God’s character. According to Paul, God’s “invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. . . .” (Rom. 1:20). Given this fact, any subject concerning God’s revelation of himself (i.e., all subjects—even modern physics, geography, and shipbuilding<sup>3</sup>)

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, the sympathetic reviewer may be interested to know that the Bible can be or has been applied to each of the subjects he mentioned. Modern physics (per Einstein) has only recently posited that the speed of light is so constant that time and space will distort before the speed of light alters even a bit. It seems to be a universal point of reference for Creation. This would make sense, since God created light before he created anything else, and often uses it as an analogy of His unchanging nature. (Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* [New York: Three Rivers Press, 1961], 21–22.) Richard Hakluyt, one of the cartographers who drew accurate maps of the New World for the purpose of accomplishing the evangelization of the peoples across the Atlantic, resolved to become a cartographer after being inspired by “certain bookes of cosmographie, an universall mappe, and the Bible,” specifically Psalm 107. (Richard Hakluyt, *Divers Voyages touching the Discoverie of America* [London: n.p., 1582], quoted in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. XII. [New York: 1910], 828.) Recent scholarship indicates that Ancient Chinese boat-builders found out through experiment that wooden boats could not be longer than 450 feet (about 300 cubits) because wooden

should be submitted to God's special revelation of Himself in His Word. Since both the creation and the Word are revelations of God, the two will never disagree, but we should subordinate our interpretation of creation to the Word for at least two reasons:

1. The creation is corrupted by sin (Gen. 3:17–19) so that it is no longer a full and clear revelation of God's character, but is "subjected to futility" (Rom. 8:19–21).
2. As the source of sin's corruption of creation, man cannot be trusted as a source for truth—especially when he is in rebellion against God. God gave the Word, not Creation, for the renewal of man's mind.<sup>4</sup>

For this reason, the foundational principles of any discipline should be drawn from the Bible since we know that God's words are sure and pure because God keeps them (Prov. 22:12). As the only perfect revelation of God's character,<sup>5</sup> the Bible is the only wholly reliable revelation of Truth. Therefore, the foundations of any discipline should be in the Scriptures,

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boats longer than this would break apart on the waves. Noah, who did not have access to such experimentation or time to do his own, received this information on shipbuilding by the Word of God's mouth. (Xin Yuanou, *Guanyu Zheng He baochuan chidu de jishu fenxi* [*A Technical Analysis of the Size of Zheng He's Ships*] [Shanghai: 2002], 8.) The sympathetic reviewer, like many others, incorrectly surmises that substantive silence means principal irrelevance. If this were the case, the Bible would be useless in its entirety for any purpose not explicitly outlined in circumstantial detail: "You said that I should not steal, but you never said I couldn't take a candy bar from the convenience store."

<sup>4</sup> Ps. 14:1–3; Prov. 28:26; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 1:21.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 12:6–7; 119; Isa. 40:8; Matt. 5:17–18; 2 Tim. 3:16.

and the findings or production of any discipline should be re-evaluated in any area where they even seem to disagree with the clear teaching of the Scriptures—in order to find the source of the discrepancy and remove it. Human wisdom and authority derive from God’s wisdom and authority, and are, therefore, naturally subordinate and inferior.<sup>6</sup>

### A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR AESTHETICS: METHOD AND MEANING<sup>7</sup>

Books on aesthetics often read like art appreciation textbooks: documenting different artistic movements and their representative artists, taking up hundreds of pages to present a more or less exhaustive description of the path artists *have* taken without much discussion of the path artists *should* take. Aesthetic philosophers prefer the descriptive over the prescriptive because of the generally held principle that beauty is *subjective*. But we as Christians should draw a distinction between the aspects of art that have no *necessary* moral content—forms and methods—and those aspects that compose the moral and ideological pith, the *meaning*, of art. Though artists may produce

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<sup>6</sup> Isa. 29:14; Rom. 3:4; 1 Cor. 1:18–25.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the book, *aesthetics* means “the disciplined study of beauty.” “Art” refers to mostly visual or aural representations of reality with an aim to instruct and to please an audience. This could include literary, visual, graphic, theatrical, aural (musical), or cinematic expressions. They all have this in common: they apply a particular standard of beauty through a particular medium for the purpose of establishing a particular view of the world in a way that engages and entertains the sense(s) and instructs the understanding of an audience.

art through any number of valid methods, the *meaning* of a given art object—the intent and ideological content of it—is *not* merely subjective. Most good artists seamlessly interweave meaning and method, but the discerning Christian will not allow a beautiful form to deter him from making a righteous judgment. An assessment of aesthetic *appearances*, no matter how accurate, cannot satisfy the godly man—he will seek to discern the *motives* of art.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the appearance orientation of men, God does not delineate the necessary form or appearance of things in the Bible, but instead gives underlying principles that derive flesh from their application in the lives of saints through the working of the Spirit. One who alters the form or appearance of a thing makes an only temporary change. Lasting change is *radical*—it comes from the root.<sup>9</sup> As Jesus said, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). To think that good prescriptions for the form of things will result in lasting change to the root of things is similar to thinking that putting water purification tablets in your cup of water will purify the polluted spring from which you drew.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian cannot ignore appearances altogether, but he

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Sam. 16:7; Prov. 20:5; John 7:24.

<sup>9</sup> “Radical” means “deriving from the root.” In this sense, Christians are all called to be “radical.”

<sup>10</sup> Consider Paul’s treatment of the “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” fallacy which assumed spiritual change could be effected by external conformity to a set of human conventions (Col. 2:20–23).

should learn to interpret appearances first as *effects* rather than *causes*. Forms follow the dictates of foundations, and foundations are laid in the heart. Lasting change to the compromised discipline of aesthetics must occur in its foundation—then it will manifest that change in a burgeoning variety of profitable and God-pleasing forms. Consequently, this book seeks to uncover a biblical *foundation* for aesthetics.

The *method* of aesthetics, as distinct from its foundation, is a *scientific* discipline in the sense that it researches God’s revealed character in the physical world through experiment. The “technology” or “applied science” of art implements God’s guidelines for what can and should be called “beautiful,” usually by presenting various solutions of balance to paradoxical<sup>11</sup> tensions (such as variety/order, free will/determinism, plurality/wholeness, justice/mercy, movement/stillness, conflict/resolution, field/ground, authorship/transparency, durability/accessibility, etc.) This part of aesthetics will manifest itself in many divergent forms, and should not be overly delimited by the dictates of any particular taste. There is no intrinsic superiority of chocolate over vanilla, some groupings of colors over others, one medium over another, etc. God intends this variety, and God loves it. He called it all good.

The use of one work of art over another should depend on the appropriateness of the situation and the “need of the

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<sup>11</sup> I define “paradox” as a “seeming contradiction.” None of the things mentioned are truly in opposition, but the finite mind has difficulty grasping both things as true simultaneously. This tension, then, exists within our fallen and/or finite frame, not in God’s created order.

moment” for the purpose of edification.<sup>12</sup> Jesus wore sandals. This is not a divine pronouncement that sandals are universally superior footwear, though we can say that Jesus’ choice of sandals was perfect in all its aspects for the circumstances in which He was placed. We also must apply ourselves to the wisdom of the Scriptures to learn discernment for the application of God’s standards. No substantive application to a set of circumstances will likely hold for all time or all circumstances, though the content of the Word of God and its underlying principles stand forever.<sup>13</sup>

Though the Bible may not prescribe a particular method for all aesthetical endeavors, it contains plain teachings on the *meaning* of aesthetics. By “the meaning of aesthetics,” I am primarily referring to two things: the *context* and *consequences* of a work of art’s production or reception. The context involves *permissibility*, whereas the consequences involve *profitability* (1 Cor. 6:12).

Consider the circumstances preceding the first human sin: Eve looked on the forbidden fruit and, among other things, saw that “it was a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6). She made an intrinsically sound judgment of the fruit given the fact that God had created it: surely it must have been beautiful. But she failed to view the fruit in its larger spiritual context, and she failed to remember the consequences of consuming the fruit that, in itself, was good. The *context* was God’s command; the *consequences* were death and suffering.

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<sup>12</sup> Eph. 4:29; Prov. 25:11.

<sup>13</sup> Ps. 33:11; Isa. 40:6.

The criteria the world applies to aesthetic endeavors are actually similar to Eve's criteria, and, in themselves, they are not bad. It is not wrong to ask whether a given art object is useful, pleasing, or good to make one wise, but these questions are largely unimportant unless they are subordinate to the question, "*What has God said* concerning this activity or endeavor?" By applying this criterion to every stage of aesthetic endeavor—starting with the consumer and moving through the stages of the artistic process back to the artist—we will derive a working understanding of the biblical foundation for aesthetics.

## Dying of Consumption

**I**n most Western countries, Adam Smith's successful free market mechanisms could not be contained by the field of economics and quickly developed into political and social libertarianism. However, the broadly libertarian application of *laissez-faire* policies to the social realm does not always comport with biblical laws (e.g., concerning homosexuality and abortion).<sup>1</sup> Rushdoony said that the source of a people's law is that people's god.<sup>2</sup> In these United States, capitalism has gained primacy over other forms of law because money has become our supreme god.<sup>3</sup> Let us take a brief jaunt through the history of art and the market to see how despecialized capitalism has affected the arts, and let us determine whether these changes harmonize with sound doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup> Lev. 20:13; 20:2–5; Exod. 21:22–23.

<sup>2</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, Vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), 4.

<sup>3</sup> This is one of the reasons why "God" has been removed from every government-affiliated public article *except* money. The statement "In God We Trust" is still true of these United States; we have left that name on our "god" of choice.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION

The idea of the consumer has quietly become one of the most important ideals of Western society, and its subtle influence has laid the groundwork for egalitarianism and its attending tyranny more intractably than any French or Russian style revolution ever could. Before we go much further, it is important to define the “consumer” and to discuss how this concept, ostensibly harmless at its inception, has become so destructive.

The economic sense of *consumer* (opposite of *producer*) is first recorded in 1746.<sup>4</sup> Of peculiar interest is the fact that one of the first pieces of Western classical music to be supported by the market rather than through the patron system opened April 13, 1742. This was the opening of Handel’s *Messiah*. There were patron musicians after this date, but clearly a sea change was overwhelming Europe—the market and the masses wanted direct control over what they received as art.

As some have painted the picture, the market system finally delivered art to the people, rescuing it from the straitjacket of highbrow traditionalism like a Prometheus delivering aesthetic fire to the huddled playthings of the callous aristocratic art-snob gods. On the contrary, the patron system effectively provided excellent art to the masses, often at no cost. And as evidenced by the *groundlings*, who paid a paltry sum to see Shakespeare’s plays, even the poorest, most common people could afford great art, and unlike the “liberated” masses of our day, they could *appreciate* it too.

The question is not whether or not common people paid

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<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

to see the work of sponsored artists, but whether or not the common people had any *control* over what was produced. Shakespeare was sponsored by the Queen or by various theatre producers. In these cases, Shakespeare had to please the Queen or the producer with his work; he was not subject directly to the groundlings. Artists became more and more subject to the direct criticism of the masses as their work became less and less supported by a patron system. It is an incontestable fact that this has resulted in a degradation of the quality of art overall. But why?

Is it because the common people are all uninformed or stupid? Do not think it. I read of a psychological experiment where a woman cried out for help in a room adjacent to a varied number of test subjects who were filling out preliminary papers with no idea that they were already in an experiment. Almost invariably, if there were many subjects in the room when the woman cried for help, no one would come to her aid. But when a bystander was alone, he would just as invariably attempt to help the woman in need.<sup>5</sup> Why? When a bystander was alone, he considered himself to have full responsibility to help the woman in distress, but when there were others around, each subject assumed that *someone else* would take care of the problem. Any parent can corroborate the results of this experiment—every child assumes someone else will “do the dishes” or “vacuum the family room.” What about paying a common bill at a restaurant? No matter the circumstances,

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<sup>5</sup> B. Latane & J. Rodin, 1969, "A lady in distress: Inhibiting effects of friends and strangers on bystander intervention," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 5, 189–202.

the contributed total always seems to come up short, and, of course, it's nobody's fault. When a job is no one's particular responsibility, no one will take responsibility to do it.

When we apply this to the market, we can see how the consumer concept has encouraged the irresponsibility which defines the arts today. Though "the masses" may control the market, a lone consumer feels that his decisions have little impact on his future options for consumption. He just consumes from whatever the market provides; he doesn't think he has any real say over what gets to the feeding trough. A patron, on the other hand, is held accountable for the quality of the art he endorses for public consumption. Patrons would often fire their artists for some fiscal, moral, or aesthetic impropriety. A bad artist reflected poorly on the patron, and the patron could not hide behind the guilt-displacement mechanism of incorporation.

Today, we have a different story. No man can be held responsible for the state of the arts. The guilt for the abysmal state of "pop" art has been so evenly compartmentalized over all sectors of the market as to be virtually inscrutable on an individual basis. But an interesting dynamic develops in all egalitarian systems. Since choice and responsibility are inseparably connected, whenever one renounces responsibility for his actions, he forfeits his power of choice, transferring it over to whomever is willing to take responsibility for the consequences. This means that insurance companies will gain more control over the use of our insured property and our insured bodies. The civil government is gaining more control over our income, jobs, education, etc. The situation

is no different in the arts. When a person takes upon himself the egalitarian moniker of “consumer,” he unwittingly cedes control of his choices over to the uncontrollable forces of the market, which have always trended toward the lowest common denominator. He trades the burdens of responsibility for slavery to someone else’s choices.

### TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR CHOICES

So how does the consumer break out of this cycle? First, the consumer must start taking responsibility for his aesthetic choices. We must understand that when we pay a dollar into the market, we are saying, “Make more of this. I think this product is perfect.” One could say, “Perfect? I never said anything was perfect. I just haven’t found anything better to spend my money on.” But you could not pay \$150 for a \$300 dollar painting based on the fact that the work was only half as good as you would have wanted. No, you must spend the full amount, just the same amount you would have spent if you could not have been more pleased with the purchased work. You think, “Meh, this is pretty good, I guess.” But the market hears, “Bravissimo! Fantastic!” This means that the market will always produce more of what is paid for, but this does not always mean it will produce more of what is wanted. Because what is paid for is not always what is wanted. Most are in the position of taking the *least undesirable* option available and convincing themselves of or resigning themselves to its goodness after purchase.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “‘It is bad. It is bad,’ says the buyer, but when he has gone his way, then he boasts” (Proverbs 20:14).

Elections display the illusion of choice that plagues democracies.<sup>7</sup> Do the majority of Americans today wholeheartedly desire to elect any of the available candidates? No. But most still choose from within the options given. They choose that option which is *least undesirable* to them. What about the Narnia movies? Did any of the Christians watching the film *Prince Caspian* actually want the teen romance and pre-pubescent smooching? I don't think so. So why was this "mild" lewdness in the movie? Because we have not refused to watch *other* children's movies which have also included such seemingly harmless, but actually subversive, tastelessness.

Shortly after Dick Dawkins's *The God Delusion* came out, there was a mysterious un-woodworking of atheist literature. I should rephrase—shortly after it came out *and became popular*. But who popularized this book? Christians who felt a need to defend their faith, people who like to be astride of the latest controversy, and maybe a few agnostics and atheists who would not have had the capital to bring this book into the public eye on their own. Without the commercial success of *The God Delusion*, we would not have had to endure all the other books I do not desire to name. Bottom

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<sup>7</sup> By democracy, I mean it in the Greek sense—the sense of *pure* democracy or mob rule. These United States were never intended to be a democracy, but rather a republic. In a democracy, the majority rules and authority is derived from the people. In a Christian republic, the Law rules and it is enforced by democratically elected officials that derive their authority from God rather than the people. Long ago, our representatives stopped upholding the law, and chose instead to uphold public opinion. We are therefore, unfortunately, living in a democracy.

line: each consumer should take full responsibility for the artistic work he purchases or chooses because his choice does *actually* and *measurably* affect the possible choices he and his neighbors will have in the future.

This means we must be willing to *refuse to choose* if there is not a God-honoring choice available to us. We must learn to understand that we are more *commissioners* than consumers. If we did not pay for a particular kind of art, it would cease to exist. By paying for a particular art, we commission the market to make more art just like it. Therefore, we as Christians must make a commitment of faith to support good Christian art where we find it, and to withhold our dollars from the vast majority of non-Christian art *whenever we can*, which is nearly always.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps a startling thing that many Christians will find very difficult to believe, much less practice. Is it really true that we are to withhold our dollars from non-Christian art? What about non-Christians in general? How does one define non-Christian art?

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<sup>8</sup> I point out some possible exceptions to this general rule in Chapter 8: Applications and Questions (pp. 127–128).



## What the Bible Says About Art

**T**he Bible speaks about subjects in two basic ways: indirectly in normative and historical examples, and directly in injunctions or commands. The Bible contains many indirect references to art—it narrates the forms and function of temple worship and contains much poetry and imaginative literature. It also contains many commands that apply to sacred and secular art.

Most of the normative and historical examples of art in the Bible concern music and sculpture (or engraving). Music, with lyrics and instrumentation, has a long-term inter-covenantal primacy in the worship of God. Sculpture and visual art, though hardly emphasized in the New Testament, played a large role in Old Testament worship. Within the archetypes of poetry and sculpture, we find the two main kinds of art. Art that largely relies on the sanctified imagination to deliver its meaning can be called *symbolic* art, though it is not necessarily abstract and may contain very vivid, concrete expressions. Art that relies primarily on the exercise and discipline of the senses can be called *sensory* art, though it may rely on complex symbols and visual metaphors.

The largest portion of symbolic art is creative writing, although heavily semiotic<sup>1</sup> visual art (like interpretive dance

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<sup>1</sup> “Semiotics” is the study of signs and symbols and how they are

and abstract painting) could also qualify for this category. Architecture, sculpture, engraving, most kinds of painting, dance, and music all fall roughly into the category of sensory art. All art contains elements of both symbol and physicality, but most types lean more heavily to one or the other.

If we are to study art in general, we must apply what the Bible says in particular, understanding that our applications must be open to further clarification as the church is purified over time. A brief discussion of the place of art in Old Testament Hebrew culture may help us understand how art should be used on this side of the cross.

Unlike the pagan cultures of its day, the Hebrew culture did not strictly separate art from daily life. Art was integrated into many common everyday activities, thus infusing these daily activities with metaphorical and semiotic value.<sup>2</sup> This should not be overlooked. For the faithful Israelite, the metaphorical was to be informed by the real. The monolithic projections of religious abstraction that characterized the enemies of Jehovah did not characterize Israel. In many ways, her art was *integrated* into her walk with God.

A Hebrew had externally applied significance surrounding him from his youngest days. From memorial stones to festival

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used to communicate. "Semiotic" refers to the heavy use of representative symbols to communicate an underlying meaning.

<sup>2</sup> For example, all the Hebrew's clothes had to be made from only one kind of material (Lev. 19:19); they let the land lie fallow every Sabbath year (Exod. 23:10–11). There are many other examples of an externally applied significance to common actions or things. An externally applied significance is at the heart of artistic purpose and meaning.

days, the Hebrew world was constructed out of moral metaphors. It follows that biblical art is *both* concrete and highly symbolic. Biblical art derives its power from the fact that God crafted the world as a revelation of His character, and therefore the universe displays both method and meaning—it is God’s art. David did not see shepherding as just a job, but as a metaphor that eventually found shape in Psalm 23. One of the greatest examples of this applied significance can be found in Ecclesiastes 12:1–8, where Solomon draws a masterful comparison between the winding down of work in a city and the unraveling of a man’s life before he dies.

This applied significance found its culmination in the sacraments as the Lord’s Supper and Baptism replaced Passover and Circumcision after the final expansion of God’s Covenant of Grace.<sup>3</sup> The sacraments bring to light the real question of importance between Christian and non-Christian art: who is allowed to apply significance and meaning to the world through art, and who is the judge of whether or not these applications are valid?

In the Bible, God applies significance to the world. We are forbidden to apply an autonomous meaning to the world because the application of meaning is authoritative labeling (also called *naming*), and naming is reserved ultimately to the One in authority.<sup>4</sup> While God made Adam responsible for naming the animals, and parents for naming their children,

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<sup>3</sup> Col. 2:8–12; 1 Cor. 5:7–8.

<sup>4</sup> In Genesis 3:5, Satan promises Eve the ability to be like God, *determining* good and evil for herself. This drive toward autonomy is the first thing God sees fit to prohibit.

he has simply made us *stewards* of a great gift. But the gift is not ours. We do not possess *inherent* authority, but *delegated* authority. When we abuse a stewardship, God reserves the right to take it away.<sup>5</sup> We have a responsibility to name as God would have us name. There is great freedom in this, but there is also a terrible responsibility. Nabal's parents may have regretted naming him *Fool*, since he seems to have turned out to be a very great one. One asks the question, "Would Nabal have still been a fool had he been named *Sage*? Did his name end up being a self-fulfilling prophecy?" This question cannot be answered. Authoritative labeling invokes the intersection of free will and predestination because we are most like our God when we create like He did.<sup>6</sup> His labels are so powerful that whatever He speaks *is*. Our labels mimic that power as they apply a creative significance to what already exists. And here's the rub—one can apply the wrong meaning to the world. And when an artist does this, he makes bad art.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Sam. 15:26; Matt. 12:9.

<sup>6</sup> God honors the authority He lent us, as our free choices in time are part of His eternal plan. This issue does not require an either/or distinction. We flatter ourselves if we believe that we cannot be directed and managed without our knowledge. Every single day, advertising that would insult the intelligence of a pickle convinces millions that they actually want useless products that they neither need nor really desire. And we think the Creator of the Universe can't figure out how to both give us our own free way and organize all things according to His plan? Consider that a musical composition is finished before it is played. The composer may say that he is finished with the composition before the first violin touches bow to string. In the same way, God's composition of history is already complete, but we are all part of its first and only performance. And in a sense, God wrote billions of *cadenzas* (solo improvisations) into his composition.

## WHAT IS BAD ART?

By bad art, I do *not* mean art that is made by non-Christians. Who could know what that is? A man who seems very devout and godly can turn out in the end to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Do his artistic achievements suddenly transform from being edifying and constructive to destructive and worldly? Not necessarily, though one may be tempted to unfavorably re-interpret his achievements. Our standard for judging art must be distinct, though not completely separate, from the artist producing the work. What does the Bible say about art? Does it say anything about non-Christian art? What is bad art, anyway?

Bad art applies the wrong meaning or a false significance to reality. An artist can deny God and attempt to make the world out in his own image through the power of authoritative labeling, and the skills he employs and the pleasure he evokes can often convince an audience that what they see and feel is true. This is the power of art, and the danger of art made by those who hate God. Bad art then is the *presentation or representation of reality that has the effect of advancing a lie or obstructing the advancement of the truth*. One must be careful with this definition. Is art necessarily unedifying because the artist intends it as an obstruction of the truth? What if the artist consciously intends nothing at all (a faint possibility)? What if the viewer is directed to a lie when the artist intended to advance the truth?

After Aaron crafted the molten calf for the Israelites at the foot of Sinai, they said, "This is your God who brought

you up out of Egypt.”<sup>7</sup> They applied a significance to this art object that advanced a lie. This was bad art. But this does not mean that molten calves are forbidden by God henceforth. Notice that Solomon, with the apparent approval of God, as evidenced by God’s indwelling of the temple, commissioned Hiram of Tyre to build many bronze sculptures including twelve molten *oxen* that held up an enormous bronze bath outside the temple (1 Kings 7:25). These oxen remained until Ahaz—who was, ironically, an infamous idolater—removed them at the counsel of Assyria’s king (2 Kings 16:17).

