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AESTHETICS IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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Concept confusion readily assaults the Christian mind. For certain Christians, "beauty" and "sin" have become synonyms, mirror images of depravity and degradation. Furthermore, these individuals often equate piety with somberness, drabness with holiness. If one experiences delight, such feelings must be inevitably wrong and the source of pleasure inherently evil. By some, the injunction "love not the world" (1 John 2:15) is viewed, in fact, as a grim warning against literature, music, and art. Such aesthetic experiences are viewed as subtle, sinister attempts to sneak worldliness in through the back door.

As committed Christians, however, we must address certain crucial underlying questions:

1. Does God love beauty?
2. Did He place within man both the urge and ability to create things that are original, unique, and lovely? If so, are there divine standards that govern human creation?
3. What is the role of aesthetics in the Christian life, and, by extension, in Christian education?
4. Is a thoughtful acquaintance with literary and artistic masterpieces legitimate for a Christian, or is one playing with fire?
5. Is it permissible for a Christian to enjoy aesthetic experiences that center on the common things of life? Or must one focus exclusively on aesthetic experiences that are religious in nature?
6. Finally, is there a right and wrong in art, in drama, in music, or in literature? If so, how should a Christian make that distinction?

These issues trouble many Christian educators. Scripture teaches that we should be able to give a reason for what we believe (1 Pet 3:15); a rationale based not merely on tradition, prejudice, personal preference, or popular opinion. Clearly, our answers to these questions must not be flippant. Rather, it seems necessary that Christians carefully examine these matters and seek to formulate guiding principles that will enable us to experience, understand, and enjoy what God has intended.

Core Concepts

As we begin our journey, some working definitions are, perhaps, in order. Let us first consider the overarching concept itself—aesthetics.

Let us suppose that we are considering the purchase of a particular dining room table. One way to look at the table is to see it in purely utilitarian, economic terms—its resale value, for example, or the practicality of its features, such as the number of people it will seat. Another way to see the table is to take a technical, scientific approach and describe it in terms of its height, width, strength, type of wood, and finish. There is a third view of the table, however, and that is to note its warmth of color, proportions, texture, and style. This latter perspective is the aesthetic response.

So what is aesthetics? In essence, it is a persistent attempt to see life appreciatively. It is a bonding of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual factors; a synthesis that seeks to better comprehend all of man's experience that could be called beautiful or expressive.

What then are the qualities that make up the aesthetic experience? There are, undoubtedly, an infinite number of conditions that can enhance the aesthetic nature of an object, idea, or situation. These might include purpose, pattern, proportion, and perspective, as well as originality, dominance, restraint, and unity in diversity. Such aesthetic qualities are formed, in turn, from more fundamental ingredients such as tone, melody, and rhythm; alliteration and climax; line, color, texture, and movement.

We have realized that inherent in the concept of aesthetics are the underlying constructs of beauty and creative expression. What, in the end, is beauty? And what is creativity?

A definition of beauty seems elusive—so intangible that modern writers usually make no attempt to define it. Even Plato, who stressed ultimate meaning in *Greater Hippias*, failed in his attempt to delineate beauty. So perhaps we do have something here that does not fit neatly into a tight package.

For the purpose of our dialogue, however, let us at least attempt an operational definition: To say that something is beautiful implies that we are pleased by whatever it is that we are describing. There is a satisfying relationship between an individual (with his/her capacities, past experience, and training) and an "object" (with its sounds, colors, shapes, and forms). Thus, beauty is found not only in the object nor solely in the "eye of the beholder," but rather in the multifaceted relationship between the two, a relationship that seems appropriate and fitting.

As with many relationships, however, beauty may be transitory. Something deemed beautiful today might lose that quality tomorrow; while that which has not been considered beautiful in the past may suddenly seem to undergo a metamorphosis and acquire innate beauty. The Scripture itself notes, "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (Eccl 3:11). Consequently, the assessment of beauty must be an on-going, dynamic process.

