

Outline a Christian Aesthetic

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There is no doubt that the Bible addresses the issue of art. Jesus was a skilled craftsman. He was also a master story-teller. In the Old Testament we hear about the elaborate craftsmanship and artistry employed in the construction of the Tabernacle and Temple. The Bible itself is a literary work consisting of various separate art forms: prose, poetry, narrative, rhetoric and so on. Ultimately we can conceive of God as the master-artist. It is in this fact that we can grapple with the notion of a specific *Christian* aesthetic.

But we might well begin by asking the question whether it is even right to conceive of a particular *Christian* aesthetic. Some if not most branches of evangelicalism have not really considered the theme of aesthetics. Take the buildings we use as meeting places for example. Surely the emphasis has not been on creating buildings that are beautiful, pieces of art in their own right. Perhaps it is because our theology tells us that these buildings are just 'rain shelters' in which the church can meet, we haven't given much thought to how these buildings look, feel and act.

We have rarely thought how the Bible would have us approach the issue of aesthetic quality. My own experience is that I have never been properly taught how as a Christian I ought to approach any creative act I might engage in, whether that be producing a meal, a piece of rhetoric, decorating my home or putting together the church magazine. I cannot recall hearing by way of application in a sermon how something I create should be 'beautiful' or should accomplish its task well, or how it

should reflect my Christian world-view. Perhaps the closest thing to this is being told that I should do everything to praise of God. But what does this mean?

I want to suggest some ways in which we should approach our aesthetic task as Christians. What will be peculiar about a *Christian* aesthetic?

Beauty

'Beauty' it is said 'is in the eye of the beholder.' Is beauty quite so subjective as this? Or does the Bible allow us more objectivity? Does the Bible help us know what is truly beautiful? This is the place we need to begin since aesthetics might be defined as the enquiry in to the nature of beauty. But can we say that anything is beautiful, and other things are not?

To begin with we should say that the Bible tells us that God himself is beautiful. David writes in Psalm 27:4 "One thing I have asked of the LORD, that I will seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple." Hundreds of other passages praise God in aesthetic terms: 'O Lord my God you are very great; you are clothed with splendour and majesty.' (Psalm 104:1); 'Sing to the LORD and praise him for the splendour of his holiness' (2 Chron 20:21).

An ultimate, originating 'divine beauty' might then be said to exist. Augustine said 'The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you [God] and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all.'ⁱ In other words Augustine recognised that beautiful

things only existed in the world because God himself is beautiful. Beauty finds its origin in God. 'Just as God is primordial being, the ontological ground of all that is, and just as he is the foundation of ethics, the axiological ground of all values, so is he the foundation of aesthetics, the ground of all beauty.'ⁱⁱⁱ

The Bible notes that some things are clearly beautiful. Primarily, the creation that God made 'was good'. We understand by this that part of this inherent 'goodness' was that it was beautiful. The objectively beautiful God had made a creation than was objectively beautiful.

And God has given men and women the ability to make items that the Bible declares to be objectively beautiful. We read that Solomon 'adorned the house [the Temple] with precious stones for beauty' (2 Chron 3:6 *Amplified Bible*). The stones did not perform any other practical function. They were there for the sake of beauty. The same chapter in 2 Chronicles goes on to describe the lavish beauty of the Temple. Carved cherubim; fine gold; a veil of blue and purple and crimson fabrics; and two towers in the Most Holy Place that served no utilitarian function whatsoever. This was to be a work of beauty for the sake of beauty. It was meant to be beautiful because God is beautiful.

So we can say that God himself is beautiful. He is the source of beauty. And things created by man which are beautiful reflect the divine beauty and indeed have their origin in him.

Genuine creativity

In the beginning, the first verse of Genesis tell us, God created the heavens and the earth. Our world was not an accidental or unwanted by-product of the gods; rather it was a deliberate, planned and executed piece of creativity. What

is more the refrain in Genesis 1 comes again and again: 'and it was good.' The creation that God had made was a perfect creation.

As the pinnacle of the creation God created mankind. This 'man' (who was created 'male and female') was made in the image of God. Whatever that exactly entails, it must surely include the ability to create something new, as God can. Adam was given the task of working the ground of Eden. He was given the responsibility of re-fashioning a world that had already been made perfectly. This is some task.

Dorothy L. Sayers wrote 'The idea of art as creation is, I believe, the one important contribution that Christianity has made to aesthetics.'ⁱⁱⁱⁱ She goes on to ask to what extent we can consider mankind as being like God in the creative task, and answers that the fundamental difference is that whereas humans are limited to creating out of that which already exists, God is able to create out of nothing. Nonetheless, are still able to create something and in doing so we image God.