Do you remember what became of the gold of the golden calf? It was burned, turned to dust, and sprinkled in Israel’s water supply (Exod. 32:20).<sup>8</sup> God later commanded the people to burn all idols with fire. He instructed them not to desire the gold or silver of the idols. He viewed the gold and silver *in themselves* as an abomination since they had been used in the creation of an idol (Deut. 7:25). Recognize how radical a command this is. God had called that gold good after the creation week. Now, He calls it an abomination. What about the bronze serpent that Moses made at God’s command? Surely this was not wicked. Yet the godly king Hezekiah destroyed it when it had become “Nehushtan” because the people of Israel were worshipping it instead of the God who was their true Redeemer (2 Kings 18:4). In Ezekiel 16:6f, God condemns

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<sup>7</sup> Exod. 32:4; Neh. 9:18.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that the water of idolatry that the Israelites were forced to drink resembles the water of adultery used in the test of jealousy (Num. 5:11–31). Given the fact that many of the Israelites were struck dead after this golden calf incident, it seems they failed the test. They were in fact “playing the harlot” with other gods.

Israel (figured as a young woman) for taking the beautiful endowments He had given her and using them for idolatries and “harlotries.” He says that Israel had made her “beauty abominable” (Ezek. 16:25). The things God gave her were beautiful, but she made them abominable in idolatry.

We see from these examples that a good thing in itself can become an abomination when it becomes inextricably tied to what God has called wicked. We also see that the *possibility* for wickedness or even the past use for wickedness does not keep a thing from being good and edifying in the right context. And we see that a particular thing may be morally good, even commanded by God, in its inception but may later need to be rejected because of the destructive effect it is having on its audience, sometimes through no fault of its own. Again, we come back to those two crucial aesthetic markers: the context and consequences of a work.

The resemblance between art and science runs deeper than most may think. Consider that one’s acceptance of a given scientific “discovery” largely depends on how that discovery is being used (i.e., what that discovery is being used to “prove”). In the same way that an aesthetic representation of reality can advance a lie, a scientific representation of reality can be used to impose a seemingly authoritative, though invalid, label on the commonly available evidence.

The most contemporary instance of this process, the religion (or mythology) of Darwinism, has not only reinterpreted the significance of previous scientific discoveries, but has also started to produce entirely new representations of reality that have little or no connection to real evidence.

Have you ever noticed that the famous progression of man from primate to biped, the embryological comparison of animals and man, and the geological column are all *drawings*? Does the Big Bang hypothesis depend on observable, repeatable, or in-the-present phenomena (if we overlook the science-fiction-induced mirage that is latent Gravity Wave detection)?<sup>9</sup> What about the interpretation of the fossil record? The ideas of “punctuated equilibrium” and “planetary evolution” should prove just how lacking in evidence the theory of Darwinism really is.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gravity Waves, according to the quacks that try to detect them, are “ancient” waves produced by the Big Bang that are still inherent in the fabric of the universe. Many very expensive instruments have been constructed to detect these waves which have apparently remained in the universe like the ever-growing ripples in an infinite pool after a large man has jumped into it. Many evolutionary scientists believe that if we could detect gravity waves, we would be able to detect exactly how the universe came into being (and how long ago this occurred), since the waves would be a generally unaltered physical memory of that event. Of course, detecting these waves is nearly impossible. Even if they are in existence, they would be fainter than any of the “new” energy that is being propagated in the universe, and a scientist on an earth-based detection mechanism would be more likely to detect the underground rumblings of a New York subway than the distant remainders of a speculated event.

<sup>10</sup> “Punctuated Equilibrium” was first adopted by the late Stephen Jay Gould. It dictates that macro-evolution advances very rapidly for short periods of time every epoch or so and then lies dormant for as many epochs as is convenient. This theory was meant to explain the uncanny lack of any intermediate species in the fossil record as well as the fact that macro-evolution has never been detected in even one studied species in all of human history. “Planetary Evolution” was first made famous (as *panspermia*) by Francis Crick (of DNA double-helix fame) and is now being endorsed tentatively by such a “heavy-weight” as Dick Dawkins. It theorizes that life on

Artistic endeavors work in exactly the same way as scientific endeavors. Artists present *selected* portions of reality organized in such a way as to convincingly transmit their particular view of the world. When reality is in short supply for their views, they make stuff up. Even an “objective” photograph presents the artist’s perspective, since the photographer selected *that* frame out of all the possible frames he could have chosen. I am not recommending that the artist try to present a whole picture of reality in every work. This is simply not humanly possible (or *desirable* for that matter) because we are temporal and spatially finite beings. But we must attempt to depict a *true* picture of reality within that limited scope appropriate to a given artistic project.<sup>11</sup>

I am not condemning fiction either. Jesus made many of his points, even *most* of his points, in fictional parables. What I am recommending is discernment. Without the divine revelation of a transcendent God, our finite forays into the world of truth will merely commence another parade of vanity—possibly pretty, but ultimately damning and useless.

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earth could have been “seeded” by an ancient alien civilization. This is meant to explain away the design earmarks of terrestrial life as well as compensate for the supposed lack of time necessary for life to evolve on earth by chance from scratch. The obvious question would be, “But where did the aliens come from?” The “beauty” of the theory is that this does not matter until we are actually able to visit all the planets in the universe. No one expects this to be an accomplished reality soon so they “trade space for time” in their retreat from the onslaught of reality.

<sup>11</sup> I explore what this means in more depth in Chapter 4, under the heading “Whatever is True” (pp. 36–42).



## The Importance of Discernment

**L**et us suppose that an evolutionary scientist presents you with some discovery he has made in his research. He tells you that certain plant roots receive sunlight that has been transported to their underground location through tubules in their stems. He says that these tubules strongly resemble fiber-optic cables, but that they are so much more precise than man-made cables that the roots don't just receive light: they actually receive a crystal-clear image of the *view* from above. You praise God for His wisdom, but the scientist does not give God any credit. In fact, the scientist thinks upon his discovery with a wonder and amazement of a different sort: "Isn't it amazing what can happen given enough time and chance? Mother Nature sure knows what she's doing." But we are missing the point. Is the finding itself to be rejected simply because an evolutionary scientist has "discovered" it? Not necessarily.

How about this: a friend invites you over to his house. He turns on his finely tuned audio system and out of the speakers comes the most beautiful music you have ever heard in your life. It grips you. You ask your friend who composed it. He says that it is the recent work of Ima Pagan. You are surprised, maybe confused. You wonder whether you should support Ima Pagan. You have heard of this thing

called “common grace,” but most of the people you have heard use the term seem more concerned with what is permissible than what is profitable. What are we to do with these examples? Doesn’t there seem to be a sliding line here somewhere?

The Scriptures say that “the plowing of the wicked is sin” and that “the treasure of the wicked is stored up for the righteous.”<sup>1</sup> It does not say that the *idols* of the wicked are stored up for the righteous, but as we have seen before, some of the things that can make idols for idolaters can make edifying things for the righteous. Still, we should not keep idols as idols, but rather destroy them.<sup>2</sup> In a world where idols are rarely fashioned as figurines of wood or stone, silver or bronze, what are we to do? It can sometimes be very difficult to discern what constitutes an idol. How do we discern between what is gold, what is an idol, and what is the gold of an idol? This question requires wisdom and discernment.

### DINING IN AN IDOL’S TEMPLE

Unless a thing has been completely defiled by idolatry, it can be edifying in the right context, even if it is or has been enjoyed sinfully by idolaters on other occasions. Paul indicates this principle concerning meat that has been sacrificed to idols:

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed

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<sup>1</sup> Prov. 21:4; Prov. 13:22.

<sup>2</sup> Exod. 34:13; Deut. 7:5.

there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:4–13)

In another place, Paul says that “anything that is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). As a recently convicted commissioner of art, what then is your responsibility?

If you are going to receive the art of a non-Christian, it must not be an idol in itself, even if you are not tempted to worship it. But God has declared certain beautiful objects morally undefiled even if they may have been devoted to idolatry in certain unrelated instances. Like the consecrated meat

which Paul references in Romans 14, some art looks the same no matter who produces it. Meat is still just meat whether it is devoted to God or devoted to an idol. A painting of a landscape may be merely a painting of a landscape whether the artist devoted the painting to the god of himself or the God of creation. Consider that the plowing of the wicked is sin, but it is not sin then for Christians to plow, nor would it be sin for a Christian to use a new plowing technique that the unbeliever pioneered (Gen. 4:21).<sup>3</sup> And, as long as the Christian accurately discerns the context and consequences of his choice, he could conceivably buy bread made from the wheat of a sinner's plowing without sharing in the sin of its production.

If you are beginning to see that this topic requires a great deal of discernment, I have at least done part of my work. Until the larger Christian community starts understanding that we need wisdom to navigate the arts, we will continue to consume and produce rubbish (in *at least* a moral sense). If aesthetic endeavor is a branch of science, then we can use the same biblical criteria we use for judging the validity of scientific "discoveries" to determine the validity of a given artistic endeavor. A Christian can and should gratefully receive scientific discoveries (no matter their origin) that are sufficiently separated from the tainting influence of faulty ideology. Similarly, aesthetic discoveries that are well-removed from the taint

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<sup>3</sup> In the context, Jubal was a descendant of the first murderer, Cain, and the son of the first polygamist murderer, Lamech. As a descendant of Cain, Jubal would not have been a child of promise, yet David wrote most of the Psalms on the instrument Jubal invented—the harp.

of idolatry have fulfilled a necessary though not sufficient condition for being received by a wary Christian.<sup>4</sup>

Christians rightly reject geological and biological assertions made by evolutionary scientists who have been so thoroughly brainwashed by anti-Christian dogma that they can neither uncover nor represent empirical data without the interference of truth-crippling ideological distortion (though sometimes their research is still salvageable by the most discerning). And we should reject most of the world's art for the same reason. Most contemporary music and movies have become nothing more than vehicles for the dissemination of corrupt and corrupting ideas. As an aesthetic or scientific pursuit gets closer to the core of a particular paradigm in rebellion against God, it gets closer to proving itself irremediably tainted and entirely unworthy of acceptance.

But even when one determines that a given work of art is permissible, it still needs to pass another test: Is it profitable? Many Christians vainly attempt to justify their vices by asking, "Well, is it *wrong*?" Instead, we should ask, "Is it *right*?" If it can claim no edifying purpose, Christians should not pursue it. Beware of making provision for the flesh; never relax your guard against idolatry.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Though I give some criteria for judging art in Chapter 4, each person must determine before God how "faultless" some piece of art must be before he would be willing to endorse it. Christian charity goes a long way here. We should always do justice to our own standards for ourselves but love showing mercy toward others even if their standards seem different or lower than our own (Mic. 6:8).

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 13:14; 1 John 5:21.

## WHAT IS THE GOLD OF AN IDOL?

The aesthetics of a particular endeavor operate as the means to deliver a message. The unbeliever's message, since it militates against reality, possesses no intrinsic power to convince a hearer. Having discovered this, unbelievers have learned to clothe their lies in disarming beauty;<sup>6</sup> many have honed their skills in the production of means (media) to a prodigious extent. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard the phrase, "The message is no good, but it is *so* well done!" come out of a Christian's mouth concerning some compromised work of art. I am frankly tired of hearing it. "The idol is an abomination, but its gold is *so* well-wrought!" Apples may be very good, but it's no good bobbing for them in a barrel of manure.

To the extent that a piece of art advances a lie, it is an idol in need of destruction. Each Christian may have a different capacity for discernment; each man's discernment may lead him to accept what another rejects or to reject what another man accepts. But there is no excuse for inviting immorality into our minds just because it wears finely tailored clothes. None at all. If a Christian can discern that the message of a piece of art is *generally* destructive, why would he still desire, endorse, or receive it as good? What would it matter if a person were good-looking if he were also a liar, a thief, and a murderer? We can't determine "bad company" on the basis of appearances. The handsomeness of a villain and the beauty of a lie are idol's gold. *We are commanded to abhor it!*

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<sup>6</sup> They learned this trick from their father the Devil, who "masquerades" as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

This concern broaches a very complicated and difficult area of aesthetic discernment requiring great care and forbearance with one another. Let us say that there is a band, *Satan's Little Helpers*,<sup>7</sup> and they produce some music that, though very popular, is filled with endorsements for the foulest of evil deeds. A Christian band comes along that call themselves *God's Little Helpers*. They make music that sounds almost exactly the same as the non-Christian's music, but it has endorsements for righteousness and every good deed. Should this Christian music be received? Or is it the illicit acquisition of gold from an idol? What about if the Christian band did covers of *Satan's Little Helpers* songs, but replaced the offensive lyrics with constructive ones? What then?

From the already discussed principles we can safely say without any shadow of a doubt that supporting *Satan's Little Helpers* is absolutely not an option for the Christian commissioner. He should not endorse them, pay for them to continue making music, or even listen to their music to the extent that he is physically able once he has established that the band is crafting idols out of music. He should abhor what God has called abominable.<sup>8</sup>

But what about the other two options? I think it is harder to say with absolute clarity what the Bible says about the other options. In the case of the meat sacrificed to idols, Paul says that if a man has been an idolater from his former days, he may not

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<sup>7</sup> I don't think this band exists. If they do, I am not referring to them, though they may incidentally be an appropriate fit for the point I am making.

<sup>8</sup> Phil. 4:8; Prov. 17:15.

be able to eat meat sacrificed to idols without sinning. It would be sin even for another brother who does not have any qualms of conscience about this meat to try to convince the “weaker” brother to eat it.<sup>9</sup> Maybe there are those who worshipped an idol in their former unsaved days by listening to *Satan’s Little Helpers*. It may be impossible for them to distinguish the sound of the similar “Christian” music from the soundtrack for their former rebellious lifestyles. I do not believe God condemns these brothers for refusing to listen to *God’s Little Helpers*, and neither should we. I do not think this issue to be obvious in every case—it requires discernment. In the following chapter, I offer biblical principles to help us navigate these somewhat choppy waters.

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<sup>9</sup> Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia were required by the Jerusalem Council to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols. Paul, who was on this Council, makes it clear elsewhere that this meat can be righteously received with gratitude to God. It is clear from this that context and consequences have a profound influence on the *application*, though not the foundational *principles*, of the Law (Acts 15; 1 Cor. 10:28f).

## Biblical Principles of Aesthetics

**I**n Philippians 4:8, Paul tells Christians directly what to pursue in art and otherwise. One will notice that, unlike non-Christian schemata of aesthetics and discernment, the Bible does not erect an impenetrable dividing wall between morality and material excellence:

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.

The biblical assessment of goodness always presupposes the *union* of objective excellence and moral uprightness, where moral uprightness is the necessary first condition. The canyon Western culture has excavated between craft and virtue has debased the arts, and a recovery of true beauty will require a joining together again of what man in his folly has put asunder. Toward this end, let us consider each of the facets of Paul's command as it applies to the area of aesthetics.

## WHATEVER IS TRUE

This is the first principle of biblical aesthetics, and it is the first tier of determining whether we should reject a given work of art. We should not endorse any artwork that presents or represents reality in such a way as to advance a lie. This would obviously apply to literature or lyrics that tell lies outright, but it also applies to the more subtle prevarications that God-hating artists insinuate indirectly into the frameworks and assumptions of their presentations. One does not need to say a word to tell a lie. But what is a lie?

Many people invoke the word “truth,” but few can provide a substantial working definition of it. If we are to meditate on what is true, we must have renewed minds that understand truth the way God would have us understand it. As with any other area, we must rely on the Word of God as our guide.

We can start with a discussion of what the Bible says concerning “bearing false witness.” Have you ever wondered why David, “a man after God’s own heart,” deceived the King of Gath by representing himself in an “untruthful” way as a mad man (1 Sam. 21:10f)? Why is Rahab in the Hall of Faith for “lying” (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25)? We must refrain from saying that Rahab and David did wrong, since God implies, or outright declares, that they did right. What is it to be truthful, then? Is it merely to be in accord with the facts?

Is fiction less true than non-fiction? It is less factual, of course, but does that mean it is any less true? If an author writes a book he intends to be a compendium of facts, it is obviously dishonest for him to make up or embellish the facts

he includes in his book. But fiction writers, composers, and visual artists are no less exempt from some standard of truth. Fiction may not be constrained by fact, but it must be constrained by truth.

It should be clear that truth is larger than factuality. The elements of the Scripture that are figurative do not have to be factual to be true. Even if we never see a giant, multi-headed beast crawl out of the sea and persecute Christians, we can still learn something true from Revelation about how the enemies of God become enemies of Christians. Many Christians today misunderstand the use of the figurative and literal in the Scriptures because they conflate truth and fact. Truth comprises all facts, but facts do not compose the entirety of truth.<sup>1</sup> This also means that much fiction proves false not because it is imagined, but because it “bears false witness” concerning the truth to the detriment of the hearer.

We must begin to understand that truth is covenantal. It is not relative, but it is relational. God keeps words of truth in the same sense that He keeps His promises (Ps. 146:6; Prov. 22:12). He also keeps truth by preserving His faithful remnant as a “pillar of truth” (Mal. 2:7; 1 Tim. 3:15). One does not necessarily lie by withholding facts or even by altering facts to preserve the truth and to preserve the lives of covenant-keepers. God makes little distinction between the speaker of truth

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<sup>1</sup> The widespread adoption of a positivist epistemology has created a huge exegetical problem for the church. For example, many Christians interpret Genesis *figuratively* because “the facts” of “science” contradict the traditional reading, while others interpret Revelation *literally* because they believe this the most faithful rendering of the text.

and the truth itself. Proverbs 22:12 can be correctly translated, “The eyes of the Lord keep knowledge [keep watch over knowledge], but He overthrows the words of the treacherous.” But another correct translation reads, “The eyes of the Lord preserve *him that has knowledge...*” Notice also that Jesus is called *The Word*. To cherish the truth is equated with cherishing Jesus. God keeps the truth by preserving Jesus even to the point of raising Him from the dead. This also sheds some light on why the ninth commandment does not say, “You shall not lie.” Rather, it says “You shall not bear false witness *against your neighbor*.” God forbids using words to attack a covenant-keeper. Jesus said the same thing differently: “Be shrewd as serpents, but harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). We are not to set ourselves against the truth or against those within the promise of truth. Sometimes, telling a tall tale is bearing a true witness.<sup>2</sup> And at other times, telling the facts is bearing false witness against your neighbor.<sup>3</sup>

Two approaches to knowledge are conceivable. You can

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<sup>2</sup> Consider Nathan’s tall tale of the rich man, the poor man, and the unblemished ewe which he told David to convict him of his sin with Bathsheba (in 2 Samuel 12). When Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” he was making an incorrect statement as far as the “facts” were concerned: David was not factually the rich man in the story, and he had not stolen a ewe from a poor man. But Nathan, though he did not tell the factual truth, bore true witness in fiction, as evidenced by David’s repentance.

<sup>3</sup> In 1 Samuel 22, Doeg the Edomite tells Saul the absolute facts concerning David’s help from Ahimelech the priest. Though he related the flat facts, Doeg bore false witness against Ahimelech, who had not truly intended to thwart Saul by helping David. Doeg proved his witness was against his neighbor when he willingly slaughtered Ahimelech and the other priests of the Lord.

know by being *transcendent* above all things. This would result in objective knowledge. God has this kind of knowledge; He is in the heavens without any limitations or finiteness, therefore He can know that something is true or factual absolutely. The other route to true knowledge is through *immanence*, or indwelling. This would result in a knowledge constrained by the boundaries of the system within which you are immanent, but it renders knowledge nonetheless. Transcendent knowledge promises exhaustiveness; immanent knowledge—specificity.

To illustrate this point, I am typing on a computer right now, and I (ideally) have objective knowledge of the workings of my word processor. I press the keys with a near absolute assurance of how my actions will manipulate the black electronic markings on my screen. I even possess some knowledge of the way the program itself works. Some have knowledge of the program's code. They might be able to recognize what passages from the code I put into effect with each keystroke. But how many people understand the functioning of the word processor at the level of machine language? What about at the level of binary code? I doubt there is a single human on earth—no matter how computer savvy—who could follow the binary code this word processing program accesses and generates with the same effortlessness with which I am using the program to type these words.

Effortless knowledge at the basement floor of understanding is *truly* subjective knowledge—true knowledge through immanence and intimacy. Though we don't often think of it, God has this kind of knowledge too! It is possible that there is a spectrum of knowledge analogous to the spectrum of light:

We see knowledge in frequencies from red to violet, but God can see microwaves below, gamma rays above, and beyond. Transcendent knowledge lies invisibly *above* our understanding, while immanent knowledge hides *below* it. How can we get it?

Through the Incarnate Christ, we have access to “*all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” which includes both immanent and transcendent treasures. God, the immanent and transcendent, has revealed knowledge to us in Christ, His Word, in a way that we can understand. But we must be careful. As fallen humans, finite even in perfection, we will never be absolutely transcendent *over* or absolutely immanent *in* reality. This means that we must rely on God’s revelation of Himself to us. The major problem with most science is that it attempts to achieve absolute transcendence through methodological objectivism. This doesn’t work. The problem with most art is that it attempts an absolute immanence through methodological subjectivism. This also fails.<sup>4</sup>

Intimacy with God is the only path to true knowledge. Because we live in a scientistic (though not scientific) culture, we tend to consider subjectivity as a detriment to true knowledge, but the Bible does not see it this way. The seat

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that much art generalizes or abstracts experience in order to come to transcendent truth, whereas much science deals with the particularization of knowledge at the foundations of reality. A case could be made that art and science both have their own brands of transcendence and immanence, but it is my contention that they have epistemological tendencies in discernible directions. Art trends toward methodological subjectivism within a coherence theory of reality, whereas science trends toward methodological objectivism within a correspondence theory of reality.

of reason in the Scriptures is not the head, but the heart. In many English translations of Proverbs, certain verses tell us that the fool “lacks sense” or “is stupid” when the Hebrew literally says that “the fool lacks heart.”<sup>5</sup> Notice also that “Adam *knew* his wife, and she conceived” (Gen. 4:1). When Jesus says, “I never *knew* you” to the unbeliever, He means, “I have never had intimate communion with you” (Matt. 7:23). In the Scriptures, knowledge is directly related to intimacy. Because we cannot achieve transcendence over reality (since we cannot become God), we must achieve an assurance of knowledge by becoming intimate with Christ. Therefore, any path to knowledge that does not start with the complete reverence and intimate adoration of God—the “fear of the Lord”—leads only to destruction (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7).

Whereas our transcendence merely pictures God’s, our immanence is real. Immanence as a road to knowledge more aptly suits finite creatures; for this reason, the Bible gives pre-eminence to intimacy over objectivity as the foundation of human epistemology.

What does this all mean for the arts? When correctly pre-conditioned by a fear of God, art functions as a search engine for immanent knowledge and truths. We should not allow our minds to long meditate on art that does not bear a true witness of immanent truth as we have received it through the intimate dealings of the Spirit in the Word. Christians must reclaim the arts. They belong to us by right, though they have been hijacked by liars. Only Christians can rightly understand knowledge

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<sup>5</sup> Prov. 6:32; 7:7; 11:12; 12:11; 15:21; 17:16, 18; 24:30; Eccles. 10:3.

through intimacy because we alone have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). We should have practical experience in immanent endeavors because of our daily walk with the Word. The shallowness of the majority of contemporary Christian art belies a difficult fact: we, as a church, have drifted far away from Christ; we know *about* God, but few of us truly *know* Him.

### WHATEVER IS HONORABLE

The meaning of the word translated “honorable” (σεμνός *semnos*) is not exhausted and is barely approximated in the phrase “worthy of honor.” In every other place in the Bible where it occurs, translators have used some derivative of “dignified.” *Semnos* is used in the description of elders, deacons, and their wives, and can mean “venerable” or even “serious-minded.”<sup>6</sup> Bottom line: we should not be spending a lot of our time focusing on what God has deemed trivial.