Perhaps it is also worth pointing out the difference between that which is beautiful and that which is merely pretty. As we have noted, beauty is a personal aesthetic experience blending spiritual, intellectual, and emotional components. Prettiness, however, seems to be almost exclusively an emotive reaction, and a response that is easily swayed by the emotional norms of the masses.

The third concept, creativity, is the ability to invent or express what has never before existed. It incorporates synergy, in which the end result is more than the sum of its parts. This creative capacity is a divine attribute, given in a measure to man from the very beginning.[1] It is probably significant that there is only one description of God provided prior to the statement that man was formed in His image (Gen 1:26-27). That portrait is of God as the Creator. Thus, whatever else it may mean, to be in the image of the Creator (*imagio deo*) must mean to be creative.

Consequently, man has been instructed to bring out of the treasure house not only things that are old, but also those that are new (Matt 13:52). Such freshness and originality imply innovative thought and action. Thus each creation—whether sculpture, architecture, painting, literature, drama, or music—brings with it a crisp new awareness, bursting from the bud of a unique message or an innovative aesthetic form.

A Christian Perspective

Having at least grappled with some fundamental concepts, we must now ask, as Christians, whether the Bible implies a theory of aesthetics, and whether it is possible to formulate Christian principles that allow us to judge what is beautiful and to establish standards for creative expression.

First of all, it is clear that Christianity involves the whole person—including the intellect and the emotions, as well as one's creative expression and aesthetic relationships. Christ Himself affirmed that to receive eternal life one must love God with all one's heart, soul, strength, and mind; and one's neighbor as himself (Mark 12:30-31). Thus any creative production or expression of beauty must be done to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31) and for the betterment of mankind (Gal 5:13).

Second, while there is clear warning against being "of the world," the Christian is nevertheless "in the world," according to God's plan (John 17:15). And being in the world, one partakes of its pain and pleasure, its hopes and fears, its sorrows and joys. While Christ spoke unequivocally of sacrifice, of taking up one's cross (Matt 16:24), and of walking the straight and narrow path (Matt 7:14),

[1]Cogent presentations of this concept are found in H. M. Best, "God's Creation and Human Creativity," in *The Reality of Christian Learning: Strategies for Faith-Discipline Integration*, ed. H. Heie and D. L. Wolfe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 249-67, and Arthur Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), particularly the chapter entitled "Human Creativity" (pp. 199-206).

He also affirmed the concept of an abundant life. "I am come," He said, "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Hence it seems significant that Christ attended wedding celebrations and even provided additional refreshments when the supply ran low (John 2:1-11). He called the attention of His listeners to the loveliness of wildflowers (Luke 12:27), and invited His disciples to join Him in singing (Matt 26:30). Although no sanction is given for emotional intoxication, it appears evident that one can follow Christ and still enjoy food, festivities, and the beauties of nature. The Scriptures, in fact, declare, "Thou wilt show me the path of life; in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Ps 16:11).

A third critical area in a Christian view of aesthetics concerns the formulation of Christian principles to guide creative expression and to provide God-centered criteria for aesthetic evaluation. These are particularly important concerns in Christian education, where we deal directly with the formation of the Christian mind and the development of a Christian lifestyle. Although aesthetics is not limited to the arts, we will take the arts as a case in point, given that it is an aesthetic arena with which most students interact in their educational programs, and with which most of us have had at least some contact at one time or another.

The Case of the Arts

The arts are forms of aesthetic expression that enlarge our field of experience, stimulate our ability of observation, train our power of reflection, enhance our capacity for discrimination, and help us to empathize with other peoples and cultures. In so doing, they clarify, intensify, and interpret life.[2]

For the sake of our discussion, we will delimit the arts to the following three areas:

1. The *auditory arts* meld sound and silence, pitch, timbre and rhythm, intensity and sometimes words into acoustic productions, such as vocal or instrumental music.

