

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

51 What Is the Christian View of Art?

*Scripture: Genesis 1:31; Exodus 35:30-36:1; I Kings 6:28-35; Ezra 7:27;
I Timothy 6:17; Philippians 4:8*

INTRODUCTION

When people become Christians they stand on the threshold of a realm of ideas and truths with which they must become familiar if they are to increase in their knowledge of God and be of service to Him. We need to know what God is like and how he is able to help us be what He wants us to be. In a word, Christians need a working knowledge of the truth as it is presented in the Bible. This understanding will also prepare them to face the facts of life with greater perspective and appreciation. Our question this morning has to do with the Christian view of art and I wish to focus on certain basic areas: **(1) The Definition of Art; (2) The Appreciation of Art; (3) The Purpose of Art; (4) The Quality of Art.**

I. THE DEFINITION OF ART:

The main point which must be made at the outset is this: **Art is primarily an expression of values.** Or, it could be said that **art is the expression of truth through beauty.** It is the language whereby we express to each other those interests we value most. To teach directly is science; to teach obliquely is art. The Christian should be able to appreciate true beauty and good art more than a non-Christian of comparable aesthetic maturity because of being rightly related to the One who is absolute beauty. There should be a keener appreciation of loveliness. There is a wide difference between illumination and blindness. There is much truth in the little verse: **“Heaven above is softer blue, Earth around is sweeter green: Something lives in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen.”**

Of course we need to realize that God gives creative genius to the just and to the unjust. God created man with the capacity for art and the enjoyment of it. In Genesis 1:28 we read that man was created in the image of God and part of that image is likeness to the great Creator artist, God; and part of the dignity which man possesses is the ability to create, produce and appreciate that which is beautiful. The Genesis record is that God took a formless mass (Genesis 1:2) and

brought form to it (Genesis 1:31). God then looked at this result and pronounced it “good” (Genesis 1:31). The Hebrew word rendered “good” includes the idea of beauty. Art works include line, mass, color and design, and when we look at the works of God we find that he is master of these. Made in God’s image, man is an aesthetic being.

As we are thinking along these lines I can almost hear someone say, “Well, I’m not into art and never have been. I don’t go to art galleries and I don’t have any particular interest in artists.” The point here as we come to define art is that of art in the broad use of the word. We are not thinking now about art galleries and professional artists. You see, art is a vital part of every day life. It is unavoidable. It is a vital part of the clothes we wear and the houses we live in. The way we arrange the furniture in our living rooms, decorate our tables, and plant our shrubs and flowers; all of this is art in one form or another. It is not a matter of being artistic or non-artistic. It is a matter of good aesthetics or bad aesthetics, because the way values are expressed is something which is with us every day that we live.

In our use of the word art we include those things already mentioned as well as literature, poetry, sculpture, music, drama and poetry. Because these things are so relevant to the human experience, the Christian view of art is a worthy philosophical subject, especially for the Christian, who inherits a vast tradition of art.

II. THE APPRECIATION OF ART:

The early Church, notwithstanding catacomb art, seemed to have shied away from art and regarded it as essentially pagan. This distrustful attitude was not because of any anti Christian character which it possessed, but, due to the fact that it was so thoroughly identified with pagan culture. But it wasn’t long before the Church began to seek the service of art and during the Middle Ages art played an important role. With the Renaissance came a secularization of art. Christianity has given real impetus to art. It has given a rationale to the arts in its teaching about God and man. It has provided an atmosphere of hope in which the arts can thrive. It provided a framework within which men like Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and Browning wrote.

It is interesting to note that most evangelical Christians have little concern for art. Dr. Frank E. Gaebelien writes, “Some think commitment to the Holy Scriptures as the inspired Word of God and the rule for all of life is a hindrance to

aesthetic expression and appreciation. Complete fidelity to Scripture, they say, leaves little place for anything but religious use of art; they consider the arts as generally worldly and thus outside the bounds of biblical truth, mere marginal activities for those determined to be about the Father's business. This is wrong in principle, because it assumes a gap between sacred and secular truth and thus violates the unity of truth. Truth, though on its highest level is incarnate in Christ and as expressed in the Bible, is not confined to religion. All truth is God's. Among the rank and file of evangelical Christians, aesthetic standards are generally low. The evidence is abundant. The pictures on the walls, the hooks on the shelves, the records played, so many of these things are products of a sentimental, pietistic dilution of the aesthetic integrity that should mark the Christian use of art." (Frank E. Gaebelin, **Toward a Biblical View of Aesthetics**, 1968; Christianity Today)

Of course, we all have our interests and those things which do not hold interest for us. The point is that Christians ought not dismiss artistic expression because they have come to feel there is no spiritual value in such expression. Some Christians have even reasoned that because the second commandment forbids the making of any graven image, art can not be very meaningful for them. This is a misunderstanding. The second commandment forbids the fashioning of any graven image **to be worshipped**. It does not forbid the making of statues or images. Remember, in the tabernacle there was the beautiful statue of the Seraphim. In the Old Testament numerous art objects were used as external symbols of Israel's relationship with God.

Other Christians have strayed in their attitude toward art because of the feeling that the arts are so often beset with people who have little or no interest in Christ, or because they are perverted in some way. I'm sure you know what I mean. But the fact of the matter is that the business world, or any world we move in, is filled with such people. These objections are not valid. Some Christians simply do not have time for cultural interests because they are so busy in church work or spiritual pursuits. These may fail to realize that **a primary principle of Christianity is that all truth is of God**. There is truth in art as there is truth in religious endeavors.