This means that art should not merely serve as entertainment or amusement. The Bible does not unilaterally invalidate entertainment and pleasure as righteous objects of pursuit.<sup>7</sup> But this verse indicates that entertainment should not be even close to a priority in our thought lives, and that our entertainment needs to be edifying—needs even to be *serious!* This is not a contradiction in terms. Solomon tells us that “doing wickedness is like sport to a fool, and so is wisdom to a man of understanding” (Prov. 10:23). In other words, the wise man

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Tim. 2:2; 3:4; 3:8; 3:11; Titus 2:2; 2:7.

<sup>7</sup> God established a tithe (the Jubilee tithe) that was meant to be spent completely for the purpose of gratefully received immediate pleasure (“whatever your soul desires”) in the presence of God (Deut. 14:26).

finds great sport pursuing God by thinking God's thoughts after Him. This does not characterize the world, which finds folly entertaining and serious pursuits boring. Have we as Christians lost touch with the righteous attitude of Solomon?

### WHATEVER IS RIGHT

The word "right" (δικαίος dikaios) is mostly translated "righteous" or "just" and indicates guiltlessness or innocence. For our purposes, the phrase refers to art that is law-keeping. The first and most obvious denotation of law-keeping would be that it does not break or encourage breaking any of God's Holy Law(s). But the criterion drives deeper than that.

Most human works in rebellion against God will travel to the right or the left of God's law into either autonomous righteousness (self-righteousness) or libertinism—a drive toward *autonomy* or a drive toward *antinomy*. Autonomous man desires to be a law unto himself, whereas antinomous man aims to deny all law. In both cases, men in rebellion against God attempt to escape from under the Law of God. This implies that all men inherently understand that *they are guilty* (Rom. 1:18f). God has cleared the guilty record of Christians, however, so we are free to obey God's Law without viewing it through the resentful spectacles of either autonomy or antinomy.

In history, one can trace the pendular swings of artistic endeavor from autonomous art to antinomous, then back again and again in an ever widening succession. Since neither autonomous nor antinomous art can satisfy all the needs

for which men pursue beauty, their fruitless futility inevitably emerges over time, yet, like dogs returning to their vomit, rebel artists turn from the indigestion of one failed error to consume *other errors*. Thus, most rebels congratulate themselves for rejecting the falsehoods of their fathers, but fail to realize they have merely exchanged their father's lie for a repackaged version of their *grandfather's*.

Consider Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring*. The purpose of this work can be more clearly seen when one sees the ballet that accompanied it. In this ballet, the dancers hold a first position that exactly opposes the then established conventions of ballet. The "dancers" turned their feet inward rather than outward; they hunched their shoulders and hopped about inelegantly on both feet. The music also displays this rebellion against man-made conventions.

But who originated these conventions, and for what purpose? At some point, one of Stravinsky's artistic forebears established some rules in an attempt to "civilize" dancing. Stravinsky, as is clear from his obsession with the primal, wanted to return to the time *before* civilization corrupted the pure energy of dance. He regurgitates a "noble savage" ideal—his grandfather's lie.

In the end, the autonomous artist doesn't care which lie he holds, as long as he doesn't have to turn to God. Stravinsky didn't just aim to establish the primacy of his conventions over the dictates of other men—ultimately, he wanted to replace even God's Law with his own. Like the rulers of Psalm 2, he really believed he could release himself from

God's bonds of reality.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, our generation has preferred antinomy over autonomy. Having seen the havoc caused by man's attempts to establish his own conventions, our generation has learned to distrust conventions altogether. Antinomous art does not attempt to establish a *different* convention for art, but rather to destroy the validity of having conventions at all by demonstrating the ultimate arbitrariness and relativity of conventions. The products of antinomy attempt to deny an absolute God, though they may seem harmless with their self-effacing humor, prattling triviality, or sleek appearance.

It is often hard to distinguish between the effects of autonomy and antinomy, and many people consider Stravinsky to be just as easily antinomous as autonomous. This has some truth to it since both drives are present in every rebellious man, but the *zeitgeist* of the Modern period is different than that of the Post-Modern one. Consider the rampant fascism that manifested itself all over the world directly following the acceptance of the Modernist paradigm, as well as the disintegration of the "rule of law" that has attended Post-Modernism's ascendancy. Fascism follows autonomy as assuredly as anarchy

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<sup>8</sup> Why are the nations in an uproar,  
and the peoples devising a vain thing?  
The kings of the earth take their stand,  
and the rulers take counsel together  
against the Lord and against His Anointed:  
"Let us tear their fetters apart,  
And cast away their cords from us!"  
He who sits in the heavens laughs,  
the Lord scoffs at them. (Ps. 2:1–6)

hounds antinomy. These earmarks can help us to distinguish the ages and “understand our times.”

One should also keep in mind that antinomous art sometimes clears the way for autonomous art by discrediting the currently established conventions. The first stage of any construction project involves demolition, and many artists that went on to establish their own “autonomous” schools of thought (e.g., Picasso) started by critiquing the artistic conventions of their generation.

One can discern the oscillations between autonomy and antinomy in both artistic and philosophical history. The autonomous Enlightenment gave birth to antinomous Romanticism, which gave birth to autonomous Modernism, which has recently given birth to antinomous Post-Modernism. Soon we will have a new breed of autonomous art that differs only slightly from its predecessors as man spins ever more wildly into wider circles of deception to escape, if at all possible, the ever-tightening grip of God’s hand.<sup>9</sup>

Art with an arbitrary foundation is beset by challenges to its authority and is overthrown. The art that overthrows arbitrary authority must either establish an arbitrary authority of its own or deny all authority. If it denies all authority and condemns conventions as arbitrary, it eventually disintegrates itself into what can metaphorically be called mud—brown mud: without distinctions of any kind, little else than

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<sup>9</sup> We can already see the political fruit of this pendulum swing in the increasing consolidation of power in the State around the world. I predict that global art will soon follow this trend and return to the veneration of formalism and received conventions.

madness or the incoherent representation of chaos can ensue. Just as a train may move in new territory when it abandons its rails, autonomous or antinomous art can sometimes have a dazzling semblance of innovative freshness, but in the end, both the train and the art bog down in the futility of their respective follies.

This means that if we are to meditate on what is right, we should not meditate on those things that derive their interest from a rebellious obsession with the destruction of conventions or the distortion and corruption of reality. However, one can take this advice to an extreme. I do not mean that art cannot be controversial. In fact, it should even rebel against the Christ-opposing world order. I also do not mean that it cannot contain an accurate description of wickedness for the purpose of exposing it, or that it cannot contain distortion, dissonance, swing, or unresolved tension. Instead, Christians should discern the context and consequences to determine if a given work is attempting to subvert God's Law and righteousness, and shun such work if it is, no matter how clever it may seem.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, according to the Jeremiah mandate, destruction, deconstruction, uprooting, and overthrowing

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<sup>10</sup> Sometimes a work of art may deconstruct human conventions without crossing the line into "unrighteousness." I would be wary of this work, though. God's servant is not quarrelsome, and human amoral conventions agreed upon by a community often have more valid justification in reality than may be readily apparent upon initial consideration. Though a man at war with men may be just (e.g., Athanasius), a man who is at war with God will also be at war with men, so a lack of peaceableness with men *may* be an indication of lawlessness.

play a large part in God's work through his prophets (Jer. 1:10). One should not automatically assume that a controversial or deconstructive work is lawless. The question is whether it is deconstructing or subverting the truth, or whether it exercises these tools of criticism to undermine and overthrow falsehood.

### WHATEVER IS PURE

Something pure (ἄγνός hagnos) is set apart or holy; such a thing is "free from ceremonial defilement."<sup>11</sup> This word indicates two main things about art: it should not glory in sin, and it should not be tainted by unbiblical worldviews.

If we are not to allow "unseemly" or "coarse" speech to "proceed from our mouths" (Eph. 4:29; 5:4), how much more should we disallow the unwholesome from having a place in something like art that is more lasting than speech? That does bring up the question: What is unwholesome? All communication—including artistic communication—should be aimed at *edifying* the hearer, but there are some things that modern Christians consider vulgar or coarse that the Bible nonetheless includes as God's Word.<sup>12</sup> The point of the "vulgarity" in the Scriptures is usually to expose or *pathalify* sin to accurately represent unrighteous words or deeds.<sup>13</sup> This is a subject that

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<sup>11</sup> NASB Greek-Hebrew Dictionary.

<sup>12</sup> Job 31:10; Isa. 64:6; Ezek. 23:20; Judges 3:21–23; 2 Kings 9:8 (read the KJV; the NASB is expurgated); much of Song of Solomon, etc. In many cases, the literal translation has been "improved" to be less "offensive."

<sup>13</sup> There does not seem to be one word in English that means "to demonstrate something to be ugly" or "make evident that something is ugly or twisted." I propose this word (pronounced pa-THAWL-ih-FIE) to

requires discernment; every Christian should consider his brother more important than himself in the application of this principle (Phil. 2:3).

As an example, some Christians have discussed the permissibility of having “curse words” in a Christian movie, book, etc. Paul tells us: “All things are permissible, but not all things are profitable. All things are permissible, but not all things edify” (1 Cor. 10:23). If the artist’s purpose is to be edgy, his purpose is misguided, worldly, and compromised. But even if the artist’s purpose is to edify, he may not actually succeed in edifying. The measure of edification is in the receiver, not in the producer’s intentions. The receiver and the artist must carefully weigh a piece of work to determine if its “vulgarity” glorify or pathalify sin.<sup>14</sup>

We must be careful that the art we endorse is “set apart” from the attitude and message of the world. The Bible condemns Ahaz for attempting to worship God the way the Assyrians worshipped their gods (2 Kings 16:1, 10–11). To worship God through the tainted gold of an idol is an abomination to God. We must judge a work of art by the extent to which it has been mixed with the uncleanness of worldly lusts and thinking.

This injunction would again rebuke those who believe it right to receive the mode of a work of art while rejecting its

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fulfill this need. It comes from the Hebrew (פָּתַל *pātal*) which is used in Psalm 18:26: “to the crooked, God shows himself oblique [*pātal*].”

<sup>14</sup> But we should also recognize that different applications and audiences require different art at different times. Not all actually good and very edifying art will seem wholesome to every viewer in every age. That doesn’t mean it isn’t good art. It may mean you aren’t part of its audience—you aren’t the intended “hearer” (Eph. 4:29).

message. This is just not possible. “Do not be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals!” (1 Cor. 15:33). This means not only that the bad artistic company that you keep will corrupt your morals, but also that we must judge the mode of a piece of art by the ideological company it keeps. Just as a clear piece of glass cannot help but be imbued with whatever light shines through it, a means of artistic production is always colored by the ideological motivation which harnesses it.

### WHATEVER IS LOVELY

It would be easy to assume that one needs no instruction in what is lovely. Many consider this to be a matter of personal taste without any need for study, discipline, or assistance. This perspective is, however, not biblical. While no particular human aesthetic can claim to have a corner on loveliness, Paul would not have included this phrase if loveliness were entirely arbitrary. If *anything* has the possibility of loveliness and depends only on one’s taste, what would be Paul’s point in even mentioning loveliness? As soon as anyone tries to define the characteristics of loveliness, the relativist refrain of “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!” inevitably rears its clichéd head. Because God does not give us a list of *Thou Shalt Nots* concerning aesthetic forms, any conviction concerning loveliness is vulnerable to the charge of subjectivity: “Well, that’s just your opinion.”

While we must remember that what pleases us must not be in contradiction to the express commands and teachings of the Bible, the Greek word here (προσφιλης *proshiles*) denotes something agreeable or pleasing, which would indicate that

there is a certain level of subjectivity concerning aesthetics that God allows and even encourages. Here we detect another effect of the pretended objectivity of our culture. Because no “objective” standard of beauty appears to be possible, this must mean that all standards for beauty are invalid. Such thinking misses the point of art entirely. Art should edify its particular audience.

God has indicated as much in the simple fact that the music that accompanied the Psalms has not been passed down to us in the inerrant record. The content of the Psalms has not changed, but their application has. The fitting music that edified the Middle Eastern hearers a few thousand years ago probably wouldn't do much to enhance the truths of the Psalms in our particular cultural and historical context.

This means that the standard for art's effectiveness must be *local*, since no centralized or objective standard could possibly fill all the particular needs of every person in every audience. Art pursues immanent knowledge, and it is governed by the “need of the moment” for a specified audience.

For the commissioner, this idea has profound significance. Are we supporting local aesthetics and local artists, or do we pump millions of dollars into nationally centralized mega-distributors of generalized pabulum? No artist, no matter how talented, can make art that specifically speaks to each member of his national audience. Most popular artists strip their art of all defining, localizing characteristics—speaking in abstractions and generalizations to accommodate as many potential audience members as possible. This trend has devastated the arts.

The Hebrew word for *medium* (אֵבֶן ob) means “empty wine skin.” This rich figure of speech indicated that the

medium or spiritist emptied himself of particularity so that he could be filled with any passing spirit. Centralized art pursues the same goal in its attempt to be nationally marketable. Each piece of art is an empty wine skin, an amorphous container ready-made to receive the specific experiences of whatever spirit (in this case, whatever *consumer*) might happen to pass by. No wonder our entertainment industry calls itself “the media.” The marketization of art has promoted the transformation from local to centralized aesthetics because a larger audience results in more money with less risk and fewer expenditures. Remember, the market judges art by *profit* to the producer, not *profitability* to the receiver.

As with “big government,” the solution to “big art” is downsizing and localization. In order to effectively generate the little truths of everyday, immanent life, our art must be free from the constraints of unilateral, top-down rubrics for national marketability. In fact, until our culture reforms its tastes through the renewal of its mind in Christ, most *good* art will be absolutely unmarketable. Consider all of the art in the Bible. Prophetic poetry possessed no popular appeal; the audience actually martyred the prophets (Luke 11:47–51)—not exactly a standing ovation. Does this mean that the prophets should have abandoned their artistic ministry—that they should have gotten “real” jobs?

We must remember that one’s culture dictates his tastes and expectations to a great extent. We have all been trained to have short attention spans, shallow interpretive skills, and immature approaches to resolution. We must not allow ourselves to grow complacent concerning the things that

are agreeable or lovely to us. We must always be striving to stretch our tastes toward maturity. Our perspectives on loveliness must be local—bound by our specific context and time for the purpose of edification. We must learn to support the local artists that God has put in our midst, and to listen to them as experts in their field—called by God and equipped by Him for that calling.

### WHATEVER IS OF GOOD REPUTE

Solomon tells us that “a man is tested by the praise accorded him” (Prov. 27:21). In the context, this means at least two things: in the same way that the offer of a bribe tests a man’s character, even genuine and unflattering praise can tempt a man to give up his ideals in order to maintain his popularity. But this verse could also mean that a wicked man will be praised by the wicked while the righteous will esteem the righteous. Solomon says in another place, “An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, and he who is upright in the way is an abomination to the wicked” (Prov. 29:27, ASV). Art widely endorsed by the wicked is often, but not always, wicked.

One should seek out art that has been endorsed by righteous people. Righteous people skilled in the production of art are extremely underused sources of aesthetic discernment in the kingdom of Christ. So many Christians I know are content to think that *their* perspective on art is just as valid as any other perspective. This is just not true. God has given certain people a special anointing in art since the beginning of time.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gen. 4:21; Exod. 31:2ff; 1 Chron. 25:3; 1 Kings 7:14.

When we have people within the church who have skill in artistry or artisanship, we should solicit and utilize their educated opinions on aesthetics. This does not mean we are not personally responsible for our own opinions before God. It is *because* we are personally responsible that we seek good counsel.

When a skilled architect says that a house design is good or bad, his judgment carries weight. But for some reason when an artist says that some thing or another in his field is good or bad, no one seems to think this opinion matters. While artists should not go around lording their opinions over everyone else, Christians in general should take Paul's command seriously by asking for the opinions of Christians in their community who have displayed skill in the given field of inquiry.

One can take this too far, however. I do not intend to encourage the creation of a class of snobbish elitists who pass down their opinions on art as if they were mandates from above. C. S. Lewis, as was often his habit, proposed a balanced approach to the subject, and though his comments were specifically intended to inform the analysis of poetry, they also apply to the other arts:

For who can endure a doctrine which would allow only dentists to say whether our teeth were aching, only cobblers to say whether our shoes hurt us, and only governments to tell us whether we were being well-governed?

Such are the results if we take the position [T. S. Eliot's position that the only opinions on poetry he would accept were those of good poets]

in its full rigour. But of course if it is only meant that a good poet, other things being equal (which they often are not), is reasonably likely, in talking about the kinds of poetry he has himself written well and read with delight, to say something more worth hearing than another, then we need not deny it.<sup>16</sup>

The statement, “I like what I like, so don’t try to get me to like something I don’t like,” is sheer folly. In the same way that we would ask a lawyer for legal advice, Christians need to learn to ask qualified individuals in their church communities for aesthetic advice, and then we need to *try very hard* to grow by the assistance we receive (Prov. 27:17).

Additionally, when a piece of art has endured criticism for hundreds or thousands of years, it has proven itself of “good repute.” Such work should be given priority over work that has not yet proven itself under the scrutiny of qualified critics. While new work should not be shunned altogether, perhaps Christians should shift the balance of our intake back toward those classic works of art that continue to thrill the discerning. It saddens me to talk to Christian young people who have read every one of the *Harry Potter* novels, but have never read *Beowulf* or *Paradise Lost*. I do not mean to say anything at this time about whether the *Harry Potter* novels are permissible (or profitable) reading. I am merely pointing out that the books have yet to prove themselves of enduring quality.

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<sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (New Delhi, India: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2005), 11.

## IF ANY EXCELLENCE, OR IF ANYTHING WORTHY OF PRAISE

Many Christians have, in practice, misinterpreted this portion of Paul's command to mean that we should accept any *part* of a given work that is excellent or worthy of praise even if the rest of the work leads us into error or causes us to stumble in sin. I don't think Paul means this, as the beauty of an idol must be abhorred along with the idol itself (Deut. 7:25). If a work of art utilizes an excellence of means but fails to edify the audience, it does not meet the biblical criteria for overall acceptability. Christians should avoid both well-wrought and shoddy idols to the same degree.

But I think this verse does allow for a “eat the fish, leave the bones” approach to work that contains a good deal of error and artistic inadequacies—providing that work also has an edifying effect. No artist, even the most well-intentioned Christian artist, will make perfect art. If art edifies its audience—if it generally tells the truth—it is good. As a commissioner's discernment increases, he will be more capable of perceiving whether or not a given art work is worth his time. In our current artistic climate, however, it often seems that the choices are very limited.

This is a further point Paul is making here. Christians should be striving for excellence, both to produce and to endorse things of excellence. Material excellence without goodness is vain. But goodness without material excellence is misleading. We should strive for both—art that is sound of soul and body.

There is some valid debate as to what constitutes a thing of excellence, but generally one can ask, “Is this art thought-

fully conceived, carefully composed, expertly executed, tastefully delivered, and gratefully received by well-qualified commissioners?” If a piece of art fulfills these criteria and the criteria mentioned above, it is most likely excellent and worthy of praise.

Different commissioners will have different perspectives on whether a piece of art fulfills these criteria, but overall, each commissioner must be willing to take responsibility for the art he approves. One may not merely say, “I like it, and that is all that matters to me.” Our aesthetic choices do not merely affect ourselves. As I have already discussed, what one endorses and supports in the market constrains what is *able* to exist in the market. Each commissioner (consumer) must be willing to take personal responsibility for all the work he endorses.

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

From what has been discussed, here is a distilled list of criteria the Christian commissioner may use to analyze the permissibility and profitability of a given piece of art:

1. Does the message or ideological framework of this art advance a lie or exhibit the truth? Does it display intimacy with God’s Word and world?
2. Does this art exist only to entertain or amuse, or does a serious purpose undergird it even if it also entertains? Is it flippant or trivial?
3. Does this art attempt to establish God’s law order? Is it motivated by a desire to establish an autonomous

man-centered law order? Does it attempt to undermine the possibility of a valid law-order? Is it overly concerned with either the establishment or destruction of received conventions?

4. Does this art glorify or pathalify “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life”? Does it attempt to worship God in the way the world worships its idols?
5. Is this art agreeable and pleasant to your sanctified tastes? Does it encourage you to maturity in your tastes, or does it allow you to remain complacent? Is it oriented toward local needs, real experiences, and specific goals, or does it allow itself to be filled with “any passing spirit”?
6. Has this art proven itself agreeable to the tastes of well-qualified Christian artists and disciplined students of aesthetics? Has it stood the test of time or does it have the staying power to do so?
7. Are you willing to take personal responsibility for this artwork as being “excellent and worthy of praise”? Would you recommend that others receive it as good? Would you feel comfortable receiving this art in the presence of Jesus, since He is actually present with you at all times (Matt. 28:20)?

With these tools, I pray that the Christian commissioner is further on his way to fulfilling God’s command: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

## The Artist: A Question of Identity

**T**he following pages concern the work and person of the Christian artist. They may prove helpful to the Christian commissioner (even if he does not aspire to become an artist) for the following reasons:

1. It will help commissioners determine what a Christ-centered artist is and does so that they may seek out artists of greater spiritual character and discernment.
2. This section will go over each stage of the artistic process with biblical guidelines; commissioners who desire to be more discerning may find apt ammunition for their growing analytical arsenal.

### DYING OF CONSUMPTION (AGAIN)

Lord Byron, the famous Romantic poet, once told a friend, “I should like to die of a consumption.”<sup>1</sup> He was speaking of tuberculosis, which, according to Susan Sontag, was a fashionable disease among the Romantics:

So well established was the cliché which connected TB and creativity that at the end of the century one critic suggested that it was the pro-

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<sup>1</sup> Recounted in Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 1990), 31.

gressive disappearance of TB which accounted for the [then] current decline of literature and the arts.<sup>2</sup>

It was stylish to be waifishly thin, have a sickly pallor, and be of a ghostly constitution. Those who were destined to die of consumption were thought to be in touch with the spiritual: as their “fleshy coil” withered away, they were better able to discern what was of spiritual value. This consumptive style was a direct consequence of Neoplatonic thought which denigrated the body and glorified the unencumbered, sublime spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Our culture continues to have a cult of style that surrounds the artist. Susan Sontag points out that insanity may be the contemporary replacement for the Romantic ideal of consumption.<sup>4</sup> Many of the artists of our day apply themselves to any number of artistic posturings: the hedonist, the bohemian, the madman, the druggie, the mystic, the iconoclast or denouncer, the reality-unconscious visionary, the flaky feeler, the ascetic prophet, the mousy recluse, the protean above-it-all, etc. In each of these externally applied postures, the artist wishes to garner for himself the power or prestige of a particular heritage of style.

Such posturing is not biblical. The very first thing the Christian artist must purge from himself is a desire to fit into the worldly model of the artist. Before the Christian artist is an artist, *he is a Christian*. He must first pursue Christ, and his art will flow out from his sanctified life. In reality, “Christian

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>3</sup> In many Romantic novels, the consumptive character (usually a woman or child) is often the emblem of innocence and the author’s moral compass for the novel.

<sup>4</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 35–36.

art,” though a convenient label, is a misnomer. There is good art and bad art. Christians should worry about making the best art they can, not about whether or not that art fits into preconceived notions of what constitutes “Christian” art.