2. The *visual arts* incorporate the prime ingredients of mass, space, light, and shadow, as well as form, proportion, perspective, and hue to produce painting, sculpture, architecture, and the like.

3. The *literary arts*, such as poetry and prose, weave rhyme, rhythm, contrast, metaphor, alliteration, and the meaning of words into written tapestries.

Within these artistic domains, we will seek to delineate Christian principles for aesthetic production and evaluation. Following each principle, a brief rationale is given for its derivation and relevance.

[2]Although there are relatively few works that have examined aesthetics from a Christian perspective, an excellent treatise, focusing on the arts, is Harold B. Hannum, *Christian Search for Beauty* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1975).

The Arts Are of Christian Value

Why, from a Christian perspective, does a work of art have worth? What is the basis for its significance? First and foremost, art acquires merit because it is an expression of creativity. And creativity is of value, as we have seen, because God is the Creator and man was made in the image of God.

A second argument in favor of the Christian value of the arts is found in the fact that the Bible, as God's inspired revelation of His will, specifically enjoins artistic production. Both congregational singing (Exod 15:1-21; Rev 15:3) and instrumental renditions (1 Chr 23:5; 2 Chr 29:25-28) were at various times ordained by God as key components of worship. This implies that it is of value that some people learn composition, that others achieve skill in instrumental performance, and that everyone, no doubt, improve their voices. On another occasion, God directed that simple drama be enacted (Ezek 4:1-3) in order to communicate spiritual lessons. This particular production, in which a representation of the Jerusalem skyline served as a backdrop to ensure that the audience would not miss the point, ran continuously for more than a year.

Perhaps the greatest demonstration of the value that God places on artistic expression, however, is to be found in the design of the sanctuary and of Solomon's temple. In each of these cases, the house of worship was meticulously constructed according to God's blueprint (Exod 25:9; 1 Chr 28:11-12). Following the divine plan, there were to be statuary representations (Exod 25:31-33), carvings in bas relief (2 Chr 3:7), embroidered curtains (Exod 26:1), and artistic depictions of nature—blossoms and almonds (Exod 25:31-33), oxen and lilies (2 Chr 4:3-5). Furthermore, God personally commissioned those who were to prepare these aesthetic components (Exod 35:30-35), altogether providing convincing proof that God values both the artist and the work of art.

1. Levels of Understanding Influence an Appreciation of the Arts

There are at least three levels of understanding—sensation, perception, and valuation. Sensation is the raw data that our sense organs give us; perception adds meaning to sensation; while valuation assesses perception by means of our worldview. Aesthetic knowledge is thus hierarchical in nature.

It is possible, for example, to sense something without really perceiving it, without truly understanding what it is. In His day, Jesus noted that some individuals looked without seeing and listened without understanding (Matt 13:13). Much popular music, for example, has strong sense appeal. It is pleasurable on a physical level. Great music, however, goes beyond the physical response and requires an intellectual component. It calls for an understanding of both the medium and the message. While it is clear that sensation is prerequisite to subsequent stages of knowing, the constant bombardment of the mind with mere

sensuous stimuli can bring about a toxic imbalance between sensation and reflection.

There is an even more important dimension, however, and this relates the aesthetic experience to one's worldview, to a conceptual framework that includes normative principles and evaluative criteria. For the Christian, this valuation process means that an aesthetic work must not be merely something one likes or even comprehends, but something that lifts one to a higher, more spiritual plane. It implies that while sensory delight and experiential pleasure are legitimate components of the Christian life (Isa 35:1-2, 10; Cant 2:11-13), the love for God must supersede the love of pleasure (2 Tim 3:4).

These levels of experiential knowledge result in corresponding groups of individuals. At the first stage are those whose response to art is primarily sensuous. These persons give the greatest importance to feeling and physical enjoyment—whether it is the driving beat of rock or the soothing balm of Mantovani. Although the sensory element is always a necessary aesthetic component, in this group it is the dominant if not the exclusive mode of response.