Sayers makes the point that a distinctively Christian aesthetic requires the production of pieces of art that are *new*. We should not settle for simply copying that which already exists. This is not a hallmark of a genuine Christian aesthetic since it fails to accomplish that act of 'working' the creation. We should remember that art is always a kind of *work*:

A work of art emerges only when an artist takes chisel in hand and chips away at stone, heats up a furnace and pours bronze, picks up a lump of clay and turns a pot, takes up a brush or knife and spreads paint around, selects from the verbal stock of his language

specific sequence of words... The fundamental fact about the artist is that he or she is a worker in stone, in bronze, in clay, in paint, in words, in sounds and instruments, in states of affairs. On some bit of the concrete materials of our stage he imposes order.^{iv}

Copying is not creating something new. So a Christian aesthetic requires that there will be newness about that which we create. Spiegel warns that a lack of creativity might break out in various forms of artificiality: popular kitsch (t-shirt designs, car stickers, coffee mugs); hackneyed formulas in music (like the key change towards the Westlife song) and 'maudlin dramas that oversimplify the complexities of real life moral problems and dilemmas (e.g. "Yes, Jane, your pregnancy out of wedlock is a serious problem, but if you just trust the Lord...").... Perhaps the best (or worst) example of this is the widespread use of musical accompaniment tapes.^v

Reflecting the Christian world-view

Schaeffer says that the saddest artist to witness is the one who is a born-again Christian 'who does not understand what the total Christian world view should be and therefore produces art which embodies a non-Christian world view.'^{vi}

Across an artist's entire body of work we should expect to see a Biblical world-view reflected. It is inappropriate for the entirety of a Christian artist's work to heavily reflect, for example, that there is no meaning to life, since there is meaning to life. It is inappropriate for a Christian artist's work to largely reflect that all is despair, since it is not. It is not a Christian aesthetic if the body of work tells us that there is no hope of redemption, since that is the

Christian's hope.

It is important that we stress the need to contemplate the artist's entire body of work in this respect. Schaeffer makes the helpful distinction between a 'major' and 'minor' theme in art. The major themes that will be reflected in the Christian's art will be those of hope, redemption, salvation, creation, forgiveness, restoration, joy and so on. However, a Christian is not removed or immune from the suffering and brokenness of the world, and as such her art, if it is to be credible, should also reflect this 'minor theme' of feelings of hopelessness and despair, the sense of lostness and depravity. Our Lord Jesus suffered for us in our broken world. God suffered and died! A Christian aesthetic will reflect on the themes of brokenness. It is when we have experienced darkness that we can appreciate light.

Technical excellence

When God created the universe, not only did he make that which was perfect, but we understand that he act of creating was a perfect act. His creating was technically perfect. He controlled his instrument – his word – to perfection. He didn't make any mistakes.

So another aspect of Christian aesthetics will be a striving for technical excellence, since this reflects the work of God. A painter will work hard to control his brush. A pianist will endeavour to master the scales. A dramatist will seek to perfect her ability to utilise dramatic tension. Striving for excellence is also an act of love for our neighbour since no one likes to hear a violin played badly for a prolonged period of time. A parent may put up with it in the house for a period of time in the understanding that the son or daughter will eventually improve!

Moral integrity

God is altogether good. In his work of creating he acted with complete integrity. And so we must aim for integrity in our works of creativity as we seek to image God in the creative task. We are people called to live lives of moral obedience to Jesus, and this obedience certainly extends to our art.

Our art must not, for example, seek to sell a lie (Phil 4:8). We must not use art to make an attack on another person. We will not use art to perpetuate injustice. Christian art will not be pornographic. Christian art will not demean the Lord Jesus in any way. Our art must not aim to provoke others to sin. We are called to prefer the needs of others to our own, and so our purpose in creating art should not be to serve ourselves but to serve others. We will not worship our art,

since that is idolatry.

Trinitarian reflection

The God of the Bible exists as Trinity. He is in himself a community of persons existing in perfect harmony. He is Father, Son and Spirit, yet he is One.

Surely this must impact upon our distinctive Christian aesthetic. Our art should reflect the theme of different parts working together in harmony. The way in which the painter brings together differing colours to produce a single painting on canvas. The manner in which a choir fashion a rich variety of voices into one voice. While (following Shaeffer) we might sparingly use elements of disharmony to reflect the reality of brokenness in our world, we will seek to emphasise themes of harmony and unity.

- i Augustine, *Confessions X*, 27 (New York: Viking Penguin, 1961), 232.
- ii James S. Spiegel, *Aesthetics and Worship* (available online).
- iii Dorothy L Sayers, *Towards a Christian Aesthetic*
- iv Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 91.
- v Spiegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 48
- vi Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (IVP: Downers Grove), p. 69.