### THE PERSON OF THE ARTIST

The main sin of man is pride, and the artist’s main sin is pride even more so. The greatest desire of fallen man is, in fact, the reason he fell in the first place: an attempt to appropriate a possession for himself without reference or deference to God. The first possession of this sort was the autonomous self acting against God’s will in an attempt to separate from God’s reality. Notice that Adam and Eve did not recognize that they were naked before the Fall.<sup>5</sup> They may not have even been self-conscious as we fallen beings are. When Adam and Eve sinned, they brought something into reality that was *entirely and completely their own possession* (Rom. 5:12). This thing was sin. Sin has no part in God. Man loves sin and sinning so much because he can take pride in possessing it as his own. Sin separates us from God (Isa. 59:1–2), thus increasing the consciousness of a separate and virtual self that perceives reality only through distinctions predicated on death and decay.<sup>6</sup> The more we sin, the more we believe ourselves to be our own, and the pride cycle deepens. We as Christians must recognize

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:25 indicates that they were not ashamed of their nakedness, but Genesis 3:7 indicates that they did not even *know* they were naked until they sinned.

<sup>6</sup> We perceive with our eyes only that which is passing away (2 Cor. 4:18).

this: sin did not originate with God, and every good thing in this world is from God (James 1:17).

Should the donkey's jaw consider itself the ultimate in Philistine-killing technology? God uses the weak and foolish things of this world to confound the wise and mighty (1 Cor. 1:26–27). Humility is not our *posture*; it is our *position*! One cannot achieve humility by acting humble or focusing really hard on pretending to devalue anything good he has accomplished. Don't posture. Recognize your position. Have you made a good work of art? Praise God. I don't just mean that we should say, "Praise God!" when people give us compliments. We should rather praise God in our own hearts before only Him without masks or ulterior motives. When the Christian artist receives praise from men, he should be grateful to have been used by God and work all the harder to rid his work of the corrupting influence his flesh still exercises over it.

At the same time, what has been done *is* good. Do not call what is good evil and play games with God (Isa. 5:20). So many times, false humility tells people to say, "Aw, it was nothing, really," when given praise by men. Are you saying the work of God is "nothing, really"? This response points out that most people still perceive humility through the lens of the fleshly self. This is not humility at all. Call what God has done through you good, but don't try to take credit for it. Humility is actually the unlikely way toward a truly objective look at the world, yourself, and your work.<sup>7</sup> The Christian artist must

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<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 28:11: The poor man, seeing little good in himself, sees through the rich, whose perspective is obscured by the illusion that his riches are of his own doing.

pursue Christ with all his strength, forsaking his fleshly identity for the sake of Christ's, and bearing the reproach of Christ as greater glory than the praise of men (Heb. 11:24–26). In other words, true humility looks very little in practice like what passes for humility in the contemporary church.

The Christian artist must be everything a Christian is called to be, but as a teacher of men through his art, he is actually called to an even stricter holiness (James 3:1). Consider how radically this advice contradicts popular wisdom concerning the artist. Let us for a moment consider the idea of the artist that has been foisted upon our contemporary public.

### THE WORLD'S ARTIST

The world's artist is *different*. He is a bit eccentric. He might dress funny, think funny, walk funny, and will certainly act funny. The world's artist has the job of searching for the new, and this dictates a commitment, no matter how superficial, to novelty in all its forms (Acts 17:21). In our day, many who are not artists of any kind attempt to mimic this sometimes sincere drive toward novelty with many permutations of *appearing* unique. Apparently, most people's view of differentness happens to parrot everyone else's view because people seem to look different all the same. This disappoints the artist trying to carve out a little piece of reality he can call only his own, so he manufactures even wilder deviations from normalcy. If he establishes or defines boundaries, it is only in order to transgress them.

According to Bishop George Berkeley, the famous empiri-

cist, “To be is to be perceived [*Esse est percipi*].”<sup>8</sup> Or if you prefer Descartes: “I think, therefore I am [*Cogito ergo sum*].”<sup>9</sup> The reality is that the unbeliever needs confirmation of his consciousness either from a virtual self or other selves in order to corroborate his identity. He cannot rest in God for his identity, so he either validates his own consciousness by a sort of schizophrenic, psycho-sorcerer parlor trick, or he gets others to validate his existence by getting an audience to acknowledge him. The first mode, self-consciousness, usually attends autonomous drives. The second mode, collective consciousness, usually attends antinomous drives.

The non-Christian artist must be different because he must establish himself (or, more accurately, *his self*) as distinct from others and independent of any external source of being—whether transcendent or collective. Thus, the relationship of artist and audience, in the world, is a strange and conflicted one. The artist seeks novelty or separation from the crowd, but the crowd desires identification with—even oneness with—the artist. A catch-22 evolves: an audience (or, more accurately, every *individual* in an audience) desires unity with only a truly unique and authentic “personality,” so the artist must be separate. But the audience’s appreciation for the artist immediately starts to decompose the very reason they want to be like him, that is, his separateness. Each member of the audience emulates the per-

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<sup>8</sup> George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008), 29.

<sup>9</sup> René Descartes, “Discourse on the Method, Part Four,” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), I:127.

sonality or style of the artist in order to gain some of his unique personhood, but that very emulation makes his personhood less unique. This explains the disgust and snobbery that can develop between artists and their fans, and even among fans of the same artist. Nobody wants to be the “late adopter”: the last one to the circle of identity placeholders when the music stops.

The world’s artist seeks fame and recognition and validation, and, in many cases, pretends not to care about these things in order to make himself a more magnetic object to the watching world. The human heart longs to praise the transcendent, and the artist who acts like he doesn’t need his audience is a ridiculous but sometimes convincing scarecrow of a transcendent and self-sufficient God.

The world’s artist considers himself in touch with a knowledge that is hidden from plain sight. His art is a sort of sorcery: by organizing and representing reality in a certain way, he believes he can express mystical, self-affirming truth. He believes he can make reality in his own image, and his success as an artist depends on his ability to convince others of his power. Because the artist is viewed as a mystical sort of lightning rod, he is given leeway to transgress the “law” rather freely. In many ways, he is *encouraged* to transgress, for it is only in transgression that “the new” can be established.

As a sorcerer, the world’s artist may feel a need to supplement or temporarily distort his perception with outside inspiration in order to divine the cultic reality.<sup>10</sup> This inspiration

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<sup>10</sup> I use “cultic” in the sense that “occult” comes from the Latin “occulare” which means “to cover” or “to hide.” The occult religions attempt to uncover deep hidden truths through their divinations.

may come from “Nature” or “Technology,” hedonism or asceticism ... or hallucinogenic drugs. The artist can become very superstitious about his habits, believing that, at any moment, he might have a “block” if his environment is not carefully maintained. He nourishes a fear that the “muse” might leave him altogether and deprive him of ever being able to produce another work of genius. He fears being washed-up and he fears running out of new ideas. He may constantly alter his style in an attempt to escape banality, but the need for either approval or denunciation delimits his freedom—either way, the audience binds him. The very support that allows him to survive by his art also makes it commonplace through distribution and mass marketing. The artist slowly transforms into what the audience wants from him. He may violently thrash and superficially rage, but every worldly artist knows that he will “burn out and fade away” in the end.

Given the inevitability of obsolescence, the sincere artists of the world will often commit suicide in an attempt to preclude the final encroachment of mediocrity and staleness. This suicide may be sudden and violent, but it also may be slow and uncalculated. Indeed, the self-destructive tendency of the artist has become cliché.

The artist may kill himself to preserve his authenticity, but he may also destroy himself as part of a messianic paradigm. The idea of the “starving artist” or the “suffering madman artist” wields a romantic appeal over our generation. If an artist does not suffer, he does not know if he is really reaching new territory. Suffering validates the world’s artist. The worst thing that the world could do to its artist is ignore him. If he sparks

controversy and is decried by “the establishment,” that will only strengthen his resolve to press on further into “the new.” He may eventually make the ultimate sacrifice for his art by taking his own life.

Many of the world’s artists want to be viewed as people who have felt, seen, and experienced so deeply that they cannot even bear it. Such an artist wants to appear overwhelmed by the depth of his experience. He may even *be overwhelmed* by his experience, but this does not always indicate a depth of experience as much it does a shallowness of character.

Some artists have no use for rigor and discipline. They think art shoots into the brain and out through the medium by the power of mystical enlightenment. These may even despise discipline and education as limiting to the imagination and unnecessary for the true genius.

The world’s artist exercises a severe introspection that fluctuates between manifestations of self-indulgence and self-loathing, which he attributes to the necessary suffering he must endure for his art, and the burden of genius. He may even say things like, “Do you think I want this?! I would love to rid myself of this gift and be a normal person like you.” He exercises an unbounded self-orientation, and he encourages this vanity and its debauchery in all those who receive his art.

The world’s artist cannot separate himself from his work. He receives any criticism of his work as an *ad hominem* attack on his person.

The world’s artist does not actually care whether the audience understands his work. Nietzsche said that many philosophers of his day seemed more afraid of being understood than

misunderstood, and that the poets muddied their waters to appear deep. This testimony, from one of their own, is true. When the world's artist lacks depth, he fills this lacking with obscurity. His aim is not to please the audience, but to receive the praise and validation that the audience's fixation affords him. The audience, like the artist, gains satisfaction from the fact that it now has an identity. This identity contains no substance, however, since it derives its contours more from what it is *not* rather than from what it *is*: "We aren't like those other people. We get it."<sup>11</sup>

Much more could be said about the world's artist, but that is not the purpose of this work. It is of the utmost importance that we draw our model of the artist (which will be the model into which we grow) from the teaching of the Scriptures, and *not* from the world.

## THE CHRISTIAN ARTIST

The Christian artist should be motivated by a desire to praise God by obeying His Law. His art uncovers God's revealed character in the structures, relationships, meanings, models, questions, anomalies, ambiguities, nuances, beauties, etc. of the universe. The Christian artist's tool is not transgression, because he does not aim primarily at novelty. His tool is *discernment*. His view is toward work that is *fitting* so that it may be edifying (Prov. 25:11).

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this phenomenon, I highly recommend *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter. I don't agree with all of their conclusions, but their research is most compelling.

The world's artist serves himself. If pleasing an audience serves his ends, then he will please an audience as a matter of course. The Christian artist strives to serve God and others, and so fulfill the two greatest commandments (Matt. 22:36–40). The Christian artist recognizes that this work of service may not please men (because men hate bitter medicine), but he will strive to fulfill God's call nonetheless.

The world's artist follows whatever is right in his own eyes—both morally and aesthetically. He fails to recognize how his purportedly self-generated understanding has been pre-manufactured—his predictably obedient fleshly will turns wherever his sin dictates. And sin, which turns out to be very *unoriginal*, has been charting the same course for millennia. Recognizing the intrinsic monotony of merely human *experience* (Eccles. 1:9) and the manifest incompleteness of *reason* (Prov. 3:5–6), the Christian artist rests his hope on *revelation*—the evergreen Word of God which never perishes or loses its freshness (Isa. 40:7–8). Rather than stifling or marginalizing the artist's work, revealed truth actually sets the Christian artist free from the constraints of his culture and the tyranny of his limited perspective (John 8:32). Revelation—the contact point of God's transcendence and immanence—empowers the artist to discern the most fitting avenues for the expansion of Christ's Kingdom in the arts.

The Christian artist rejects self-destruction because he understands that he cannot pay for his own sins or the failings of others. Because he does not find his identity in his art, he does not fear that God may remove inspiration from him. If God were to call the Christian artist to do something

other than art for a time, he would gladly redirect his desires toward that new calling.<sup>12</sup>

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The main difference between the world's artist and the Christian lies in their sources of *identity*. Each craves an assurance of his individual value, but each seeks assurance from different sources. The world's artist finds his assurance in himself or in an audience, but the Christian artist seeks assurance in God. The Bible regularly refers to this crucial idea. As Christians, we are "in Christ."<sup>13</sup> We have our identity in Him. The world's artist does not have a firm footing for his identity. In fact, his identity, or name, is fleeting, so he feels a strong need to "make a name for himself" (Gen. 11:4).<sup>14</sup> Consider how many times God says that the name, the memory, of the evildoer will perish.<sup>15</sup> This name will perish because it cannot be found in God. Notice God's final response to the worker of iniquity—*I*

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<sup>12</sup> Consider John Milton's Georgic period.

<sup>13</sup> The following references are the fruit of a search in the New Testament for the phrase "in Christ." I have edited out all those verses that contain "in Christ" but do not specifically refer to the Christian's being in Christ (e.g., "faith in Christ"). There are other verses that refer to our identity in Jesus that do not use the words "in Christ." The following list of references substantially evidences the biblical centrality of identity in Christ: Rom. 6:11; 6:23; 8:1; 12:5; 16:7, 9, 10; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 2 Cor. 5:17; 12:2; Gal. 1:22; 2:17; 3:28; Eph. 1:10; 2:6, 10, 13; Phil. 1:1; 3:9; Col. 1:2, 28; 1 Thess. 2:14; 4:16. 2 Tim. 1:1; 3:12; Philem. 1:23; 1 Pet. 5:14.

<sup>14</sup> This same ancient impulse motivated the builders of the Tower of Babel, and directly proceeds from our separation from God.

<sup>15</sup> Deut. 7:24; 9:14; 12:3; 29:20. Job 18:17. Ps. 9:5; 109:15. Prov. 10:7; 24:20. Eccles. 1:3–4; 9:5. Isa. 14:22. Nah. 1:14. Zeph. 1:4.

*never knew you* (Matt. 7:23). On the other hand, God promises to establish the name of His chosen people (His holy, or *separate*, ones) by applying *His* name to *them*.<sup>16</sup> This promise is more fully revealed in the Scriptures as God's covenant with His people expands.<sup>17</sup>

It is not without purpose that I focus on names and naming because the work of the artist is, in fact, naming. Naming flows out of our name, in the sense that we apply our name to the work we do, and it in turn reflects our name to those to whom we present it. We share this quality with the God who created us. Consider that Christians are called God's "workmanship," a word that would be better translated "poem" (Eph. 2:10). God uses men and history as an instrument to "publish" his name throughout the earth (Rom. 9:17). His creation is a revelation of His character, and He even created us in His image (Gen. 1:26).

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<sup>16</sup> Gen. 12:2; Num. 6:27; Deut. 26:19; Josh. 7:9; Ruth 4:5, 10, 14; 1 Sam. 17:45; 18:30; 2 Sam. 7:9, 23; 1 Kings 1:47; 2 Kings 14:27; 1 Chron. 17:8, 21; 2 Chron. 7:14; 26:8, 15; Ps. 20:1; 54:1; 72:17; 89:24; 124:8; Prov. 18:10; Isa. 43:7; 48:19; 56:5; 66:22; Jer. 13:11; 14:9; 15:16; 23:6; 32:20; 33:9, 16; Dan. 9:19; Micah 4:5; Zeph. 3:12, 19, 20; Zech. 10:12; Matt. 18:20; 28:19; John 17:11–12; 20:31; Acts 3:16; 4:12; 8:16; 9:15; 15:14; 19:5; 1 Pet. 4:14–16; Rev. 2:17; 3:5; 3:12; 14:1; 22:4.

<sup>17</sup> Though I know the above references may seem daunting in their number, I hope the reader will study them at some convenient time. To meditate on the name of God, on what it means and how it relates to us, is one of the most rewarding studies we can make in the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament, God causes His name to dwell in the temple *with* His people. In the New Covenant, the temple *is* God's people, and He causes His name to be *on* and *in* them. The prophets relayed the promise of this reality to the Old Testament Jews, but its fulfillment came in Jesus our Righteousness.

When confronted with this singularly perfect self-centeredness, many unbelievers condemn God for forbidding pride in His people while He Himself seems so concerned with His own glory.<sup>18</sup> But everyone worships the highest good he knows. Who is greater than God?<sup>19</sup> The world's artist swears and lives by his own name because he claims himself and his own interests as the highest good he knows. On the other hand, Paul commands Christians to do everything "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17), while exhorting them elsewhere not to blaspheme God's name by doing evil in the name of Jesus, which is the nature of hypocrisy (Rom. 2:17–24; cp. 2 Sam. 12:14).

Every artist works by the power of the name of his highest good (his God or god), and he works to apply that name to the world through his art. The Christian artist is called by the fair and everlasting name of God to a sure future and a lasting legacy, but the unbeliever is doomed to the fate of Absalom and Ozymandias—setting up monuments to themselves in a vain (in both senses) attempt to circumvent their inevitable obscurity.<sup>20</sup> The Christian artist may begin in obscurity, like his Master did, but his future inheritance is sure. The world's artist may become quite great in his lifetime or after in the eyes of men, and yet his future memory is just as surely doomed.

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<sup>18</sup> Dawkins calls God "megalomaniacal," among other blasphemies.

<sup>19</sup> In Hebrews 6:13, it says that God swore by His own name when He made a promise to Abraham "since He had no one greater by whom to swear."

<sup>20</sup> Absalom, having no children, set up a monument "in his own name" in the Valley of Kings (2 Sam. 18:18). *Ozymandias*, the short poem by Percy Shelley, tells of a vain monument to the memory of a forgotten king.

The artist cannot help but name his own name—to apply the name he has to the world. He will do everything in his power to sew his name into the fabric of this world, and when others see his work, they will be seeing his good name and interacting with his public identity. There is no way around this. But for the Christian artist, his name is not his own. Christians are named the name of Jesus, and we therefore extend His name and authority when we authoritatively label the world through our craft. This is our high calling and the true path to humble service. Only when we no longer see ourselves as our own are we free to publish God's name to the ends of the earth. We can be ambitious and hard-working and invest all of our strength into our work without shame and without self-congratulation because we are striving through the power of God's name that works within us (Col. 1:29), and His name will rest on the title page of our lives and work.

The sooner Christian artists embrace this vital calling, the sooner we will understand what it means to praise God “according to His excellent greatness.” The world's artists will work according to the excellence they believe they alone possess, and this does lend them some strength to the extent that they are in God's image, and wholly undivided in their self-loyalty. But Christians of our day have made a tragic mistake in their perspective that saps their effectiveness as artists. In their desire to appear and be lowly, they have not escaped a self-centered name. They have made their own flesh-centered names small in a self-conscious attempt at the appearance of humility, but they have still striven according to their own power and authority. This is wrong. Christians must strive

according to the power of God's name. This is true humility, and, consequently, true greatness. When we find our identity in God, we find the path to praising Him as He requires.

The story of David and Goliath provides rich truths that we can now apply to the idea of the artist. David defeated Goliath with an instrument which he wielded proficiently, *from practice*, and he decided against using tools that he had not yet "proved" (1 Sam. 17:39). David's weakness and youth served to increase God's glory. David's humility gave him great boldness, but his older brother viewed this boldness as "pride and naughtiness" (1 Sam. 17:28). The balance of the contest between David and Goliath ultimately depended on the *names* upon which the contenders called. Goliath rested in his own greatness, and he lent his greatness to his gods in order to garner yet more strength with which to curse and slaughter. David discerned that Goliath trusted in his skill and his tools, but David did not come in the power of his skill or his tools (i.e., *in his own fleshly name*). He came "in the name of the Lord of hosts" (1 Sam. 17:45).

The conflict of cultures is a contest of names and naming. The Christian artist should not attempt to make a name for himself or to name by his own fleshly separated name. Each of the artists of this world pushes his name onto and into the universe. Each one relies on the power of his tools and skill to magnify the greatness of his own name. The Christian artist must also advance his name, the name that has been given him—that is, Jesus Christ. The Christian artist must not rest on his own strength, skill, or tools though he is required to discipline and grow these instruments as he is able. The Christian

artist rests in and works through the name of God, striving with all his might not to blaspheme that name.

### DOES GOD NEED THE CHRISTIAN ARTIST?

God chooses to work through tools, but He *does not need us* to accomplish His work. This is an absolutely essential realization for every Christian. Theologians call the self-sufficiency of God His *aseity*.<sup>21</sup> The Bible explicitly mentions this attribute of God a number of times, and the whole framework of biblical cosmology rests on God's uncreated and autonomous being.<sup>22</sup> Why is this truth so central to the Christian artist? So many times we tend to think that God needs us. We test God, thinking that He maintains His favor to us because we are such "a catch." While laughable when stated in such a way, we all, willfully or thoughtlessly, *act* like this. We think God owes us something for going to church. We think that He will reward us for our self-effacing posture and "amazing" works of obedience. But God does not need our work, and therefore He needs not pay us for it in warm, fuzzy feelings or cold, hard cash.

In fact, we need to recognize that service to God is a *privilege* rather than something He requires of us for His own benefit. Consider for a moment. Hypothetically, let's say your favorite president (who may not still be alive) calls you up on the phone and says, "Hey. I want you to come over to the

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<sup>21</sup> See John Frame, "Divine Aseity and Apologetics," *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Job 22:2–3; 34:13–15; 35:1. Ps. 50:9–13. Acts 17:25. Col. 1:17. 1 Tim. 6:13.

White House today. I think I may have a job for you.” You put on your best clothes. You glow with happiness and expectation getting prepared to go. You beam and smile on the way there. And you are certainly excited to find out what *the president* wants from *you*. When you get to the White House and are ushered into the Oval Office, the president says, “Would you be my coffee boy? I need someone who can get coffee here in my office at 7 a.m.” Do you think you would say, “No, that time isn’t convenient for me.” Or “Nah, thanks, but I just expected you had something *important* for me to do.” Would you wonder whether the president would pay you for your work? After the first day on the job, would you hound the president to reimburse you for the coffee you had bought? Would you ask him to pay for the gas you spent driving to the White House? Probably not. I think most of us would be so thrilled to be of use to *the president* that we would do everything in our power to do a good job, and we would be thrilled the whole time. The honorableness of this work does not consist in the work itself, but in *the person for whom the work is done*.

What about God? Do we not nit-pick His providence, and mistrust His provision? Do we not resent the inconvenience of His commands at times and begrudgingly fulfill His demands out of superstitious hypocrisy or a desire to please men? We are Christ’s bride, correct? Do you think He takes pleasure in our intimacy when we are merely willing but not desirous to be intimate with Him? Would any of you husbands enjoy intimacy with your wife if she just lay there unmoving without reaction? We are this wife to Christ very often! We think He

owes us something because we are *willing* to be in His church? What a tragic, laughable, pathetic, man-centered perspective. When we do as He says, we are still “unprofitable servants” (Luke 17:10).

Service to God is a privilege. He can take away the gifts He has given us—that is, everything—that we do not use for His glory (Matt. 25:28–30). He does not need us in order to receive praise (Luke 19:40). Therefore, we should be grateful *He* is willing to use *us*. We should not only serve willingly, but *joyfully!* And let not anyone look upon our joy with smug uptightness, like David’s wife Michal looked upon his joyful dancing before the ark (2 Sam. 6:16), but let all the servants of God shout for joy! We get to be of use to the Creator of the universe! Bask in the glory of that thought, and let your hearts rejoice in the significance God has given you.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Psalm 8 powerfully relates this wonderment at our intrinsic insignificance and God’s grace in giving us an honorable calling.



## The Work of the Christian Artist

**T**he Psalmist gives the Christian artist some general guidelines in Psalm 150:1–2 that provide the what, where, why, and how of artistic endeavor:

Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary;  
Praise Him in His mighty expanse.  
Praise Him for His mighty deeds;  
Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.

We will look more closely at these verses before we delve into the specifics of the artistic process.

The Psalm calls the Christian artist to praise God—not only in the sanctuary, but also in God’s “mighty expanse,” which includes everywhere. God’s praise is not confined to the worship service; it is to resound in every place from every frame that has breath.

Many artists, Christian and otherwise, believe this injunction to praise God limits their expression, but this is patently false. Consider that we are to praise God “for His mighty deeds.” This means that *absolutely nothing* is off-limits for the Christian artist, since nothing exists outside of His plan and control. We are commanded to communicate how everything in the world has God as its reference point; we are to authoritatively label all things as they relate to

God's eternal decree.<sup>1</sup> When the Christian artist understands this, it frees him from all worldly limitations.