The second group is comprised of those persons who respond perceptually. Although emotive ingredients are nearly always evident, these individuals also interact with the artistic medium on an intellectual level. This, of course, requires at least a basic understanding of the aesthetic elements—which in music might include such components as rhythm, melody, harmony, structure, expression, and their interrelations.

Finally, there are those who relate the aesthetic experience to the larger parameters of their existence, seeking not only to comprehend the medium and the message but also to relate these to the spiritual quality of life. These are the individuals who appreciate art to its fullest.

2. In the Arts, Both Medium and Message Must Be Considered

There are two sides of art: form and content, style and substance, medium and message. We will first address concerns related to the artistic message, examining subsequently matters more specifically associated with artistic style.

Art forms can be used to convey many types of messages—realistic or pure fantasy, true or false, good or evil. But they *always* convey a message. Even the assertion that there is no meaning at all is a message.

When we use art to convey a message, it serves to amplify the impact of that idea. It adds strength to the worldview encapsulated in the proposition, regardless of whether that worldview is Christian or not. Consequently, an artistic message must be examined most carefully. Even when a celebrated artist commits a worldview to an artistic medium, it does not follow that this worldview is true or that it should be accepted unquestioningly. As we will soon discuss in greater detail, the truth of the worldview presented by an artist must be judged on separate

grounds from his or her technical excellence. While both are essential, the worldview is paramount.

A Christian worldview,[3] however, does not imply that the message must always be cheery and bright. Indeed, such a shallow statement runs counter to the Christian understanding of the great controversy between good and evil, and presents a distorted, romanticized view of life. In the Christian worldview there is both a major and a minor theme.[4] The minor theme is the truth about the untruth, the reality of that which is evil, ugly, and immoral. In the arts, there is a place for this minor theme because man is flawed and fallen, society is sinful and in rebellion, and the universe itself is fractured and abnormal.

Nevertheless, one must be careful not to major in minors, as has occurred in certain modern art that dwells on a pessimistic analysis of contemporary man. This position is unbiblical (e.g., John 3:16; 14:1-3). Rather, the aesthetic message must resolve toward the dominant Christian theme, because there is ultimately an optimistic answer. This major theme maintains that there is an infinite, personal God whose character of love is the law of the universe. It also asserts that life is meaningful and purposeful because man was created in God's image. Finally, while recognizing that man is lost, it affirms that he can also be redeemed and restored through Jesus Christ.

We turn now to artistic style. As one converses with believers, it soon becomes apparent that many Christians reject contemporary art forms, not because they are contrary to their worldview, but because they feel threatened by a new medium, jeopardized in some way by a particular style different from that with which they are familiar. Growth and change, however, are characteristics of life. As long as art is an integral part of life, its forms are bound to change across time, place, and culture.

Such modifications in style are not intrinsically evil. Hebrew poetry, for example, hardly ever rhymes. Rather it uses literary devices such as parallelism and alliteration. But does this mean that it is not a viable form of poetry? Certain forms of contemporary music utilize harmonic combinations and sequences that do not appear in music written five hundred years ago. Is this wrong? Or could it be, as with language, that twenty-first century forms and expressions connect more effectively with the postmodern generation. In short, it seems that a Christian must utilize art forms that speak meaningfully to contemporary culture, while

[3]Delineations of the Christian worldview can be found in the following works, among others: B. J. Walsh and J. R. Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), and J. W. Sire, *Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990).

[4]Francis A. Schaeffer has developed this theme quite extensively in his book, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976). This penetrating essay has encouraged many to examine more closely the underlying assumptions in a Christian view of aesthetics.

concurrently contributing to a better understanding of life as seen from the Christian perspective.

Lest someone receive the impression, however, that artistic media are of no great concern, perhaps we should note that artistic style is much like a whetted knife. In the hands of a surgeon, it can save a life, while in the hands of a vicious thug, it can abruptly terminate life. Similarly, while artistic style, in and of itself, is neither good nor evil, we must not be deceived into believing that style is of no real importance.