Dr. Gaebelin writing also in The **Church Herald**, has this to add: "We Christians today urgently need to rethink their opinions about the arts. They need to do so because the arts relate so directly to the kind of people they are and to the kind of people they want their children to be. No animal really practices art any more

than it worships. Sub-human creatures may make beautiful things but only by their instinct, and the things they make are not their own conscious expressions but expressions of God's thoughts. Only man consciously seeks to express truth through beauty. If life is to be lived to the fullest in glorifying God, the aesthetic faculty must not be starved. The Christian who devotes himself to business or science or any other area of life and leaves the arts standing outside "the house of intellect" to be invited in only as an occasional guest, is slighting an integral part of God's truth. For God is concerned about our use of the aesthetic faculty he has given us."

One further word about the appreciation of art. Because it is true that all beauty has its origin in God and is a reflection of God, such beauty may serve to draw some people to God. James reminds us in chapter one, verse seventeen that *"every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down from above from the Father of lights."* This does not have to mean church beauty. It does not have to mean sacred or religious beauty but it means all beauty. God reaches for people in different ways. The reformers in their return to the New Testament wrote "Properly viewed everything is sacred and it does not have to be a picture of Christ, or a picture of the disciples. It can be a picture of a mountain or a picture of the ocean. It can still be sacred if it reflects the beauty of God and is directed toward Him." (Romans 14:14; Titus 1:15) It is very reasonable to assume that God may use the beauty to be found in the arts as a means of some grasping the truth of his love for them. I found an interesting quotation from Bernard Bosanquet who said, "The true renaissance was not that of the classical forms in the 16th century; but, rather, the rebirth of humanity itself." Christians ought not to be the enemies of art, only the abuses of art, for such is a noble gift through which man reflects the image of his creator.

III. THE PURPOSE OF ART:

A Christian view of art is based on the assumption that there is a God. This God has revealed Himself to us in nature, conscience, Christ and the Scriptures. This view would best fit the facts of cultural sensitivity and would be the most logically consistent system to explain those facts. Christianity believes that art should serve several purposes.

1. Art Should Be Used to Glorify God:

Beauty in art communicates important truth. This is the reason why people constantly demand of a piece of art, "What is it? What is the artist trying to

say? This is a good indication that there is no great art apart from a valid valuable message. For the Christian, the goal of art is to make visible the truth of God in nature and man. Art should not serve selfish ends. It should not point to itself. It should not even stop with nature. But it is not the function of art to teach directly as a matter of necessity, but in an oblique manner, in the truly artistic manner. Directly or indirectly, the goal of art is to be to the glory of God.

2. Art Should Be Useful to the Spirit of Man:

There has been much disagreement over the relationship of art to life. Isolationists argue that art is separate from the rest of life. The feeling is that art exists for its own sake. But we find that art is functional, though not in terms of scientific practicality. We do not have to have roses in the world, but they have a way of reaching to the heart and spirit of man.

3. Art Should Help Us to Understand the Meaning of Life and to Share it:

It has been said, "Art is the only (universal) language we possess whereby we are able to transmit our values to others." (Melvin Rader, *Esthetics*, pp. 23) I remember the inauguration of the late President Kennedy. He had said that what our country desperately needs in this hour is a great poet. This is the reason why he chose Robert Frost to read a poem at that inauguration. It was a way to communicate values, to help a nation understand itself, to discern its goals, and to begin to move toward them. Of course, the great tragedy of our day is that the poet who speaks does no longer express true direction and purpose having forsaken the absolutes of the Word of God. What a pity that when we need an artist, when we need a poet, Christians are not there and the task remains for those without faith to express our condition and future.

4. Art Should Provide Enjoyment and Enrichment for Mankind:

Paul wrote to Timothy (I Timothy 6:17) "*God hath given us all things richly to enjoy.*" Darlene Miller gives a fine definition of the purpose of art in the words, "The purpose of art is to help us to feel, to see, and to appreciate the world in which we live. It helps us discover beauty wherever we live. It helps us to discover beauty wherever it may be found." (Darlene Miller; **Art And Our Children**)

5. Art Should Reflect a Philosophy of Life:

It has been said, "When something is wrong with the Arts, it is not wrong with the arts only." Because art is an expression of one's values or what one holds to be true, one's whole way of looking at life is revealed. In the field of literature we have whole periods of time designated by such terms as Rationalism, Romanticism and Naturalism. These titles arose because certain men expressed their philosophy of life in what they wrote. Christianity so permeated other periods of history that Christian art became the dominant theme of most painting, literature and music. The Christian does not seek artistic meaningless. He searches for valuable art which builds up.

IV. THE QUALITY OF ART:

If art is an expression of values, there is at least one necessary presupposition that an absolute scale of values does exist. The Christian believes that there is criteria by which to judge art and that this criteria is found in the Biblical view of the creation, man, the doctrine of God, and the whole purpose for living. T. S. Eliot has well written. "What I believe incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world."

The important questions are these. What is being said about God and about man? What is being said about the meaning of life and about man's problems and the solution to those problems? The Christian will ask, "What is the purpose of that film, that book, that song, or that picture? What is the motivation behind it? What effect will it have upon the lives of those who are exposed to it? There are deep moral implications to the creation of these things.

Unfortunately, so much of what surrounds us today exerts a negative influence, speaks of life as having no meaning and is a perversion of God's gift. Art itself is unredeemable. Christ did not die to change art. He died for people. When a person is thus transformed, that change will show itself in his powers of creativity and in his perspective toward art. May there be those who will see art as a vital element in life, infusing it with Christian truth and meaning.

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