And *how* are we to praise God? David says it should be "according to His excellent greatness." There is nothing that man could do that would match God's greatness, and yet we are called to praise Him in a way that accords with how great He actually is. We are not equal to this task. Even though we may not be able to praise God in accordance with His greatness on our own strength, God gives what He commands and is able to perfect strength even in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). God requires that we work hard unto His glory even though it is not by our own power or goodness that our work is accomplished or received.<sup>2</sup>

#### BEGINNING AN ARTISTIC WORK: ISSUES OF COMPOSITION

Does the Christian artist discover art or create it? I would say he does both in a sense. He does not create *ex nihilo* like God created; the artist creates in the sense that he forms things. God formed the earth from raw materials that he had created out of

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<sup>1</sup> Lamentations 3:37–38 references that both "good and ill" come from God's eternal decree. As long as the Christian artist puts evil in the correct perspective, he may speak even about the worst elements of the human experience as a mighty deed of God. God has included these things in His eternal decree though He neither originated sin nor condones its manifestation in His creation. It is merely the opportunity for the display of His mighty redemptive power to the glory of His Son. It is the tension and distortion necessary as a foil for His resolution.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Chron. 29:10–19; 1 Cor. 14:12; 2 Cor. 9:1–13; Col. 1:29; 1 Tim. 4:6–11.

nothing.<sup>3</sup> The artist shapes raw materials that are already there. The only difference is that man does not create what he shapes, but must rely on what he can discover—what already exists. This is why the artist both discovers and “creates” art. We are to think “God’s thoughts after Him” (2 Cor. 10:5). God brings His thoughts, every one of them, to pass (Isa. 14:24). As Christians, we desire to find out what those thoughts are to the best of our ability all the way up to the borderlines of our limitations.

Solomon said, “Prepare your work outside and make it ready for yourself in the field; afterwards, then, build your house” (Prov. 24:27). The Christian artist should not go about his work in a haphazard and random way. He must plan his work before he proceeds to execute it. This does not necessarily mean that he cannot experiment, but even this experimentation will be a means to an end—part of the planning process. It will never be terminal experimentation, for the artist does not experiment for his own amusement; he searches for content and means of communication for the sake of his audience.

Part of the artist’s planning involves becoming conscious of his presuppositions, and altering them if necessary, before he gets into the meat of his work. What are the presuppositions of a Christian artist? These are the facts about reality and art that he takes for granted. They are the foundational truths from which he will compose and execute his vision. But what should they be? The following are some suggestions. This list is not exhaustive, but it is true to the best of my discernment.

1. The universe is predictable and operates according to

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<sup>3</sup> Gen. 1:1–2; Ps. 90:2.

discoverable rules<sup>4</sup> maintained by God (Job 34:14–15). Objective truth can be known through God’s revelation of His character in the Bible, though men can grasp it only through intimacy with Christ.<sup>5</sup>

2. Art should serve to overthrow lies and establish the truth. Whether it should lean more toward overthrowing or establishing depends on its cultural context and intended application.<sup>6</sup>
3. Because God created the whole universe and all it contains, anything can glorify God (Prov. 16:4). There is no subject, medium, tool, event, etc. over which God does not exercise sovereignty.<sup>7</sup>
4. God alone deserves praise, and He gives strength and skill to His servants. Without God’s inspiration and blessing, the Christian artist will accomplish nothing. If He allowed us success apart from Him, we would forget Him. Many times, He withholds a desired outcome to draw us back to Him.<sup>8</sup>
5. God accepts praise only when it is mingled with the incense of Jesus’ perfect life and sacrificial death. An artist who considers himself or his work intrinsically worthy of God’s acceptance proves himself a fool.<sup>9</sup>
6. Art should be serious-minded, and the artist sober-minded. Art should have a real purpose and meaning,

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<sup>4</sup> Gen. 8:22; Eccles. 3:1–10; James 1:17.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Heb. 4:12; Col. 2:1–3.

<sup>6</sup> Jer. 1:10; Eph. 4:29.

<sup>7</sup> Prov. 21:30; 1 Cor. 10:26.

<sup>8</sup> Ps. 4:1; 127:1; Prov. 30:7–9.

<sup>9</sup> Lev. 10:1–2; Gal. 6:14; 1 Cor. 4:7; Heb. 13:15.

and the artist should not cloud his artistic judgment with chemical or situational distractions.<sup>10</sup> Art should not be fundamentally trivial or silly, though it may employ those qualities for a discernible purpose.<sup>11</sup>

7. The tool of the artist is not transgression of boundaries, but *discernment*. The use of distortion, dissonance, ugliness, swing, chaos, obscurity, ambiguity, abstraction, etc. should be careful and well-reasoned. The work of an artist is to submit his work to the Law of God. Never transgress or encourage the transgression of even the smallest of God's laws, no matter what you may think you gain artistically (Matt. 16:26).
8. Though the artist should not be "of the world," the artist need not diametrically oppose *whatever* his culture values. Nothing but God's Word should constitute the reference point for artistic determinations—if the artist happens to oppose his culture, it will be because the culture opposes God, not because the artist has developed his sense of correctness by negating his worldly environment.<sup>12</sup>
9. The artist needs the best counsel and training he can get to learn his craft. He should be especially careful not to neglect the work that has already been done in the past. He should not overly concern himself with novelty, and he should not be so stubborn as to reject the criticism of his audience. He should view criticism as a necessary good, and seek it out from any qualified or unqualified

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<sup>10</sup> Eph. 5:18; Matt. 5:8.

<sup>11</sup> Titus 2:2, 6; 1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Thess. 5:22; 2 Cor. 6:16–18.

individual who will honestly assess his work.<sup>13</sup>

10. The artist should seek a good name. Before starting a project, he should consider its impact on his righteous name.<sup>14</sup> The artist should be willing to take full responsibility for the consequences of his work. Good intentions are not good enough (2 Cor. 5:10).

There are other presuppositions, both biblical and unbiblical, that the Christian artist holds unconsciously, and he should strive to become conscious of these. The more of our assumptions we can uncover and correct, the more our work can be pleasing to God. Of course, this implies that the artist must be a good student of God's Word.

#### FINISHING AN ARTISTIC WORK: ISSUES OF EXECUTION

Having established that our motivation should be to praise God and that our artistic foundation should rest on biblical presuppositions, I will now briefly speak about the process and end of artistic work—"briefly," because the bulk of the artistic process will vary according to the sanctified framework of the individual artist.

We must accomplish all our work, even artistic work, "heartily as unto the Lord" (Col. 3:23). I have seen more talented Christian artists fail in this regard than in any other. We are commanded to "redeem the time," yet many artists waste much of their time talking and planning and dreaming, but

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<sup>13</sup> Prov. 9:9; 10:17; 12:1; 26:12; 27:17; Eccles. 7:5.

<sup>14</sup> Prov. 22:1; Eccles. 7:1.

never doing (Eph. 5:16). This is extremely unfortunate and irresponsible. The “field is white for the harvest,” yet the workers of the field are at home playing video games waiting for aesthetical lightning to strike.

Several factors contribute to the worker shortage in the harvest field, and each Christian artist should vigilantly avoid the most common pitfalls to productivity. One is procrastination. While it is of the utmost importance to plan before beginning a work, the Scriptures also warn against the kind of interminable planning that forestalls productive labor. Solomon writes, “The one who observes the wind will never sow, and the one who regards the clouds will not reap” (Eccles. 11:4).

What does this mean? Its meaning hinges on a farming metaphor. Wind hindered sowing because it scattered the seeds every which way rather than allowing them to take root in the prepared soil. Rain ruined reaping day because it made the usual method of threshing entirely ineffective—wet wheat is nearly impossible to separate into kernel and chaff.<sup>15</sup> But if the farmer waited for that perfect time when the wind completely died down, he would never sow his seed, and if he waited for the perfectly cloudless day, he would never reap the harvest.

There is no perfect time or circumstance to begin or complete your work. Do it now and trust God to bless it. If rain

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<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, farmers hope for rain to water the seed on sowing day, and they welcome a refreshing and chaff-scattering wind during harvest. Another point of this proverb could be that everything has a proper time and place; a beneficial thing in one context may be disastrous in another.

comes while you harvest, so be it. If a person wanted to acquire excuses to not work, he could find them everywhere, but God would not excuse his laziness.<sup>16</sup> Bottom line: get to work now, even if the circumstances aren't ideal. Don't get sucked into the idolatry of the ideal. The ideal is always half the distance from the goal away. You won't ever get there. Don't worry about it. Do what you can and wait on God to bless it.

Do not avoid the tension of actual work by talking your way around the process until the original idea is stale. Solomon teaches us that "in all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Prov. 14:23). If you have an idea that is viable according to the needs of the time, get to work on it. Don't just talk about it—accomplish it.

But what if you don't have any ideas? Then study. I write a good deal of poetry, but there are times when I do not have any good ideas for poems. Many times I will return to an old poem and try to rewrite it in a received form (e.g., a villanelle or a sonnet), or I will try to write a new poem in a complicated or difficult form. My purpose in these exercises is not primarily to have a finished and presentable product, but to hone my craft in writing. Most poems that come out of these exercises are not good *poems*, but they are good *practice*. If you don't have a good idea, work while you wait for one.

Honing your craft while you wait could spare a good idea from poor execution. Many lazy Christian artists never practice their craft, so even if they do stumble on a good idea, they cannot execute it with precision and excellence. They should

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<sup>16</sup> Prov. 22:13; 26:13.

have spent their waiting time sharpening their skill. Even a mediocre idea can have value if it is baptized with sweat. If the Christian artist hopes to be used to conquer Goliath, he must practice his sling.<sup>17</sup>

Since the purpose of Christian art is to praise God and edify an audience, one must decide which audience is to be edified. The edification of the “target audience” should occupy the mind of the artist while he works. But don’t take that the wrong way. We are not to do our work “as unto men.” The needs and especially the tastes of the audience are a secondary, though very important, concern behind what the artist believes pleases God.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, a skilled artist should strive to accomplish his duty to both God and his neighbors (the whole Law) in each of his works.

The Christian artist must also be careful not to spend an undue amount of time finishing a work. Those finishing touches can often take up as much time as the beginning strokes. It is not possible for our work to be perfect. The value of a work is often in the process of working on it, and in many projects the first attempt is merely a study of viability. We cannot be so attached to ourselves that we aren’t willing to be done with a work and move on.

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<sup>17</sup> A related problem is executing an idea before it has ripened ideologically. This error of execution is related to what I call premature resolution. I devote some time to premature resolution in chapter 7 because I think it is one of the gravest substantive debilitations of contemporary Christian art.

<sup>18</sup> Col. 3:23; Isa. 28:9–13. Isaiah’s audience apparently considered his style very tedious (“order upon order... line upon line”), but Isaiah did not craft his style to suit their *taste*, but to suit their *need*.

Do your best to separate yourself from the work God is doing through you. Make it something that you would gladly receive as a Christian commissioner, and then move on. For this purpose, apply the seven criteria from the end of Chapter 4 to your own work, and ask other godly people to apply them as well. If your work consistently receives bad marks in any area, make changes if possible. If changes are prohibitively difficult but seem necessary, consider scrapping your current project and reusing parts of it for some future endeavor. In the end, the choice and the responsibility are yours to make and take.

Though I have written little on what would traditionally take up most of a book on aesthetics and art, I hope that the reader understands why. The artistic process is and should be very free. Different people will have different perspectives and skills and audiences and levels of spiritual discernment. This makes the work of the church vibrant, alive, and culturally relevant. I do not wish to dampen that vitality, but rather to encourage it through submission to the will of God as revealed in the Bible.

#### WORKING WITH OTHERS: ISSUES OF COLLABORATION

In most cases, a Christian artist cannot work alone. William Blake wrote, illustrated, published, and printed all of his own work, but few of us have the skill, patience, time, or equipment to do that today.<sup>19</sup> Most of us must work with

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<sup>19</sup> One should also consider that William Blake produced only about twenty copies each of his various books. Given the fact that he hand-painted, pressed, bound, and distributed every copy of his books,

others in some capacity.

Christians *should* be able to work with one another particularly well. We have the Spirit, the perfect bond of unity, and we should graciously receive what each joint of Christ's body supplies.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, many Christians *do not* work well together. This could be for any number of reasons (all stemming from sin) which I do not have space to unpack right now.<sup>21</sup> It is not wrong to part ways with a believer to pursue another method for God's glory, but we must weigh our motives in doing so. It is easy to justify separation even for the most petty of reasons. Even Christians fall prey to separatist thinking in an age of "rugged individualism."

"Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3). No. Yet we should carefully assess how much ideological agreement is really necessary for productive collaboration, for the Bible also teaches, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). Real disagreement that results in wrestling with issues is necessary for the production of art. It keeps art fresh and progressive. Art conceived in a single mind often gains focus because of it, but it often loses depth and dimension. On the other hand, the depth to which collaborators agree constrains the depth and scope of a work of

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this is actually quite a large number. But it is still not very many by modern standards. Such is the price of working alone.

<sup>20</sup> Col. 3:14; Eph. 4:3; Eph. 4:16.

<sup>21</sup> There are rare occasions, even among godly people, that collaborators must part ways because of a methodological disagreement. This seems to have been the case with Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39–40. This should be the exception, however. We are not to be quarrelsome or fractious.

art. The Christian should favor true collaboration—working together to the full potential of each individual’s complementary insights and gifts—over against the fake collaboration of mealy compromise. Disagreement need not produce discord.

Solitary non-Christians have a unique advantage over solitary Christians in that they operate unconditionally under an undivided allegiance to self. Christians in many ways are conflicted, at times doing what they do not love and willing what they do not accomplish (Rom. 7:15f). But we have a great material advantage in the fact that we are able to establish lasting collaborative partnerships through the unifying power of the Spirit. This may be God’s way of removing glory from any one of us and consolidating it in Himself. The unbeliever cannot maintain lasting loving relationships, but can boast only the companionships of self-interest. Most non-Christian collaborations are empty travesties of the relationships that only God’s grace and the power of true forgiveness can create.

Just as the Christian artist must *first* be a Christian before he is an artist, he must also make sure that his working relationships are *first* spiritually edifying *before* they are functionally convenient. It would be better to suffer through the difficulty of collaborating with a mature Christian novice than to suffer the adverse spiritual consequences of working with a very skilled unbeliever. It is hard to determine the balance here, as Scriptural injunctions or normative examples abound on either side of this issue.

On the one hand, we cannot help but be in the world. Jesus even prayed that we not be removed from this world, but that we be kept from the evil one (John 17:15). We cannot

help but do business with the unbeliever. I recommend that, when and if you can, you buy from companies that are owned by Christians and operated according to Scriptural principles. But in our day, such companies are not common. Should we go without toothpaste, car tune-ups, or batteries because we cannot find a Christian company that offers them? But is there not a difference between toothpaste and art? Is art just another commodity? I would say no.

Toothpaste and other commodities are closer to being *adiaphora*<sup>22</sup> than art could ever be. Toothpaste does not necessarily carry within its use a possible message or an implied worldview. If you really want to indulge in pedantry, you might say that toothpaste is peculiarly Western, that it carries with it the modernistic concept of the separation of man from Nature, that it represents the repression of *kultur* for the cause of *civilization*, etc. But all these arguments are moot to the one who does not consider them. I brush my teeth to keep from offending my wife's nose. That is it. The toothpaste has little or no influence on my outlook on life. I should definitely use toothpaste to the glory of God, but which kind of toothpaste I use to the glory of God is largely, at least to my human discernment, morally inconsequential.

But can I say this about art? Even if I do not consciously explore its message and method, if I surround myself with art of a particular ideological persuasion, I will find myself shaped

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<sup>22</sup> *Adiaphora* refers to morally "indifferent things." It was coined by the Stoics to refer to things that were extra-moral. Deciding between these things did not require moral discernment, and doing or enjoying any of these things would entail no moral judgment.

and persuaded by its bias. This is inevitable. I cannot say the same for a sandwich, gasoline, or toothpaste. No matter how many times you eat Veggie-mite, you will not increase your chances of adopting Australian values.<sup>23</sup> Yet *bad company* does corrupt good morals (1 Cor. 15:33). Anti-Christian art is bad company. A nasty sandwich is just a nasty sandwich. Except for when it isn't.

If art is not adiaphorous, the Christian must protect the core of his work from the collaboration of the unbeliever. He must protect the message of his work from the infection (corruption) of an alien worldview. But in our day—more now than in the past—works of art have many stages of production. In each progressive stage of production, as the work makes its way out from the artist into the market, its ideological framework becomes less and less malleable, and thus less susceptible to the influence of ideologies in contradiction to its current state. In other words, the closer you get to the market, the safer your work becomes from significant change. Consider that a book is completely ideologically malleable while you are writing it, but changes very little at all when it is being printed and bound by a publisher. If this is the case, is it morally allowable for a Christian to conceive or compose a work and then allow it to be executed or distributed by unbelievers?

Many would cite the collaboration between Solomon and Hiram of Tyre as a normative example. We must be careful with this example. First, Hiram was a son of Israel: his mother was of the tribe of Naphtali. Hiram wrote a letter to Solomon blessing the wisdom of Jehovah God (1 Kings 7:14;

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<sup>23</sup> You might actually be *less likely* to adopt Australian values.

5:7). Hiram may have had a foreign father, but he was raised by his Israelite mother—a common custom at court—in the fear of Israel’s God. But what if one granted that Hiram was a God-hating rebel? The most important factor in the argument would be that Solomon commissioned Hiram and approved of his work. Solomon *filtered* what work was allowed to be presented. Solomon had this chore even in the writing of the Proverbs. He did not actually compose all of the Proverbs, but “collected” many of them and, through the power of the Spirit, polished them to true perfection (Eccles. 12:9–11).

Can the Christian artist then use the work or aid of the non-Christian? I would say only if it fulfills three conditions:

1. The work of the unbeliever has nothing to do with crafting the message, approach, or vision of the work.
2. The non-Christian has voluntarily contracted to work under the direction of a godly and uncompromised Christian artist who approves the non-Christian’s results before they can be integrated or presented.
3. The personal conduct of the non-Christian is not so wicked that it compromises the good name or reputation of the believer or his enterprise.

But the ideal scenario is to keep all artistic production within the Kingdom. We should strive toward this ideal, and we should not compromise simply for convenience or because we think it will ensure our temporal success. Success is measured by God. He was able to make Gideon the victor with a handful of soldiers. He is not limited by means, and we should not direct our way by considering our means, but rather by considering

our duty and God's promise. If God has called us to do something, He will provide what we need for its accomplishment. We need only to work faithfully and wait on His timely aid.

#### PROMOTING AN ARTISTIC WORK: ISSUES OF PRESENTATION

The Christian artist should not feel guilty about trying to get his work into the hands of his target audience. The art was produced for their edification, and should be given every chance to be received. The artist should also not feel guilty about his ambition to present the truth to as many people as will receive it (Rom. 15:20). The only ambition that the Bible condemns is "selfish ambition."<sup>24</sup> The Christian artist can even desire to be paid for his work, though he should not *expect* to be paid.<sup>25</sup>

The lack of financial support for the Christian arts is extremely troubling to me. For some reason, Christians think that artwork done within their church community should be free. I don't know where they get this idea, and to be fair, it is not just Christian *artists* that experience this unfortunate lack of financial support: fellow church-going mechanics, carpenters, lawyers, or accountants are sometimes made to feel guilty for expecting full payment for their labors from their brethren-customers.

Christian artists, however, receive the lion's share of this attitude. Christians are perfectly willing to pay for the artistic work of non-Christians by going to the movies, buying music,

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<sup>24</sup> Phil. 1:17; James 3:13–14, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18.

reading non-Christian best-sellers, and subscribing to cable/satellite television, but are rarely willing to pay for the work of Christian artists in their own churches.

Christian artists must cope with this reality. Do not feel guilty about asking for support if you are doing work that you are called by God to do. Do not be too proud to ask for money. It is not living on charity to ask for payment for your artistic work. Though your work may be spiritually appraised, you have to be physically supported by things that are physically appraised. Though your work may not have a real physical equivalent in value, the financial support of your church is a token that your church receives and appreciates what you are doing (1 Cor. 9:11).

But you will likely receive very little financial support, if any at all. You may need to get another job, and that is fine. Paul himself was a tent maker who decided to forego monetary support from the Corinthians because he did not want them to think he preached Christ merely for monetary gain.<sup>26</sup> If you find yourself in this position, rejoice and continue to work hard. Most Christian artists of any skill will be in this position until the church in America becomes healthier. But even while you wait for the financial support you need to work exclusively on art, remain diligent in honing your craft and presenting your work, often for free, to any who are willing to receive it.

The Christian artist should never be so attached to his work that *its* rejection feels like *his* rejection. Consider the

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<sup>26</sup> 2 Cor. 12:8–9; Acts 18:1–5.

work of most of the prophets. God told Isaiah that he would not see even one Israelite converted, that his work would be for the purpose of hardening the people in their rebellion (Isa. 6:9–10). A Christian artist should be willing to see both his work and his person rejected. A wicked and rebellious church hates the fiery zeal of the artist more than it hates the cool reasoning of a theologian. Consider that all of the prophets wrote poetry, and a few, like Ezekiel and Hosea, were some of the first performance artists.<sup>27</sup> Most of the prophets died at the hands of their audience (Matt. 21:33f). Receive reproof, repent of sins, and bear the reproach of your faithfulness, keeping careful watch that the offense arises from the conviction of the gospel and not from the unseemliness of your work or person (1 Pet. 2:8, 12).

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<sup>27</sup> Ezekiel laid siege to a model of Jerusalem that he had made, and was also required to lay on his side a day for every year of the rebellion of Judah and Israel (Ezek. 4:1–3; 4:9f). Hosea was commanded to marry a whore to represent Christ's marriage to an imperfect and unfaithful church (Hos. 1:2).

## What's Wrong with Christian Art?

**T**his chapter will likely rattle the sensibilities of some of my Christian readers, but my love for the church compels me to speak openly of what I believe are some of its central failings with the hope that we can become more conformed to the image of Christ. But I do not merely desire that the church be sanctified. I also recognize that our failures are fodder to the world's infidelity. When God puts new songs in our mouths, the world will hear and fear—and put their trust in Him (Ps. 40:3).

The world's particular rebellions reflect those fronts of the spiritual war in which the church has become complacent. Proverbs 14:33 says, "Wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding, but it makes itself known even in the midst of fools." Many times, the folly of the world makes known the wisdom of God. In a sense, what the world loves at any given moment reveals where the church has lost its salt. Consider that the 1940s and '50s saw the rise of the workaholic, absentee father. The '60s and '70s saw the inflammation of feminism and, later, homosexuality—both of which were and are fueled by false masculinity. It is imperative to understand that darkness is the absence of light. It exists wherever light has been extinguished or occluded. A small look at the arts of the world should indicate that our light is absent. We are irrel-

evant. We have the money and talent (though it seems never the twain shall meet), so why does it seem like we have abandoned the battle?

Men always live according to the doctrines they believe (Prov. 23:7). This, obviously, does not mean that men live according to the doctrines they *profess* to believe. Professions are another outward action that, unfortunately, do not always reflect the true state of the heart. In order to understand the state of the church, we must examine her fruit. The following list is not exhaustive, but I think it represents the failings of the church that most damage our arts. First, I will discuss what I think are the faulty doctrinal roots of our bad fruit, after which I will discuss how certain incomplete, incorrect, or immature doctrines can be more closely conformed to the Scriptures.

## DOCTRINE OF HISTORY

It is fascinating to think of history as a drama that God has written to glorify Himself. I wonder how weak this story would read if we had written it. How many authors would have the discipline to include two thousand years—and counting—of dénouement after the climax of the Cross? Would we have written sin into this story? Would we even have written the Cross into it? Hell? I hope the following imaginative illustration of what history would look like if it had been written by contemporary Christians enlightens the reader to a central problem in the modern church's doctrine of history.