In any significant work of art, there is always a close link between the medium and the message. In fact, artistic styles often develop as a result of a certain worldview. Furthermore, over time, certain art forms become closely associated in symbolism with particular messages. This implies that one must also consider the real-life linkages of a given style, whether in music, painting, sculpture, literature, or any other art form.

In essence, although the medium of an artistic expression can in a certain sense be considered neutral, it must not be used naively or indiscriminately. Rather, the Christian artist must carefully consider when to adopt a particular style, when to adapt it, or when to reject it altogether and move out in a totally fresh direction. This same thought and care must be undertaken by the Christian consumer of the arts when evaluating aesthetic experiences.

3. Excellence in the Arts Can Be Evaluated

We have already noted that the worldview encapsulated in the message of an artistic production must undergo serious scrutiny. In addition to this propositional content of a work of art, Francis Schaeffer, in his book *Art and the Bible*, has identified three further criteria for evaluating the arts. These normative standards are (1) technical excellence, (2) validity, and (3) the integration of artistic content and vehicle.[5]

In any artistic arena, *technical excellence* is evidenced by the artist's expertise as judged by his peers or by other individuals in sustained contact with the art form. In painting, for example, technical excellence may include the use of color, form, texture, composition, and balance, the handling of lines and perspective, and the unity of the canvas. It may also consider accuracy, imagination, thoroughness, and completeness.

By recognizing technical expertise as an indicator of excellence in any artistic expression, we are able to state that while we cannot agree with a certain artist's perspective on life, nevertheless he or she is a great artist. In other words, we do not consider artwork rubbish simply because we disagree with the artist's worldview. On the other hand, if something immoral or untruthful is stated in great

[5]Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible: Two Essays,* L'Abri Special (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), 39.

art, it can be far more destructive than if expressed in crude art. Hence, the greater the technical excellence of the work of art, the more carefully we ought to critique its worldview.

Validity refers directly to an artist's integrity. It requires that the work of art be frank and honest, with no attempt to deceive. To borrow the sculptor's terminology, it must be *sine cera*—that is, without wax to gloss over imperfections in material or technique. Validity thus requires that the artist be honest with himself and his worldview. If an artist produces his work only with mercenary intent or to secure popularity and praise, he has lost inner integrity. If he makes a work of art merely pandering to a patron—whether the ancient noble, the modern art gallery to which he wants access, or to impress the art critics of the moment—his work does not possess intrinsic validity. He is merely "playing to the audience."

Finally, there must be a *good fit* between content and style, a strong correlation between the medium and the message. This criterion of appropriateness measures the degree to which the artist has suited the vehicle to the subject matter, as well as assessing the suitability of the work of art to a particular time, place, and function. Such an assessment, however, must take into account both the intent and the end result of the artistic expression.

4. The Purpose and Effect of a Work of Art Must Be Carefully Considered

Art can be created for a wide spectrum of intents. A pragmatist might inquire, "Will it be useful?" A sociologist may wonder, "Will it contribute to civilization?" A hedonist may ask, "Will it bring pleasure?" The Christian, however, thinks, "Does this work of art have spiritual significance? Will it help me to know God better? Will it be a blessing to my fellow men?" For the Christian, the arts can consequently fulfill certain expectations.

First of all, art may be produced as *works of beauty*. This is biblical. In the construction of the temple according to God's plan, Solomon "garnished the house with precious stones for beauty" (2 Chr 3:6). As no utilitarian reason is given, it seems that God simply wanted beauty to be evident. In the temple courtyard, there was a "molten sea" supported by twelve statues of oxen, its brim shaped in the form of a lily (2 Chr 4:3-5). Furthermore, there were two free-standing columns in the courtyard (2 Chr 3:16, 17). These columns supported no architectural weight and thus had no pragmatic significance. They were erected only because God said they should be there as objects of beauty. Artworks may thus be legitimate based solely upon their own intrinsic value as creations of beauty.

Of course, art may have *utilitarian functions*, as well. Organ music may be used to quiet a congregation before a religious service. Excerpts from great literature may effectively illustrate a sermon or teach a moral lesson. And light music, which does not demand much intellectual effort to enjoy, may find a valid role in personal relaxation or as background music in a restaurant or shopping

center. The usefulness of the arts for certain pragmatic purposes, however, should not be equated with aesthetic qualities, which may or may not be present. Just as every sentence one speaks should not be construed as an attempt to produce great oratory, so throughout the arts there may be valid expressions that communicate in practical terms but do not necessarily bear the hallmarks of aesthetic expression.

Art can also serve as an *avenue for the imagination.*[6] Some Christians have maintained that all visual art should be strictly representational—a precise depiction of natural phenomena. But according to Scriptural precedent, art does not have to be photographic. Rather, it can be free to incorporate creative, inventive dimensions. According to divine directive, the hem of the priest's garments was to incorporate representations of pomegranates (Exod 28:33). These were to be scarlet, purple, and blue. In nature, pomegranates are in fact red, and one might even stretch the hue a little and say that they can be purple. But natural pomegranates are never blue. The implication is that there is freedom to be imaginative, and this is acceptable to God.

Finally, a work of art may be created as an *element of worship.* This is holy ground, however, and we must tread carefully. Initially, there seems to be a paradox, at least in terms of the visual arts. The same God who prohibited from Mt. Sinai the creation of "any graven image" (Exod 20:4-5) also commanded Moses to fashion a tabernacle that would incorporate many forms of representational art. The candlestick, for example, included representations of flowers and fruit, while embroidered on the curtains and sculpted on the ark of the testimony were the representations of angelic beings (Exod 25:18-20,31-33; 26:1,31).

This apparent inconsistency is resolved, however, when one reads the affirmation of the commandment given in Lev 26:1. Here it is clarified that the problem is not in the representative quality of the art, but in the use of the work of art as an object of worship. This concept is supported by the words of Christ Himself, who used a representational work of art—the brazen serpent (John 3:14-15)—as a symbol of His crucifixion. This bronze sculpture was originally created by Moses under God's express command (Num 21:8). Many years later, however, King Hezekiah destroyed it (2 Kgs 18:4), not because it was representational, but because people had made it into an idol and were worshiping it.

Today, although we may not bow down and worship works of art in the same manner, perhaps we need to more closely consider our cult of homage rendered to the artist—the producer or performer of the art form. Only God is worthy of worship. While art may occupy a legitimate role as a component of worship and

[6]Leland Ryken discusses in some depth the Christian view of the imagination in his essay "The Creative Arts," in *The Making of a Christian Mind: A Christian World View and the Academic Enterprise*, ed. Arthur Holmes (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 105-31.

serve as a doxology in itself, it should never seek to occupy the place of God. In essence, while art may supplement the worship of God, it must never supplant it.

In addition to its intended purpose, the final effect of an artistic expression must also be considered. As Scripture reminds us, "A good tree always yields good fruit, and a poor tree bad fruit. . . . You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt 7:17,20 NEB). The results of an art form may be observed, either directly (e.g., its hypnotic effect) or via its associations (e.g., with the bar or brothel). Such conditions merit most careful consideration. For the Christian, the final test is the effect of the artwork on one's spiritual life. Art which helps us to be better persons—more committed to God's plan for our lives, more attuned to the needs of those around us, more desirous of doing all things to the glory of God—is art that is fitting for the Christian.

5. Artistic Expression Should Always Convey an Uplifting Spiritual Message, but It Need Not Be Religious

Religion is a vital dimension of a Christian's life. It centers on God's work of salvation and man's response to this marvelous gift. Through special encounters, it seeks to cultivate a vibrant personal relationship between man and God. Christianity, however, goes beyond the religious experience and seeks to view all aspects of one's life from a spiritual perspective, following the directives of the Holy Spirit in all facets of life (1 Cor 10:31; 2 Cor 10:5; Col 3:17).