In the beginning, God created everything good. Pat and Lee, the first humans, tried their hardest and successfully followed God's unreasonable

commands. But then an extra-dimensional being that was uncreated in this universe challenged God for possession of men. This extra-dimensional being, Satan, beat God and held men for a long time in unwilling bondage.

They did all sorts of sin at Satan's command, but they really didn't want to do any of the bad things he forced them to do. After a few minutes of torturous bondage, which was experienced as a harmless montage rather than a linear drudgery, a valiant man named Santa (who had a fine feminine nose, shoulder-length chestnut hair, and blue eyes) rose up and accumulated an army of fifty men and fifty women that he trained to be great warriors. They assaulted Satan's castle and defeated him and his army in hand-to-hand combat. Then, because Santa was humble and loyal to his first master, he decided to reinstate God as the ruler of this dimension.

God was very grateful, and promised He would change. He wouldn't be harsh and judgmental like He had been before. He wouldn't force men to do anything they didn't want to. So He made a deal with Satan so all men would be able to choose between being with God and being with Satan. If they chose God, they would stay with God forever as friends rather than as subjects. If they chose Satan, they would return with Satan to his dimension, but could still be friends with God. Satan's dimension was not the dimension for which men were created, so it was more novel and strange. Men then had the choice between novelty with Satan and comfort with God, but there was no moral censure should men choose to be adventurous with Satan.

All humans quickly made their choice and went off to their respective places to live happily ever after. The whole history occurred (thanks to non-linear editing) in exactly ten years (an even, “digital” number), after which nothing was recorded or remembered. The period of time between Santa’s defeat of Satan and the end of recorded history was five minutes set to an ever-climaxing flourish of major thirds played by wingéd baby cherubim.

We cannot over-estimate our maturity. We are no different now than the Jews of Jesus’ day who expected Jesus to be a conquering hero. We are not yet Christians who can fathom the close of Isaiah’s book of prophecy. We would not end the ineffable vision of the New Jerusalem with an earthy epilogue of satisfaction in the destruction of sinners. We must be honest with ourselves. Until we fully accept the necessity and importance of history *as God has written it*, we will always construct depthless, imitational narratives that belie our rebellious, man-centered perspective.

There are two major differences between history as man would have written it and history the way God wrote it. First, true history is God-centered. Second, it does not resolve prematurely. These two aspects of history need some unpacking.

Why did God include sin, the Cross, miracles, and hell in his narrative? Because the purpose of history is to magnify God. If men were perfect, we would need only a Creator. We wouldn’t need a Redeemer. If I am a basketball player with a perfect free throw record, all I have to do to maintain my 100% completion record is continue hitting my free throws. This is humanly possible. I am able to do this on my own power. But if I miss a

single free throw, how many free throws would it take for me to get back to 100%? I would need to successfully complete  $\infty$  free throws to get back on track, which is *not* humanly possible. This would require infinite power. The inclusion of sin in the narrative of history magnifies God's infinite power to straighten what has become bent. The Cross emphasizes the justice, holiness, and mercy of God, and the inability and impotence of men. All of history then points to God (Acts 2:22).

It is also true that history does not resolve prematurely. Premature resolution has thoroughly diseased the Christian arts. This is evidenced in surface-grazing, one-dimensional, childish melodic praise mantras and movies in which plot complications amount to nothing more than plastic on-ramps to truncated altar calls which unequivocally save the unconvincingly troubled protagonists, restoring them to states of unambiguous and superficial peace. Things bode no better for the Christian artists who recognize the pitfalls of cliché and saccharin sentimentality. These artists end up shrouding the truth in purposeless ambiguities, creating self-indulgently opaque works incapable of effectively edifying an audience.

The solution to the problem of man-centeredness is simple. We must begin to understand that this reality we live in is God's—the entire universe speaks of God. We do not have to inject Christianity into reality. Reality is already inherently meaningful and specifically God-centered (Rom. 11:36). Any *accurate* artistic representation of reality will automatically yield God-glorifying results.

Many may say that “realism” of this sort has already been the artistic engine of the non-Christian, and that this “realistic”

art has served to efface God from contemporary non-Christian art. But any realism that effaces God from reality is not true realism since God *is* the Creator of reality. He *is* the Mover of history. Any true realism will not only include God, it will recognize Him as the lens through which every atom of experience must be interpreted. Our art is not God-fortified, as if He were Vitamin G added to our bleached, stripped, highly processed cookie-cutter productions. Our art should rather be God-oriented, God-centered, and God-filled. Everything we produce should, like reality, speak plainly about God. Naturally. We don't need to force this. God and Jesus don't need to be mentioned in a work in order to be present in it. God didn't scrawl an ichthus signature on the Grand Canyon, and we don't need to manipulate reality like the unbeliever does in order to pop up our beliefs (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

The solution to premature resolution is simply learning the discipline of waiting on God through faith. Though it may be difficult to learn this discipline, shortcuts to resolution are peculiarly Satanic. Almost all of Satan's temptations utilize a shortcut to one of God's promised ends. "Turn the stones to bread ... hasn't God promised to feed you? Bow before me ... hasn't God promised to give you the kingdoms of the world? Take Hagar as your concubine ... hasn't God promised you a child? Bow before this calf ... isn't Moses taking a bit too long to bring the promised communication from God?" In every case, Satan offers a cheap resolution without the proposed difficulties of waiting on God. God gives us short-term difficulty and long-term satisfaction. Satan offers instant gratification with long-term damnation. It is clear that the non-Christian art of today

is Satanic in this sense. But has Christian art achieved a more disciplined perspective on resolution? It would appear many of us also, strange to say, are making Satanic art.

## DOCTRINE OF WORSHIP

Contemporary Christians have incorrectly understood the goal and rule of worship. Though praise for God comes from our lips, we often go to church for the emotional, spiritual, and even physical benefits we receive rather than out of gratitude and love for God. We have turned our backs to God, though not our faces. In our time of trouble, we ask God to save us, but we forget Him in our times of plenty (Jer. 2:27). We focus on the *act* of worship more than the *object* of worship because we want to *feel* worshipful more often than we want to *be* worshipful. This attitude reflects itself in our art.

Contemporary Christian art is almost all *about* God without being *for* or *toward* God. Our art is abstracted and filled with generalizations. It is not good enough to declare the greatness of God. We should be trying to measure it publicly. When we are completely exhausted by the discipline of naming the specific acts of God's greatness, then we will have earned the right to declare that He is great. The lack of concrete specificity in Christian art indicates the piffling shallowness of our modern experience with God. We have not *known* God deeply; how could we *worship* Him deeply? It is true that we sometimes work ourselves into an incantational froth by repeating abstract nothings into the ceiling-ears of our churches, but this too demonstrates a mud-puddle self-centeredness seeking the fleshly

satisfaction of an emotional high. When our emotions are not excited, we either find a more titillating church or we remain in our first church and stroke our self-image with congratulations that we are willing to stick it out—to worship God even when we foresee no pleasure in it.

The goal of modern worship is man's enjoyment and benefit alone. The rule of modern worship is man's opinion and imagination alone. We give our artistic leftovers to God on Sunday, and dedicate our work to ourselves for the rest of the week. The solution to this should already be apparent: we must redirect ourselves to God completely. The complete sacrifice of a tithe of our week's time and profit signals the fact that our whole week and work belong to God. We aren't paid up with God through a time and money tithe on Sunday so we can do what we want for the rest of the week. We tithe as a rededication of our whole lives. All our work belongs to God, artistic work included, and it should be ruled by His Word and driven by His excellence (1 Cor. 7:19–20).

Art doesn't have to be about God to be about God. Movies and paintings don't have to look Christian to be edifying. Music doesn't have to be *called* praise music to praise God. I actually dislike the moniker "Christian art." It has become conventional to call art made by Christians "Christian art," but actually, only two kinds of art exist: good art and bad art. And Christians make a lot of bad art. So much so that "Christian art" has almost become a pejorative label. This is unfortunate and unnecessary.

Christians need to stop trying so hard to make Christian art. If you are a godly Christian who wants to make art, just make the best art you can. Produce whatever God gives you to

do. Pursue God and pursue your craft. If you are honest, you will not be able to help praising God with your work.<sup>1</sup>

## DOCTRINE OF KNOWLEDGE

In the world of man, there are two paths to knowledge. These two ways parallel two perspectives on reality—correspondence or coherence:

The correspondence theory [of reality] suggests that the external world is knowable by scientific inquiry, by the accumulation of data, by documentation, by definition. The coherence theory suggests that the external world is knowable (or perhaps can be understood) by intuitive perception, by insight.<sup>2</sup>

Proponents of correspondence theories use referential language, imply neutrality or objectivity, and tend to value “facts” over experience. Proponents of coherence theories use experiential or emotive language, imply subjectivity, and tend to disbelieve the possibility of objective “facts.” Unfortunately, many Christians believe that this dichotomy accurately represents all the possibilities for the acquisition of knowledge. I think this dichotomy to be a false bifurcation, and it has significantly damaged the Christian arts (among other things).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Augustine famously said, “Love God first, and then do what you want.”

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “realism” (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 772.

<sup>3</sup> A “false bifurcation” is an informal fallacy through which a speaker implies that fewer options than are possible (usually two) constitute the entirety of possibility. For example, the statement, “A vote for anyone but the Republican nominee is a vote for a Democrat,” disallows the

Believing that knowledge can be acquired in only one of two mutually exclusive ways results in the fixed separation of the fields of knowledge into two non-interpenetrating hemispheres. This hemispheric separation then generates such fixed binary opposites as “left-brain/right-brain,” “knowledge/feeling,” and “art/science.” In our society, in which science and technology are worshipped as the only harbingers of knowledge, this dichotomy has provided the impetus for a class of irresponsible and unskilled artists that are more interested in an amorphous emotional experience than the communication of any decipherable information.

Most artists, Christians and otherwise, have abandoned the notion that art should communicate truth, thus hamstringing the primary purpose of Christian art—edification. Consider that the Old Testament temple, though exemplary in beauty and craftsmanship, was primarily a tool of worship and instruction. In Colossians 3:16, Paul instructs the church to “teach” and “admonish” one another with “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” He does not say “entertain” or “inspire” or “fill with fuzzy feelings.” This point cannot be overstressed. Though Christian art may in fact accomplish all those things, it should not strive for those things as a primary goal. Christian art then, must instruct in righteousness first, and all these other things will be added to it (Matt. 6:33).

Art remains the best tool for accurately presenting the most baffling of God’s truths, whether they originate in the Scriptures or in creation. God utilizes images and stories to

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possibility that a third party could win an election, which *would be possible* if fewer people believed this fallacious line of reasoning.

evoke those realities that defy definition, to scale the rational defenses of skeptics (like a high wall in their own imagination), and to *present* and *refine* inextinguishable questions rather than seek to snuff them out with sound bytes and platitudes.

## DOCTRINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

At least one academic has pointed out that “low-church” Protestantism has never produced a single literary giant. Since most Christians before the Reformation were Roman Catholic, it should come as no surprise that nearly all Christian artists before the Reformation were also Roman Catholic. But why should it be the case that all the literary greats *after* the Reformation were Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican? And this fact can hardly be denied: George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Flannery O’Connor, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and numerous other influential authors, were all members of the “high church.”

I cannot provide a definitive reason for the obvious lack of literary virtuosos in the low church. Some have said that an inherited “puritanical” distaste for dissimulation—the one that drove many of our low-church forefathers to forbid the theater, deface sacred sculptures, and generally disparage aesthetic pursuits—has sapped our arts of life and purpose. But even if the low-church Reformers did reject art entirely, which I do not believe is true, why should their “anti-aesthetic” ethos continue to have influence in the modern evangelical church which has distanced itself almost completely from their standards and practices? Many Protestant churches have incor-

porated drama *into their worship services*, and most Christian denominations widely support Christian movies and books, no matter how mediocre.

The main aesthetic (not theological) difference between high- and low-church Christianity revolves around the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper.<sup>4</sup> Roman Catholics "go to mass." Protestants "go to church." And most Protestants take the Lord's Supper but four times a year—grape juice in individual plastic thimbles and single-serving squares of pita bread. Some churches do it in a separate service. They say infrequent celebration increases the *specialness* of each observance. But I do not believe Protestants have made the Lord's Supper special. They've made it *nonexistent*. In high churches, the Eucharist is the central element of the worship service, whereas, in most Protestant churches, the sermon enjoys (an often undeserved) preeminence.

But can a different approach to the Lord's Supper really affect *the arts*? Should Protestant churches adopt a more Roman Catholic view of the sacraments in order to encourage aesthetic excellence? We can't really ask this question until we understand specifically *what about* the high church view has fostered the artistic imagination, and why evangelical Protestantism has been so stifling to it.

If we're honest, we must admit to couching or softening Christ's words about the Lord's Supper. "He didn't really mean that it was *actually* His body. He meant that it was

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<sup>4</sup> Though most of what I say in this section concerns the Lord's Supper specifically, the principles involved here also concern the sacrament of Baptism. I will leave the reader to make those connections.

a *symbol* of His body.” We make fine distinctions between the “spiritual” and the “physical,” and somehow, in the end, the sacrament transmogrifies into little more than a curious memorial. I’m not saying the doctrine of transubstantiation is the solution to the issue at hand, but I am suggesting a radical rethinking of the nature and significance of *symbol* and *metaphor*.

Transubstantiation has at least one advantage over the mainstream Protestant perception of the elements of communion: it maintains that the elements are *truly and really* Christ’s body and blood. Which they are. The doctrine falls into error when it assumes that the only way for Christ’s body and blood to be *actually* present is for the bread and wine to turn into tangible sinew and hemoglobin.

The mainstream Protestant alternative has divorced the sensory from the spiritual. It has interpreted the sacrament Platonically in order to avoid cannibalism, but, in so doing, it has extracted the symbolic substance of the sacrament from its physical sign. The sign has thus been stripped of its gravity, and the “spiritual” symbol has become incoherent.

The Roman Catholic view encouraged artistry by endowing sensory experience with *spiritual significance*. The Protestant view, incidentally, was a great boon to science since it emancipated spiritual significance from the strictures of mysticism and superstition. Roman Catholicism argues for coherence: The sacrament *is* what it represents. Protestantism pushes for correspondence: The sacrament is a metaphor that corresponds to a material reality distinct from the symbol. But if both theories are necessary and non-exclusive angles on the whole truth, the

following results: A sacrament is a *perfect* metaphor. As such, it actually *is* what it represents. Yes, the sacrament is a bit of word-play. But when God plays with words, tangible things happen. God sprung worlds from words, and our dismissal of the words and meanings of the sacrament indicates our lack of faith and our small view of God. What God says, *is*.

God's art shames our art. We try to *represent* reality in art. God *creates* it. His Word speaks reality into existence. God's description of reality *is* reality. In the Lord's Supper, which we take by faith until Jesus returns, God invites us to take hold of the perfect unity of the life to come. There, death will not separate substance and spirit. Lies will not separate reality and representation. What God created in harmony will no longer be divorced by death and sin. We proclaim that reality every time we take the Lord's Supper by faith. It is the present pledge and temporal guarantee of a future and eternal certainty. As Christian artists, we need to recognize this vital truth: God never designed sensory reality and spiritual reality to be divorced. They are unified in Christ even now. What does this mean?

First, the interpenetration of matter and spirit (or body and soul), elevates the body, the senses, and the phenomenal world to their proper dignity. Proponents of materialist science want to keep our senses neutral, artless, and amoral—separate from our biased spirits. On the other side of the split, asceticism deems the body and senses merely the receptacles of sensory pleasure and therefore *base and immoral*. But God made man body and soul—one person. So the senses serve both for godly pleasure and moral insight, and the Christian artist should employ them for both purposes. Good art should

please the senses, but this sensory engagement has an end beyond mere bodily gratification because the body cannot and should not be separated from the spirit. Good art then, must achieve material and moral excellence as a *single goal*.

Second, good metaphors and symbols *are* something at the same time that they *represent* something. Take away the evangelistic pretext from the movies and fiction of contemporary Christians and all you have left is an uninspired plot template populated by stereotypes and clichés. The characters don't feel real and the story is unbelievable. But fake characters and unbelievable stories cannot effectively point beyond themselves. Though most Christian movies *attempt* to point to a transcendent truth, most discerning audience members have trouble taking their eyes from the medium itself—how badly executed it is. The focus stays on the means—the sign—rather than the goal—the message. If you've ever seen a road sign with a typo or a missing letter, you know what I am talking about. You don't even pay attention to what the sign is pointing to or what it's saying. You get stuck on the broken sign itself. This is a paradox. By carefully crafting a sign, you actually free it from being an object of notice—it becomes what it was meant to be, an invisible representative of the *something* beyond it. The artist's focus on the sign frees the viewer to focus on the referent of the sign rather than on the sign itself.

Strangely, since the *sign itself* has become unimportant to most Protestants, a lack of attention to detail and craft has become the norm, and this slack-handedness distracts from the referent—the message. Even though the Protestant says he is freeing himself from any attachment to the *physical sign*

so he can focus on the *spiritual reality* the sign purports to represent, the *abandonment* of the sign paradoxically results in the *ascendancy* of the sign (see Col. 2) to the detriment of the sign's true purpose. The referent, the symbolized *reality*—the “important” part ... now becomes invisible. The sign was a bridge to it and you burned it down so you could focus on the other side without distractions. Now you've lost both. *Why should we eat the bread and drink the wine when we already have what the bread and wine symbolize—a “spiritual” communion with Jesus?* Because the bread and wine don't just *symbolize* Jesus' body and blood. They *are* His body and blood.

In really good art, the sign is indistinguishable from the symbol. In other words, the form feels like it was created for the content and the content for the form. As the Romans once said, *Ars Celare Artem Est*—it is art to conceal art. The truth being referenced and the referential tool (the sign) should exist as two valid perspectives on a single truth.

Consequently, if your characters don't register as *people*, how can they ever be truly meaningful *types*? If the tangible sign doesn't comport with established sensory experience, it cannot draw anyone beyond itself to the truth. A sign that is too prominent (either because of its gaudiness or its shoddiness) becomes an ineffective transmitter of the truth because only by being separated from its “spirit” could it have become conspicuous in the first place. A conspicuous sign is a broken promise, a failure of faith, a hollow ritual. An empty sacrament. And by the transitive property, a steady diet of empty sacraments will create an artistic environment rife with shallow signs—clichés, stereotypes, tropes, templates, rubrics, etc.

On the other hand, the artist who feeds well and regularly on God's words made flesh will recognize that reality is already fully charged with meaning without the artist's insertions ... that the sacraments are but down payments on the reality of God's heavenly will joining earthly history ... that a powerful metaphor is just man thinking God's sacramental language after Him ... This artist will dedicate himself to craft not for the gratification of his ego, but in order to erase himself more effectively from the existence of his art. Craftless art cannot point to anything beyond itself. Craftless art is doomed to be dead-end art.

But even excellent craft is not an end in itself, and perhaps the weakness of Roman Catholic art is that it eventually focused on the sign to the *exclusion* of what the sign was pointing to. The artist with a proper view of the sacraments will recognize that the wholeness of the experience comes when the transcendent reality joins the tangible one, when craft and spirit, form and content, are joined together into an authentic and whole experience.

## DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

There are two major areas of misunderstanding in the contemporary church concerning salvation, especially as it affects art. First, most Christians think that the Bible speaks *only* about salvation and the way for sinners to get to heaven.<sup>5</sup> Second, they then underestimate the scope of the salvation the Bible declares.

The Bible speaks about salvation, of course. But in order

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<sup>5</sup> Galileo famously said, "The Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go."

to accurately and adequately communicate salvation, it must also uncover all the relevant truths pertaining to salvation, which include creation, sin, relationships, civilization, governments, science, knowledge, art, etc. No subject can be properly understood without the salvation of Christ, and, conversely, all subjects, properly understood, enrich our understanding of salvation. This may seem strange to us because the world's compartmentalization of the Bible has distorted our understanding, but the Bible applies as equally to particle physics as it does to Sunday's sermon on the Lord's Prayer. Our understanding of particle physics must also be renewed by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, particle physics is in need of salvation. And so is everything else.

In 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, Paul makes clear that “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.”<sup>6</sup> In Romans 8:22, Paul makes it even clearer. He says that the world is waiting on the revelation of the sons of God to be set free from the slavery to corruption that was imposed on it by God's curse when man sinned. When God sent Christ to earth, He designed to set free “a host of captives.”<sup>7</sup> We tend to think of these captives as exclusively *people*, but Scripture makes clear that God intends to set *creation* free through the reconciling work of Jesus. God intends to put *everything* in subjection

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<sup>6</sup> This verse could be using the word *kosmos* (world) in multiple ways (i.e., as the world of men *and* as the world of creation). The reconciliation of creation depends on the salvation of men. The world of creation, having been subjected to the curse because of man's sin, waits on the fullness of man's salvation as a condition of its own restoration (Rom. 8:18ff).

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 68:18; Eph. 4:8.

under the feet of Christ (1 Cor. 15:27–28), a subjection that will free it from the stifling futility of the Fall.

As “ambassadors of Christ” through whom God makes “His appeal” (2 Cor. 5:20), we are the tools God uses to reconcile the world to Himself. Therefore, we cannot be involved in limited-scope evangelism. And we must not focus on only those passages of Scripture which speak to personal “salvation.” We must embrace the work of salvation in all its facets and in all its scope.

The Christian artist will not be excused from the endeavor of universal reconciliation. Our art must speak to every area of life too. Many non-Christians have accused Christian art of being “preachy.” If our art amounts to nothing more than a tactless morality tale enjoining each member of the audience to find his own personal Jesus, it will prove completely irrelevant to *unbeliever and believer alike*. Think about it. The only audience inclined to receive flat and shallow art-for-a-cause *already believe* in that cause.<sup>8</sup> If you limit your art and message to merely “accepting Jesus as your personal savior,”<sup>9</sup> the only receptive audience for your work will have no need to hear your message, whereas those who don’t already believe

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<sup>8</sup> An example of this would be the Communist propaganda plays produced in Maoist China. Only Chinese Communists thought they were good art; every other critic in the world considered them “singularly drab and awful.”

<sup>9</sup> I do not mean by this that Christians do not need to be continually redirected to Jesus as their Savior. The initial turning to Jesus has already occurred, however, and, therefore, the Christian needs admonishment and edification, not evangelism in the strictest sense (John 13:9–10). The Christian already knows Jesus; now, he needs to know Jesus more fully.

your message, and therefore need to hear it more than anyone else, will reject your work sight unseen as an un compelling and cheesy “soapbox opera.” So you will neither admonish and edify the believer, nor rebuke and convert the unbeliever. Your work will be tasteless salt. Irrelevant. If we are to be true to the example of the Apostles in Christ, we must not shrink from declaring “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

Limiting the scope of salvation damages the Christian arts in at least one other way: it encourages mediocrity. In some denominations, there is the concept of the “carnal Christian,” a Christian whose savior is Jesus but whose lord is still himself. This person will not desire to follow after Christ’s standards in his work. He will not feel any need to reverence God and pursue excellence in his craft. Christians embrace mediocrity unwittingly when they assume that Christ makes no requirements of them once they are Christians. These Christians think that they are right with God “by faith, not works,” so they feel no need to do good work after faith has made them well.