How does this understanding relate to the arts? First, artistic expression may focus on religious themes, and this is proper. One should recognize, however, that religious subject matter is no assurance that a work of art transmits a Christian worldview. On the other hand, it appears that non-religious dimensions of life also constitute appropriate themes for the Christian artist, provided that the totality of life is viewed from a Spirit-filled perspective.

Let us consider the literary arts as a case in point. The Bible, as the written Word of God, not only contains religious poetry, but also non-religious verse. Take, for instance, the ode written by David in praise of Saul and Jonathan as national heroes (2 Sam 1:19-27). Another striking example is the Song of Solomon. While this poem has at times been interpreted as a description of the love of Christ for His church, it is fundamentally a beautiful antiphonal expression of the love between a man and woman—a romantic literary piece placed by God in the Bible. In the arena of dramatic prose, the book of Esther can be considered one of the great masterpieces of all time, yet it never so much as mentions the name of God. Nevertheless, it powerfully portrays significant spiritual themes. If even the Bible can contain non-religious literary works, it stands to reason that non-religious artistic expressions are fitting for the Christian, provided that they transmit spiritual values and elucidate the Christian worldview.

Educational Issues

Having proposed a basic set of Scriptural principles in the aesthetic field of the arts, we now turn to a number of aesthetic issues within Christian education itself.

1. The Issue of an Attractive Learning Environment

When God created Adam and Eve, He placed them in a garden (Gen 2:8-15). It was a beautiful setting where God made "to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (v. 9). There was also a branch of the river in Eden, Pison, which encircled the land of Havilah "where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; there is also bdellium and the onyx stone" (v. 11). These first human beings were not only to enjoy their aesthetic surroundings, they were commissioned to make the garden even more beautiful. "And the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (v. 15). This garden was man's first school.

Historically, the place of learning was set amid natural beauty.[7] The word *academy* refers to the grove of trees planted in ancient Athens in honor of Academus. Here Plato and Socrates met with other inquisitive minds in the cool shade of an olive tree to discuss the nature of man, truth, and reality. Today, we refer to the academic grounds as a *campus*, which signifies a field with scattered trees, in essence, a landscape. Unfortunately, many of our contemporary learning environments are far removed from any resemblance of aesthetic beauty. Drab buildings, dingy offices, dull utilitarian classrooms, monotonous surroundings, and concrete-slab play areas coalesce into a dry, dreary learning experience.

If we wish, however, to develop in our students a love for the beautiful, an appreciation of the aesthetic, then we must transform our schools into places of delight. We must create havens of beauty. This, of course, cannot happen without planning and an investment of time, effort, and resources. The master plan for the school must consciously seek to incorporate aesthetic elements—a distinctive architectural theme for the various buildings, horticultural and artistic landscape elements, asymmetrical clustering (rather than rigid symmetry), variation of straight and curved lines, courtyards, and open expanses of green, to mention just a few of the aesthetic possibilities.

In the case of existing facilities, it would be well for the academic community to embark on a continuous program of beautification. Faculty and students should be jointly involved in the project. This is particularly important for the students, for not only will they be engaging in active learning, but they will also seek to preserve that which they have worked to beautify. One such project, which has

[7]Larry W. Boughman, "Campus Beautification: A Factor in the Integration of Faith and Learning," in *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integration of Faith and Learning*, vol. 14, comp. Humberto M. Rasi (Silver Spring, MD: Institute for Christian Teaching, 1994), 39-58.

become an aesthetic epicenter in a number of schools, is to create a prayer garden—a place of meditation that blends the color and fragrance of flowers, the songs of birds, and the sound of running water. Although we have spoken primarily of outdoor beautification, similar projects could be undertaken for classrooms, hallways, and offices, as well as for the cafeteria and student center. In all, a concerted effort should be undertaken to make the school an oasis of beauty, a foretaste of heaven.