This would be like the lame man refusing to walk after his legs had been healed. “No,” he says, “I wasn’t healed by any action of my own, so it follows that I shouldn’t do any walking now.” The man doesn’t realize, then, that Jesus healed him *so that he could walk*. Jesus saved us so that we might do the works He prepared for us to do! In Ephesians 2:10, Paul writes, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, *which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that we operate independently once we are saved. God makes it clear that what was begun in the Spirit will not be

Therefore, God is calling Christians, which would include Christian artists, to do holistically *good* work in order to bring his word of reconciliation to every area of creation. This is quite a calling; one we cannot afford to neglect.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the major shortcomings of contemporary Christian art stem from man-centeredness. A man-centered doctrine of history has encouraged premature resolution. A man-centered doctrine of worship has produced abstracted art that does not bring the Bible to bear on the real issues of life and human experience and that focuses on the appearances of Christianity rather than the substance of it. A man-centered doctrine of knowledge has vaunted feeling-oriented entertainment over instruction and edification. A man-centered doctrine of the sacraments has contributed to the divorce of form and substance which has rendered our symbolism hollow and undermined the value of sensory discipline. A man-centered doctrine of salvation has encouraged mediocrity in the Christian arts while our abridgement of the gospel's scope has relegated Christian art to a narrow realm of complete cultural irrelevance.

As one may surmise, the answer to this man-centeredness is radical God-centeredness. We need a steady and growing application of the whole counsel of God (the whole Bible and our whole experience, even the parts that challenge our faith) to every aspect of artistic production from composition to

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perfected by the flesh (Gal. 3:3). However, our present walk is cooperative (Col. 2:6), whereas our salvation was initiated solely by God's power through no operation of our own (Eph. 2:8).

presentation. *We must remember that the truth should not be applied firstly to our art, but to ourselves.* As we are more closely conformed to Christ's image, we will produce art that better pleases Him (Matt. 12:35).

## Questions and Applications

**A**fter having roughly sketched some biblical criteria both for the assessment and production of art, I would like to answer some questions about art that I have come across over the years. These questions are meant to provide practical examples for the application of the Bible to the realm of art. I hope the reader understands that the following pages are *my* interpretation of the biblical principles I have already discussed. The reader may disagree with how I have applied these principles. I intend to display the principles at work, and I encourage the reader to wrestle with his own issues, questions, and dilemmas. As I already mentioned in the introduction, each man answers for himself.

### ARE CERTAIN GENRES INTRINSICALLY EVIL?

This is a question that, unfortunately, has plagued the church from its earliest days. Because it is difficult to answer a practical question without practical examples, I will attempt to glean from my own experience to discuss genres in different mediums that have all received sharp criticism (both justified and unjustified) from at least one flock in the larger church at one time or another.

*Rock Music*

There are a number of reasons why Christians have considered rock music evil. One could be that it encourages young people to dance to a beat, and, presumably, dancing tends to fornication. Other reasons have been less moral and more aesthetical: some have posited that beats and low frequencies resonate in the lower regions (viscera), whereas the high frequencies generally produced by classical instruments resonate in the brain. Clearly this correlates to either high intellectual stimulation at the symphony or base fleshly indulgence at the arena. Other reasons have been that rock music is based on African pagan ritual rhythms. The list is almost endless.

First, there is not much of anything that does not encourage young people toward sex. In order for young people to avoid the temptation to fornicate, they must hate sin and love God's Law.<sup>1</sup> Though a prudent man avoids the way of the harlot, a dance with a modest girl under the supervision of her godly father could hardly be called the way of the harlot. A young man could just as well sit next to his girlfriend in church with perversion pulsing through his heart and mind. I have even heard of young people doing things in a church service I would not have imagined to do in the backseat of a remotely parked car. Should we outlaw teenagers of the opposite sex from sitting next to each other? Maybe you as a parent would do that for your children, but that does not mean that any interaction between the sexes is, in itself, sinful. And how broadly will we hedge the law?

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<sup>1</sup> Prov. 8:13; Ps. 119:9.

Should teenagers of the opposite sex not be allowed in the same service? The same church?

Secondly, classical music uses tympanies and double-basses. These instruments produce frequencies lower than the ear can hear, frequencies that most rock music instruments couldn't "lower themselves" to produce. With all of the cymbals and distortion, most rock music is probably at a higher frequency on average than most classical music. But that is not really the point. The real point of the criticism lies in a desire to separate classical music as a more intellectually stimulating and therefore morally superior form of music than its degraded cousin, rock 'n' roll. There may be some truth in this, but for a reason that would not condemn the disciplined production of rock music.

Consider the fact that before a composer can write a symphony, he must know how to read and write music. He must have learned the piano and have some proficiency with the use and possibilities of the other instruments he will employ. Consider that a rock "composer" needs not know anything about music. He can write a rock song with the knowledge of little more than two guitar chords. The knowledge capital necessary to write a classical symphony (regardless of its final quality) immediately results in fewer symphonies, and it also means that most symphonies are written by people who know something about music and have had to study it. This means that more symphonies are better than most rock songs because rock songs can presumably be written (though not written well) by "composers" suffering from a nearly complete ignorance of music.

But not all rock songs *have* to be written by idiots. I firmly believe that if Mozart were around today, he would be playing

lead electric guitar for a prog metal band. Consider that rock music has the inherent possibility of a greater dynamic range, greater projection of performance subtleties, and a greater variety of sounds and sound textures. These possibilities are often not employed by most rock musicians because most rock musicians are not actually good musicians. As I said, the rock genre bars few applicants.

I can neither support nor discredit the notion that rock music is based on African tribal rhythms. Like any other genre (even the too-broadly named “classical” genre), rock music has a large range of influences. Even if it were *only* pagan tribal rhythms and absolutely nothing else, this would not mean it is absolutely unfit to glorify God in the right context. Consider that many of the hymns that sung Europe into Reformation sounded to many like bar-room jigs. This means that many of the tunes for the hymns we sing today might once have been drinking tunes for the dissolute.

The abuse of a good thing does not preclude its proper use. David danced before the Lord, and actually encourages the congregation to dance before the Lord.<sup>2</sup> David also encouraged the use of cymbals (resounding and *loud* clashing), timbrels (a percussive instrument similar to the tambourine), castanets (percussive instruments now used in flamenco music) and various stringed instruments.<sup>3</sup> He employed a wild and passionate, some might say *chaotic*, rhythm and mode for his *Shiggaion* (Ps. 7). Psalm 150 makes clear through its practical

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Sam. 6:16; Ps. 149:3; 150:4.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 150:4–5; 2 Sam. 6:5.

exhaustiveness that pretty much anything that can make some noise should make some noise for the Lord.

The important thing is to apply biblical aesthetic principles to each song as you are introduced to it. Do not allow your self-limited taste or overly sensitive ears to keep you from listening to music to which God may well be tapping His anthropomorphic feet.

I adapted the following list from my general list to apply more specifically to issues surrounding rock music:

1. Are the lyrics of this song true? Do they edify and point to Christ? Are the lyrics so vague or so slurred (or so screamed) that you cannot know what the artist is trying to say with them? How careful was the artist to communicate clearly?
2. Is this music simply for the purpose of entertainment? Do you like its loudness and rambunctiousness only because it distracts you from your worries and responsibilities and makes you feel good? Does this music have a serious-minded purpose? What is it?
3. Does the music revel in chaos and dissonance, or does it use these things to emphasize the beauty and supremacy of order and decency? Is the musical form suitable to its content, or does it seem incongruous or unnecessary? Do the lyrics or music encourage you to rebel against rightful authorities?
4. Does this song use the power of its form to show wickedness as wicked and righteousness as righteous? Or does it try to entice the listener to the beauty and fun of sinful pleasures while ignoring the benefits of self-control in either its message or form?

5. Do you like the way this song sounds? Does it please you in its exploration of God's revelation in sound? Is it encouraging you to grow your tastes? When you listen to other kinds of music, do you find that listening to this song has increased your musical discernment and sensibility? Or has your sensibility become more dulled and calloused?
6. Show the song to people whose tastes differ from yours, but who know as much or more than you do about music. Ask them to critically analyze it with this rubric or their own. Assess their analysis, integrating into your own opinion what rings true from what they've said. Continue thinking about areas where you disagree. Be willing to change your tastes, and ask for their musical recommendations.
7. Would you be willing to listen to this song with your pastor, parents, etc.? With Jesus? Would you be willing to endorse this music to others, thus connecting your reputation to it?

This rubric would also work for rap music or hip-hop, and the above discussion applies as well. Hip-hop boasts an even lower bar of entry than rock music since one does not even need to know any instrument at all to produce it. Generally hip-hop has tended to serve the ends of the flesh, being mainly concerned with drugs, sex, covetousness, and violence. But it does not need to be this way. One could preach a memorable sermon in three minutes through a rap song. You could not fit the verbal content of one rap song into an album of sung lyrics. For this reason, rap has the capacity to be highly concentrated

communication for the cause of Christ. Just because it has been used for evil does not mean it cannot be used for good.<sup>4</sup>

Some will say that listening to Christian hip-hop or Christian rock will encourage the listener to listen to the world's hip-hop and rock, and, in the end, will not encourage the listener to holiness (set-apartness). This may be true if the listener has no desire in his heart to worship God. I listen to some Christian hip-hop because it edifies and encourages. I never liked hip-hop as a genre until I heard it done for God's glory. I could never listen to secular hip-hop because I don't actually like hip-hop in itself. Further, secular hip-hop now sounds even more perverted than it did before because I have heard what sanctified hip-hop sounds like. The same goes for rock music and the rest. Now, if I had gone to Christian hip-hop as a sort of nicotine patch to wean me away from my idolatrous love affair with secular hip-hop, things would be different. I would be getting my fix on hip-hop through the beats and music, and salving my conscience with the knowledge that the lyrics were "good for me." But I wouldn't be judging the music rightly. If your appraisal of a song is not firstly *spiritual* (i.e., moral) in nature, then it is likely ill-conceived and flesh-indulging.

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<sup>4</sup> I have recently become an avid fan of a select group of Christian hip-hop artists that I think are making the most constructive, Christ-glorifying music available today. I don't really care to debate the musicality or non-musicality of hip-hop, since the music is just the meter for poetry. The poetry is either good and edifying or not. Judging hip-hop by the quality of its poetry frees me from having to make judgments concerning its music. A good introduction to the artists I have been listening to would be the albums *The Atonement* or *Stories* by Shai Linne (available from lampmode.com) and *After the Music Stops* or (*reba*l), by Lecrae (available from reachrecords.com).

## SHOULD THE CHRISTIAN AVOID ALL NON-CHRISTIAN ART?

Given the rubric I derived from Philippians 4:8, it might seem that all non-Christian art is off-limits to the Christian. We should remember that not all art made by non-Christians should be called non-Christian art. But I think, in general, we would do well to limit our consumption of non-Christian art as much as possible. For one thing, by spending money on non-Christian art, we promote its continued production. It might be a better idea to save our money, and spend it supporting local Christian artists instead.

But a critical consumption of non-Christian art can be edifying occasionally. Especially for training purposes. Two specific areas of training are served by well-crafted non-Christian art.

First, well-crafted non-Christian art can help the Christian artist to understand what is possible in the realm of artistic means and methods. Obviously, a Christian artist should carefully assess the message of the art he consumes, guarding his heart with all diligence. But many of the world's artists have achieved such a level of artistic mastery that their work, when viewed properly, can function as an education in craft. That said, a Christian must be careful to separate the wheat from the chaff when he analyzes non-Christian art, and the amount of non-Christian art he consumes should be minuscule compared to the wholesome and edifying art with which he generally fills his heart and mind.

Secondly, the message of non-Christian art, when understood, will help us to understand our times. Especially today,

philosophers and pundits do not rule the thoughts of the general unregenerate population. Most people develop their worldviews from movies, music, TV, etc.—from art. Having a familiarity with the lies your culture believes can have a profoundly illuminating effect on the truths you choose to bring up in casual conversations with your unbelieving friends and neighbors. And knowing the specific spiritual shortcomings of your particular culture will also inform the art you produce.

The reader should notice that both of the uses I mentioned for non-Christian art disallow *uncritical* consumption. The Christian must always maintain the strictest vigilance when he is confronted with the art and ideas of the world. Shutting down our hearts and minds and vegetating is just not an option.

#### ARE CURSE WORDS PERMISSIBLE IN ART?

This is really one question within the broader question of how we are to represent sin and a fallen reality in works of art. As has already been discussed, we are to expose sin (or *pathalify* it, to use my word), but we also must be careful that every word be “for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). It follows that images and words should also adhere to this criterion.

Some artists include curse words and other earmarks of a fallen world in their narratives because they are attempting to accurately represent reality as it is. Though I think this goal is valid, I believe it can often be achieved without using curse words or “explicit” expressions of sin. It requires more creativity to accomplish a true representation of our world in this

manner, but it is nonetheless possible in most cases. For centuries, talented artists have practiced indirection for this purpose. Our word “obscene” literally means “off-stage,” and is rooted in the theatrical practice of having unseemly events occur off-stage. In this manner, murders, rapes, and other sinful acts have been implied to the audience without any explicit depiction. It is also possible to imply fallen language without using curse words. Shakespeare was a master of this. He transmitted the idea that certain characters had degenerate language without having to use many foul words (though some of his words were fouler than others).<sup>5</sup>

It is also necessary to discuss what constitutes a curse word. Some words are strong words, but are not necessarily careless words, or words used in vain. There are words like “damn” or “bastard” that actually do have a meaning, and it is possible that these words can be used “for the need of a moment.” In Matthew 12:36, Jesus says that we will be judged for “every careless word” we say. When used carelessly, even the most innocuous seeming words are damaging to the hearer. It is absurd how much our culture uses God’s name in vain. We even have a blasphemous acronym littering the internet. Language in general suffers degradation at every turn. It behooves the artist to consider carefully every word he sends out into the world, and to edit his words laboriously (Prov. 10:19).

As for curse words and the representation of sin, the Bible

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<sup>5</sup> A classic case is the degeneration of Othello’s language as he comes more and more under the evil influence of Iago. This point is made on page xviii of the Introduction to the 2009 Modern Library Paperback Edition of *Othello*.

uses strong (some might say explicit) language at times according to the need of the moment.<sup>6</sup> Each artist and each patron must prayerfully distinguish between the necessary representation of sin to set the stage for God's redemptive work and a representation of sin that leaves the patron weak and unedified. We must not be deceived in this. Satan would love to transmit the pleasure of sin to countless Christians through the well-meant artistic output of his enemies.

At the same time, we as Christians need to stop being so squeamish. Recently, Lifeway dropped an author because she used the word "vagina." She was not using it flippantly, but the Christian distribution giant thought the word would be offensive enough to its customers to affect sales. But that means we Christians have become a saltless bunch. Salt is gritty. Sometimes the truth is gritty too. An expurgated reality is a false one, and presenting only sterilized art will do little to address the real issues of a dirty world.

### IS IT PERMISSIBLE TO REPRESENT AN IMAGE OF JESUS?

The short answer to this is that it is *not possible* to represent Jesus. We can't draw an accurate picture of Him because we have no photographs of Him, and we cannot portray Him accurately in a film because all of our actors, no matter how talented they may be, are sinners. It is also basically impossible to represent Jesus as the Son of God. As hard as Mel Gibson tried, *The Passion of the Christ* did not accurately portray the suffering the Son

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<sup>6</sup> See my discussion of this in "Whatever is Pure" on page 48–49.

of God endured in crucifixion because Jesus' physical suffering, horrific as it was, constituted the smallest portion of the suffering Jesus experienced on the cross. It cannot even intimate the cosmic desolation Jesus experienced when He was separated from the Father. A physical depiction of Jesus' suffering will not make a significant enough distinction between Jesus' suffering and the suffering of the criminals beside Him.

There are many subjects, events, and places in the Bible that are unrepresentable. I do not mean that they should not be represented in some form, but, as before, that they are almost impossible to represent through images. Heaven and hell are unrepresentable. The Bible gives us figures of them, but I do not think we are capable of understanding their full reality on this side of the grave. Another more curious case is the nudity of Adam and Eve before the Fall. How can you represent shameless nudity in a world filled with shame? You could cover their genitals with conveniently placed shrubbery or Eve's long hair, but, by doing this, you have introduced our shame into that shame-free setting and have, by consequence, *not represented it accurately*. But if you show their nudity, our shame will either avert our eyes from their nakedness or, worse, make their nudity a cause for lust. For these reasons, I think it is basically impossible to accurately represent this circumstance through images in a way that is profitable.

One aspect of this discussion that is rarely addressed, however, is the fact that many people *did* see Jesus in His incarnate form. The Bible does not indicate that the disciples are condemned for looking at the physical figure of Jesus. That idea is preposterous. But the image they saw of Jesus was Jesus

Himself, not some fallible human's representation of Him. If it is permissible to represent other historical figures, it seems that it might be permissible to represent Jesus since He did have a physical form; but would it be profitable? Would that actor's face or artistic image be ingrained in your mind when you prayed to Jesus? Also, the common representation of Jesus as a long-haired Caucasian with a fine nose and blue eyes is almost assuredly inaccurate, and it exposes the self-centeredness of many Christians that attempt to own Jesus as a mascot, but rarely bow to Him as Lord.

I think we should approach this issue with humility and consider displaying Christ's person in some less controversial and more edifying way than through images. I'm willing to admit that there may be very specific circumstances where it could be profitable, but I have never been edified by any physical representation of Jesus in any way that would not have been possible through other means.

### IS "TASTEFUL" NUDITY PERMISSIBLE IN ART?

I don't know that public nudity can be "tasteful" in a fallen reality marked by shame. God considers "uncovering the nakedness" of a person that is not your lawful spouse a sexual sin (Lev. 18:6–19). I do not think the phrase "uncover the nakedness" is a euphemism specifically referring to the coital act alone since the Bible usually uses the phrase "lie with" when it wants to refer exclusively to the sexual act.<sup>7</sup> It follows

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<sup>7</sup> Gen. 19:32, 34; Lev. 18:20, 22. There are many others, but both terms are used in the same chapter, meaning that some distinction between the two is likely being made.

then that public nudity is an illicit “uncovering of nakedness,” and our art should eschew it.

There are many pious people that say nudity can be appreciated in fine art (like classical sculpture and painting), but I do not believe this to be the case. Many ancient sculptures were erotic art in their day, and were often painted realistically to increase their usefulness as anatomically correct sexual stimulants.<sup>8</sup> Whatever rosy view we may have of ancient art today, it is clear that this art proceeded out of a culture that God destroyed for its decadent rebellion and normalized perversion. We should be careful not to join with the “sophisticated” perverts of our day in their humble deference to the whitewashed memory of Classical Antiquity.

Ancient artists presented naked bodies as normal because their worldview denied sin. The measure of goodness was man, therefore the ideal man was naked. Intrinsically, the heroic man had nothing to hide—no shame. God disagrees. Man is sinful, and sin has caused shame. We can no longer be innocently naked like Adam and Eve. To present the naked body as a neutral object of beauty denies God’s pronouncement concerning sin and shame, and therefore obscures man’s need for repentance. This is the presentation of a lie. Nudity, no matter how “tasteful,” is also a temptation toward secret prurience, and, being largely unnecessary for any profitable ends, should be avoided to minimize the possibility of sin in the viewer. Many may say that *they* are not tempted by nude sculptures,

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present*. This book is an exploration of the findings of German archeologist Vinzenz Brinkmann.

but, as has been said, *they* are not the only people in the world. The “weaker” brother should be taken into account before we endorse or promote that which could tempt him to sin.

God made our bodies beautiful, it is true, but Christian artists should constrain the public study of aesthetics to the permissible and profitable aspects of God’s created realm, to the best of their discerning abilities. God created our bodily functions and the mechanics of sexuality as well. These things are good and, in many senses, beautiful. But that does not mean that they should be *public*. A married Christian artist should by all means follow Solomon’s example and explore the beauty of his spouse’s body. If he chooses to express his discoveries in poetry, let him clothe his wife in imagery the way Solomon did, and then publish his poems, should he deem that necessary, under a pen name—to spare his wife undue embarrassment. But uncovering the nakedness of someone’s wife or daughter for the enjoyment, even the “artistic” enjoyment, of strangers basically amounts to prostitution.<sup>9</sup>

### DOES SCULPTURE OR IMAGE-MAKING BREAK THE SECOND COMMANDMENT?

The second commandment states,

Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image,  
nor any likeness of any thing that is in heaven  
above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that  
is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not

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<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 5:16–17 says, speaking of one’s wife, “Should your springs be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? *Let them be yours alone and not for strangers with you.*”

bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them, for I Jehovah thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing lovingkindness unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments. (Exod. 20:4–6 ASV)

Some Christians think the second commandment forbids images in general because the first sentence ends (with a period) without any provision that there are times when images are permissible. I do not agree with this interpretation, however, for two reasons: the *sense of the passage* does not support this interpretation, and there are important *biblical, historical examples* that contradict this interpretation.

The period at the end of the first sentence of the second commandment could just as easily be a semi-colon since the second sentence refers back to the first sentence with the pronoun “them” rather than beginning a new and unconnected thought. Rather than implying that one should not make graven images, *and* one should not worship them *either*, this lingual construction indicates that one should not make graven images *in order to* worship them. It seems that graven images were mostly used for idolatrous purposes in Old Testament Israel. Because of this, the phrases “*worshiping* graven images” and “*making* graven images” became synonymous to the Hebrews.

Secondly, graven images and likenesses were included in Solomon’s temple,<sup>10</sup> and God accepted this temple

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<sup>10</sup> From 1 Kings 6, we learn that the temple included carvings of flowers, two huge cherubim of olive wood, and that all the walls and

and indwelled it with His presence (1 Kings 8:10–11). In 1 Kings 6:13, God promises to dwell with the people of Israel and not forsake them if Solomon “walks in His statutes” and “executes [His] ordinances.” If Solomon had broken His statutes and flouted His ordinances by including graven images and likenesses in the temple, why would God then “dwell with His people Israel” in the temple after its dedication? If God had considered it an intrinsic iniquity, I do not think He would have blessed it, much less *commanded* it. Rather, He would have condemned it as an idolatrous abomination.

It follows that it is possible to use images for God-ordained purposes, and that the main prohibition in the second commandment is idolatry. We are not to worship *the works of our hands*.<sup>11</sup>

It still behooves us to be careful that we do not worship any of our own works or achievements, and that we do not give undue attention to the works of other men’s hands. God makes it clear in the second commandment that He alone is worthy of worship—not anything we have made and not even the things *He* has made are lawful objects of worship.

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doors were decorated with engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers. Hiram also made a network of brass pomegranates that hung on the pillars of the temple’s porch, and a bath with twelve huge bronze oxen under it for God’s house.

<sup>11</sup> Deut. 4:28; 27:15; 31:29; 1 Kings 16:7; 2 Kings 19:17–18; 22:17; Ps. 9:16, 115:4, 135:15; Isa. 2:8, 17:8, 37:19; Jer. 10:3, 25:6–7, 32:30; Hos. 14:3; Mic. 5:13.

## IS FICTION “BEARING FALSE WITNESS”?

The Bible praises certain acts of apparent deceitfulness (e.g., Rahab and David before Achish of Gath) when such non-disclosure of “facts” protects the innocent, and it also condemns certain disclosures of truthful information when disclosing such information is contrary to covenant loyalty.<sup>12</sup> It is clear from these passages that the Bible does not require the universal disclosure of all the facts at all times. Telling the “truth” depends not just on the content of your words, but also the intent of your communication and the effect your words will have on their audience.

Fiction, then, may not be any less truthful than non-fiction. Jesus chose the fictional mode of parables to convey truth. Fiction is acceptable to the extent that it maintains the proportions and principles of truth even when it may stretch or rearrange reality’s dimensions. A geometric analogy might be helpful. A polygon is said to be *similar* to another polygon if it maintains the ratios or proportions of its sides. They are *congruent* if they share equal proportions *and* magnitudes. Fiction does not always convey the exact magnitudes of reality, but it should maintain reality’s proportions. In this sense, fiction should be

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<sup>12</sup> In 2 Kings 20:13, Hezekiah shows the Babylonian convoys everything in his house and treasuries (the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth). This was foolish, as evidenced by Isaiah’s unfavorable response to it. The Proverbs also condemn the “whisperer” and the “tale-bearer.” There is no mention that what the “revealer of secrets” says is non-factual (though slander is also condemned); those who reveal secrets are condemned because they do damage to their neighbors with their words. See Proverbs 11:13 and 20:19 and my discussion of Doeg and Ahimelech on page 38n3.

similar to reality even though it will not be congruent.

Does this mean that fiction is invalid unless it conveys a possible world? Are fantasy narratives or science fictions impermissible? This is a harder question, but the answer is the same. When fantasy maintains the proportions of reality, it can be useful because it magnifies to the viewer what otherwise might be miniature in reality. When done well, it “zooms in” on particular facets of reality even when those facets are wearing the costumes of an impossible world. Since the magnitudes have been altered, the proportions are given a fresh instantiation, which can aid the blind in finally seeing the truth that is all around them. But it is equally possible that the “distortion” of reality can occlude the truth from the hard-hearted. This dual possibility is not bad, however: Jesus mentions it specifically as the reason he taught in parables (Matt. 13:10f).

Notice also that the Bible is full of figures of speech. Jesus said of Jerusalem that He longed to gather her children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing (Matt. 23:37). Jesus is not a hen, nor is he female. This, like many metaphors, is a fantastical fiction. One of the great values of fantasy is that it can bring truths to bear on the hearer in an intimate and readily understandable way. We must remember that our understanding of knowledge is not always biblical, and that true knowledge in the Scriptures is almost always intimate and visceral. Apparently, God does not view truth in the coldly clinical, objective-pretending way that most Americans do.

This means that fiction can be used to glorify God to the extent that it is being used to convey the truth and not a lie. Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy is not reprehensi-

ble because it is fantasy. It is reprehensible because it uses the possibilities of an alternate reality to impose on our reality and understanding the impression that God's Law order is perverse. Pullman openly acknowledges that his books were written as an atheist replacement for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis. This perfectly illustrates the fact that fiction (especially fantasy) can be utilized to accomplish any number of diametrically opposed goals. Many authors hide within the rigorless flexibility of fiction in order to assert lies that would appear obviously untrue if they were exposed to the harsh light of reality.

As an example, Lyra, the female protagonist of *His Dark Materials*, learns not to trust people who seem to have done no wrong, whereas she feels immediately comfortable with murderers and criminals. When she first meets her future lover, she divines that he is a murderer, and this knowledge comforts her and reassures her that she can trust him.<sup>13</sup> This kind of reasoning would be disastrous for a young girl in the real world, but Pullman taps into the power of fiction to access highly gullible "dream logic." A person (a young person especially) who becomes immersed in Pullman's books will probably accept the reasonability of Pullman's logic as it operates within Pullman's universe, but this same reader may not have the critical understanding necessary to disentangle his mind from Pullman's worldview after he exits Pullman's world. Many readers bring distorted fantasy worldviews back into the real world from fictional universes; this almost always has disastrous consequences.

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<sup>13</sup> This is one of the milder corruptions among the myriad defraudings of reality contained in this God-hating, upside-down cake of a book series that I in no way recommend to anyone.

For this reason, the Christian artist must be sure that he understands the proportions and principles of the Bible, and that he is not constructing a world which introduces corruptions or distortions to the biblical proportions of reality. He must have wisdom, in other words, if he is to use fiction in a way that edifies rather than misleads the reader.

### SHOULD ALL ART MADE BY CHRISTIANS BE EXPLICITLY CHRISTIAN?

Depending on the intent of the question, the answer to this could go either way. If we're asking whether or not every piece of art a Christian ever makes has to have Jesus' name in it (preferably repeated twenty-seven times), I would refer to the discussion of the doctrines of salvation and worship in Chapter 7—much of Christian art evinces a handicapped perspective on the application and exposition of truth. God did not see fit to have all of His creation utter explicit words of praise, but that does not mean that creation does not praise God. In Psalm 19, depending on your translation, David explains this concept. He says “the heavens declare the glory of God . . . day after day [they] utter speech, and night after night [they] show forth knowledge.” Verse three can be puzzling, but it would make sense to translate it: “There is no speech, nor are there words—their voice is not heard.” David sets up a poetic paradox: the heavens speak in truth constantly, and at the same time, the heavens do not speak at all. The heavens speak without speaking.

We can take a cue from God's creative acts. It is not necessary to use explicit words of praise to praise God. But the

Christian artist should not shrink from saying whatever needs to be said. God *did* reveal explicit propositional words of truth and praise in the Bible. God's artistry includes *both* explicit and implicit revelations of truth. The Christian artist must consider his audience, the purpose of his work, the scope of his life's work, and the burden of his conscience to determine how best to transmit God's truth in art. The Christian artist must also be careful to avoid two very ugly extremes: limiting the scope of his work to an immature truncation of the Gospel in order to make his work appear more "Christian" *or* removing explicit references to Christianity from his work in order to avoid the appearance of "preachiness" or "cheesiness."

Short answer: the Christian should seek to glorify God *on purpose*, but the mode of that glorification can take many forms. Again, each artist must take responsibility for his own work. On Judgment Day, Jesus will not base his assessment of our work on our intentions, but on whether, in his perfect opinion, our deeds were good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10). If the artist does his work unto God, and not unto man, he will be well on his way to avoiding both the omissions of cowardice and the surpluses of immaturity.



## Conclusion

**W**hy did I write this book? With the political, societal, and theological arenas quaking with controversy, many readers might think that there are any number of more weighty and important topics to write about. Many well-meaning observers suppose that aesthetics holds no great importance in the great battle of our generation.

As this book evidences, I disagree. The church has spent hundreds of years honing her apologetic defenses of the faith and investing in civil and ecclesiastical remedies for the globe's great problems. We have better answers than we've ever had, and yet here we are—somehow less relevant than we've ever been. Convincing the world through logic, reason, and evidence or coercing the world through legislation has ultimately proven futile.

In the recent past, the intellectual apologetic seemed to hold some promise of progress. The debaters of the age and the pundits of the church seemed to hold similar values on some fundamental issues—like the idea of right and wrong and the possibility of Truth. But that has changed. More and more, the intellectual argument has reached an impasse. Proponents of any given idea keep their own counsel and reject everything else. The very fabric of discourse is irremediably

tern. What used to look almost like honest, rational debate has degenerated into fist-pumping on one side versus scoffing on the other. The intellectual argument has stalled out.

But while the church has been very slow to realize this fact, the world figured it out long ago. The world has abandoned all and any claims to truth, effectively forfeiting the ideological contest. It destroyed its own credentials when it gave way to the uncertainty of relativistic meaninglessness, but the war was far from over then. While we have been toiling away trying to get the right declarations onto the floor of Congress and the right ideas immortalized into our church standards and programs, the world made a tactical retreat from the battlefield of the *mind* to the battlefield of the *heart*. The world has flanked the church through the arts. These days, it is increasingly rare to hear the influential voices of the world say that the church is *wrong*. Rather, the constant refrain today is that the church is *ugly*.

And it is not just those outside the church that believe this. Our young people are abandoning the church in alarming numbers.<sup>1</sup> If you talk to these young people, one thing becomes clear—they know how to *think* and *say* the right things. The problem isn't ultimately with what they've been taught to think. It's with what they have learned to *love*. All day every day, they watch the world's movies and television, read the world's books, listen to the world's music, play the world's video games, and unwittingly drink in the world's

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<sup>1</sup> See Ken Ham & Britt Beemer with Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009).

values and affections. Every day, their *hearts* are being drawn away from God and the church toward the seductive world. And we really have no current relevant response.

I started investing most of my creative energy into art right after my twins were born. I began to think, “What will these girls listen to? What will they watch? What will they read?” And I despaired. I could literally count on one hand the living musicians that I thought were making both edifying and excellent music, I couldn’t think of any recent “Christian” movies that I considered good art, and as for Christian literature—it apparently died with C. S. Lewis. The Christian art worth looking at and listening to had been made generations ago.

And for some Christians, this is good enough. They hold up cathedrals, symphonies, and hymns as the ideal, and they preach a return to the good old days when Christian art was great (Eccles. 7:10). I don’t deny that the art of old was great, and we have much yet to learn from it, but good art is meant to edify its particular audience. There *are* timeless subjects and artistic methods, but the best art, just like the best expositional preaching, applies itself to the particular edification of its immediate audience. The Bible emphasizes the importance of *new* songs as well as old.<sup>2</sup> Why isn’t God saying to *my* generation, “Behold, I will do something new . . .” (Isa. 43:19)? Where are the new songs in our day that match the greatness and excellence of the old songs?

I wanted to point my children to the new works of God, and say, “See, God didn’t just work in previous generations or

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<sup>2</sup> Ps. 33; 40; 96; 98.

in the days of old. He is at work right here before your eyes.” But instead, I see the church desolate of fresh vision and new songs, and my heart cries with Jeremiah, “Why do You forget us forever? Why do You forsake us for so long? Restore us to You, O LORD, that we may be restored; Renew our days as of old . . .” (Lam. 5:20–21).

But in the meantime, it seems our children have two current options: either the vanity of the world—which offers passing pleasure and fleeting beauty with assured future destruction—or the vacuum of the church—which offers only the promise of future beauty with no present foretaste of it to strengthen our faith. Can we expect our *children* to have the self-control, discernment, and patience to forego a tangible present pleasure if we have nothing to offer them as a testimony to the certainty of God’s promise? Do we seriously think we will staunch the life flow of youth out of the church if we continue putting all of our apologetic and evangelistic efforts into the ideological argument? No. We must also wage cultural warfare, for that is the battlefield of our generation. And we must strive to do it well.

The art of a culture, like the face of a person, represents that culture. Those who love the church and live within her can forgive the current haggardness of her face. But those that are doubting the truth, or who have already abandoned it, excuse themselves from accountability because of the church’s ugliness. This must be remedied. If we love the church and we love the lost, we must work to make the church beautiful in both her substance and her appearance.

The work of restoring the church’s appearance in the eyes of the watching world and our expectant youth is very much

dependent on skilled artists and artisans who are called by God to communicate the power and beauty of His words in art. In the Old Testament, the restoration of the temple—in its worship *and art*—played a fundamental role in the reformation of Israel. Similarly, skilled Christian artists are vital components in the modern church's much needed restoration.

In the current church, it is rare for gifted Christian artists to get the resources or training they need to present polished works of relevant art. When an artist lacks the free time or financial resources to perfect his craft and properly execute his ideas, his work will either be unfinished, unfocused, underdeveloped, or unpolished. This creates a vicious cycle. The artist cannot prove he is worthy of the church's resources and support because he doesn't have the resources and support necessary to prove his artistic worth.

Make no mistake: when the temple needed restoring, it was the *congregation's money* that went into the hands of the artists to buy gold, stone, fine woods, etc. It was the church's money that paid the salaries of musicians, skilled carpenters, sculptors, etc.<sup>3</sup> Without faithful financial patronage from the church, Christian art cannot and will not progress. The finances of an artist cannot be left to the market. The market *will not support* uncompromisingly well-crafted presentations of God's convicting truth.

There are three major factors contributing to this: 1) The world sets the standard for what will be marketed to the church. 2) Distribution companies want to appeal to the larg-

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 12:11f; 2 Chron. 34:8f; etc.

est population of the church, so they release only the least offensive art for general consumption. 3) Most mainstream churchgoers don't appreciate the art in the Bible, and therefore, they have little capacity to appreciate biblical art.

First, "Christian" distribution companies look to what is marketable in the world to determine what will be marketable in the church. Most of what they offer us operates as a Christian "alternative" to whatever has already gained popularity in the "secular" market.

The biggest factor determining whether or not a given work of art gets published is financial risk. Since the distribution company usually pays for publishing, marketing, etc., the company's investors want to make sure that they will at least make their money back. Because of this, contemporary Christian art generally mirrors whatever has been financially successful in the world; it just comes a little later and usually with cheaper production budgets. In other words, Christian artists who can't make it in the world won't gain any audience in the church.

No one seems to recognize what a neutralizing effect this has on Christian art. If our art is vetted through the world's distribution rubric before it can get back to the church, is it any wonder that it comes back to us hopelessly derivative and cliché? The church isn't contributing anything relevant or distinct to the cultural discussion because the church in general either refuses to support and nurture artists within her own walls, or she just doesn't know she is supposed to.

Second, distribution companies don't care about making good art; they care about making good money. So they are interested in capturing as large a portion of the "Chris-

tian, conservative, family” market as possible. This means that everything they promote has to be absolutely saltless, tasteless, senseless, artless, and noncontroversial. In other words, while the market controls the arts, seeker-friendly, feel-good, fuzzy, uplifting Christianese puffery is the only “art” the church will have the opportunity to support because no fiscally conservative distribution company will take a financial risk on anything that doesn’t have “mass appeal.”

The fact that the church spends a whole lot of money on bad art doesn’t *necessarily* mean that the majority of churchgoers have bad taste in art.<sup>4</sup> It may be that we don’t have hardly anything other than rubbish from which to choose! Parents feel relieved to be able to take their kids to a movie that doesn’t taunt their beliefs or outrage their moral sensibilities. So they are willing to overlook even a vast accumulation of artistic failings in order to take a breather. A Christian radio station near where I live has the tag line: “Safe for the Whole Family.” Safe sells to the Christian crowd. The quickest way to make money in “family-oriented” art is to create an amusingly harmless, sense-gratifying banality that leaves the audience with a vague assurance that everything will be okay. Disney has pretty much made its entire fortune on that fact. And almost all Christian art follows suit. It is made to be “wholesome for the whole family,” and almost all of it is, therefore, very safe.

But, to be clear, safe art is rarely good art. If we limit the art we are willing to support to untroubling, doubt-free excursions into the well-charted puerile lands of comfortable, reassur-

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<sup>4</sup> My third point will speak to this more fully.

ing entertainment, we will have to reject the majority of biblical art. Because the Bible contains almost no “safe” art. Aside from a handful of verses in the Psalms (which constitute nearly the entirety of the biblical poetry referenced—and repeated over and over again—in contemporary Christian music), the vast majority of biblical poetry challenges, unsettles, convicts, threatens, condemns, and generally offends. I don’t know how anyone could take even a cursory glance through Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, the Psalms, and the Prophets without realizing that biblical art is not at all tame. And if the current Christian art distributors had been around in Old Testament times, they wouldn’t have released *any* of it.<sup>5</sup>

Which brings me to my third point, which is that most Christians today really don’t appreciate the art in the Bible, so the majority of them wouldn’t support biblical art even if it *were* available in greater quantities. I’m not just speculating here. In my efforts to promote and produce excellent Christian art, I have run into more obstacles inside the church than outside of it. Many churchgoers seem positively hostile toward a biblical approach to art. Most of the time, they don’t even realize they are taking issue with God’s explicit words.

For instance, my mother organized a musical for her Christian high school drama group based on portions of a concept album my band had composed, called *Death is Their Shepherd*. It is a story about a young man’s first experience with his own mortality. Most of the album uncovers biblical truths

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<sup>5</sup> I can just imagine them getting to verses like Psalm 137:9: “How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your babies against a rock?!’ We can’t publish this!”

concerning death and it ends with an aural figure of death “swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54).

My mother had to fight very hard for this production. Multiple kids (who had shown great initial enthusiasm for the project) mysteriously quit at various crucial times during production for undisclosed family reasons. My mother ended up having to make many concessions and changes in order to get a version of her vision on stage, and even then, the “expurgated” version was apparently offensive to some families.

Before the performance, one concerned mother wrote an email to the artistic director to complain. The mother knew nothing about the musical or the album, but the *title* concerned her greatly. She said it was very disturbing. She said she would not take her family to the performance.<sup>6</sup> Curiously, the title of the album is based directly on Psalm 49:14: “As sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd . . .” I agree with her—that *is* disturbing. It’s *supposed* to be disturbing. I guess this woman shouldn’t be leaving her Bible around the house. Who knows what other disturbing stuff her children may find in there.

Most Christians don’t know it, but they don’t like the art in the Bible. They like very small portions of it that have either been sterilized by decontextualization or made safe through familiarity.<sup>7</sup> Our idea of what makes art “Christian” is far

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<sup>6</sup> In case you were curious, all four of my children attended the performance. None of them are older than five, and so far I can detect no permanent emotional trauma.

<sup>7</sup> An example of this is Psalm 23, which actually contains some powerfully unsettling imagery. This imagery doesn’t register with most readers because they have heard it so many times—they don’t think

removed from the Bible's normative concept of art. Our tastes in general need reforming, but that can happen only through the production of art. We need art and exposition that challenges the truncated and unbiblical aesthetic perspective of mainstream Christianity.

I'm sure many of my readers have already started to bristle concerning my dim view of the Christian arts. Many Christians respond to me by listing all of the bands and films and artists that in their minds contradict my assertion that Christian art is in crisis. To hear many Christians talk, you would think that there is no shortage of excellent Christian art. If that is your opinion, I must flatly, though as cordially as possible, disagree with you.

We identify with the church, so we hate to see her called ugly. I understand that. I feel my heart rise against it as well. Nobody likes to hear bad things about his mother. But disputing our current cultural irrelevance because of a personal feeling of offense will do no good to remedy the causes of our failings. Contesting the label won't fix anything if the label is actually accurate. The curse wouldn't land if it didn't have a cause (Prov. 26:2).

For instance, most Christian films that receive wide financial support from churchgoers are universally (and validly) criticized by industry professionals for their wooden acting, uninspired direction, canned editing and cinematography, and implausible stories and dialogue. Though low budgets do play a role in the mediocrity of contemporary Christian

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about what it means anymore.

movies, *unlimited* funding could not salvage most of them. It doesn't cost more money to turn a good screenplay into a movie over against a bad one. The most fundamental problem with mainstream Christian art is that it suffers from a lack of vision. No amount of money can fix this.

Some Christians think that unbelieving artistic professionals pan Christian art because, being unbelievers, they are ideologically prejudiced against the Christian message. This would not explain why those same critics praise *Ben Hur*, or why Dostoevsky is still studied closely in secular universities, or why Bach is still considered one of the greatest musical geniuses of all time. It also doesn't explain why so many of the church's most thoughtful young people all over the country, who love God deeply and desperately want good Christian art, almost unanimously agree that there is little to no contemporary Christian art out there worth their time.

No. Most critics reject mainstream Christian art because the vast overwhelming majority of it is mind-bogglingly insipid on pretty much every discernible level. And the world actually likes it that way, and wants to keep it that way. It makes it easier for them to reject the Gospel. It makes it easier for them to succeed on the cultural battlefield.

When it comes to the current state of mainstream Christian art, I know that much of what I am saying is not shared by many in the church ... yet. But I feel compelled to speak now. I don't know that the American church can survive another generation of cultural attrition. The walls of Jerusalem are down, and the Temple is desolate. The majority of Israel may be content in captivity, but I long to see Jerusalem

restored. And if you are like me, you are probably asking, “How do we do this?”

First, we must begin supporting local artists within our individual church communities. This largely removes the market as a governing force in the church’s arts, and it makes it possible for skilled artists—who otherwise would be doomed to artistic obscurity or unfruitfulness—to make the art God has given for them to make. Perhaps, like Bach, some of these local artists will achieve some notoriety when their “unmarketable” art turns out to be exactly what the market didn’t know how to ask for.

I am not recommending that Christians stop supporting the well-meaning mainstream artistic efforts of Christians. I am just begging you to look *also* within your own church, find skilled or aspiring artists with unique visions, and start giving them money to make whatever art they think is right for the church. At the same time, utilize some of the biblical standards I have discussed in this book—coupled with your own research—to hold mainstream Christian artists to a higher standard. We must wrest control of our art from the debasing forces of centralized distribution and the world’s market.<sup>8</sup>

It used to be the case that the church was the cutting edge of aesthetic endeavor. Anyone who wanted work in the arts had to come to the church and abide by her rules. Why?

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<sup>8</sup> As an aside, I have nothing against the free market. It is the most efficient mechanism for getting people the highest quality commodities they desire and need at the best possible price. But as I discussed in Chapter 1, art is not a commodity. The best, most edifying art is very often entirely unmarketable, at least at the present time.

Because not just anyone in the church with a gumption to stick brush to canvas was supported. There were carefully established standards that artists felt compelled to meet, and the church and her members gave consistent commissions to skilled artists to make good art, and *paid well*. We cared deeply about the implications of the Bible for all of culture—not just for church on Sunday.

Today, the standard-making, the commissioning, and the wage-paying is being done by the *world*. Skilled artists leave the church because the support and the vision is in the world, and these skilled Christian artists and artisans make the world's goods and lend their strength to the world's idols. The church then gets the leftovers, both in terms of money and personnel. And it shows.

There are, however, skilled artists in the church who will not lend their strength to the world, and consequently cannot make a living in art because mainstream Christians think these skilled artists should “get a real job” if they can’t “make it” in the world. These are the artists that desperately need the financial support of Christians. This cannot be over-stressed. If the church is to claim her rightful place of beauty and honor in the world, uncompromising Christians of artistic skill must find paying commissions in the church. The church has the money, but she is buying from the world or buying only what the world will allow her.<sup>9</sup> If this book does nothing else, I hope it convicts the reader of the great responsibility each of us has to cut off sup-

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<sup>9</sup> The false church in Revelation 18 is mourned by only one group of people—the merchants of the world. When the false church dies, the largest market for the world's trinkets dies with her.

port from the world's idol factories and start giving support—both in word and deed—to the cultural work of the church.

An awakening sweeps the nation. People in the church are beginning to long for the meat of the Word. They are beginning to become dissatisfied with the complacency and mediocrity of the mainstream church. They want to be involved in the reformation of the United States and the world. Christian artists of aesthetic and personal integrity are out there. They are ready to start the siege on the City of Man to reclaim the tools and resources the compromised church sold for wanton pleasures. They are poised to present a challenge to the skeptics, rebels, and scoffers—the gracious challenge of a beautiful church. Christ Himself labors for this. He too works in us and through us to make His Bride blameless in splendor, without spot or wrinkle—sound in form and substance (Eph. 5:27).

The central issue is one of personal responsibility—will you take responsibility to do your part? Will you do what it takes? Will you make the sacrifices necessary to do your cheerful duty in God's plan for the reconciliation of the world to Himself? Will you work to make the church a praise in the earth?

On your walls, O Jerusalem,  
I have appointed watchmen;  
all day and all night they will never keep silent.  
You who remind the Lord,  
take no rest for yourselves;  
and give Him no rest until He establishes  
and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

—Isaiah 62:6–7





## About the Author

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Michael Minkoff, Jr. is president and cofounder of THE NEHEMIAH FOUNDATION FOR CULTURAL RENEWAL (RenewTheArts.org), a non-profit organization that produces and promotes uncompromising, thoughtful, excellent Christian art. He works full-time as an editor and typesetter and lives in Marietta, Georgia with his wife Vanessa and four children: Selah, Amity, Miles, and Ephrem.



**T**he NEHEMIAH FOUNDATION FOR CULTURAL RENEWAL is dedicated to the production and collection of any Christian media sources that both praise God for His mighty deeds and praise God according to His excellent greatness; and to the education of clearly called, but, as yet, artistically unskilled or nominally skilled Christians who seek discipling in either the artistry or artisanship of holistically Biblical Christian media production.

Toward the reconstruction of the world by the gospel presented through any means that can be conscientiously consecrated to God's service;

Toward the transformation of the church from a market of consumers courted by the world's sin merchants into a community of producers prevailing against the gates of hell;

Toward the vindication of Christ's name, which has been defamed by scoffers on account of the shameful fragmentation of the visible church in America and the anemic irrelevance of its representative cultural output:

We are Christian artists and artisans pursuing accountability for both the integrity of our artistic methods and message and the maturity of each individual's walk with God while cultivating collaboration within the church across genres, mediums, and denominations through the generous monetary patronage of godly Christians who share our vision.

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