2. The Issue of the Arts in the Curriculum

Leading citizens and even certain educators have questioned the place of the arts in the academic program.[8] The reasons given usually derive from the view that the arts are mere frills—frivolous and irrelevant to serious learning. Furthermore, with the present emphasis on learning outcomes and quality control, the arts are seen as unmanageable, unmeasurable, and unpredictable. Can a convincing argument be made for the inclusion of the arts in the educational experience? Perhaps one must ask even more basic questions: How do encounters with the arts influence student learning? And conversely, how does the exclusion of the arts from school affect students?

As one converses with students, teachers, and parents, it appears that the aesthetic experiences gained through the arts yield important benefits.[9] The student is encouraged to develop creativity, imagination, reflection, and self-expression. Through a personal engagement with the arts, learners observe with greater sensitivity, recapture lost spontaneity, and resist the tyranny of the technical. Breaking through frames of routine, presupposition, and convention, they lurch out of the familiar—hearing new frequencies, perceiving new perspectives, finding new voices, and experiencing a sudden sense of new possibilities and new beginnings.

The arts speak to the emotions, the intellect, and the spirit. They bring out the learner's inner life. Furthermore, with the demise of the monolithic perspective of intelligence and a better understanding of its multifaceted nature, it seems that students whose intelligences lie in the arts may find an avenue for nurturing their strengths and developing their talents. In essence, the rationale for inclusion of the arts in the curriculum seems educationally sound and is congruent with the Christian concepts of individual freedom, creative expression, and the cultivation of a love of beauty.

[8]A prime example can be seen in the Goals 2000 legislation passed by the United States Congress in 1994.

[9]Maxine Greene, "Art and Imagination: Overcoming a Desperate Stasis," in *Contemporary Issues in Curriculum*, ed. A. C. Ornstein and L. S. Behar-Horenstein (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 45-51.

3. The Issue of Culture

In his book *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr identifies a number of ways in which Christianity and culture can relate.[10] In the "Christ *of* culture" position, the Christian views culture as inherently good and thus accepts unquestioningly whatever is found within culture. In the stance of "Christ *above* culture," Christianity is held to be superior to culture, but the two can quite comfortably coexist because culture is seen as basically neutral. The "Christ *against* culture" position maintains that culture is inherently evil, the domain of Satan. Consequently the Christian must reject culture, seeking to separate and insulate himself from its immoral influence.

Niebuhr advocates that the biblical approach to culture is not found in any of these attitudes. Culture, as a battlefield of the great controversy, contains both good and evil elements. Consequently, the Christian must carefully evaluate any culture from a biblical basis. He is to affirm those cultural components that are in harmony with God's character and His plan, while seeking to redirect those conditions that run counter to the divine standard. In this "Christ *transforms* culture" perspective, the world is viewed as fallen, yet redeemable by God's grace. Evil is opposed, but human culture itself is affirmed.

This is a particularly pertinent matter for Christian education. A prime goal of education is to help students value their cultural heritage and prepare them to successfully interact with the larger society.[11] Unfortunately, Christian schools have often unwittingly led students to either accept culture uncritically or to mindlessly reject culture altogether. This matter is especially crucial when one considers the aesthetic dimension of education, which by its very nature tends to be inseparably bound with cultural norms. The arts, for example, almost invariably incorporate cultural symbols, subjects, and styles. In the Christian worldview, all of culture, including the arts, is to be under the lordship of Christ.

How then should we approach culture when studying the arts? First of all, we should help students understand that interpersonal relationships, including human society and culture, were established by God as a part of the divine plan for this world. Nevertheless, as this world plunged into the conflict between good and evil, elements of culture were distorted and have been subverted for ungodly objectives. Thus the initial task for the Christian is to carefully assess culture according to the Christian worldview. The foremost direction of change must be away from evil and toward that which is good, that which is in harmony with God's character and revealed will.

[10]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 1st Harper Colophon ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 40-45.

[11]J. A. Banks, "The Social Construction of Difference and the Quest for Educational Equality," in *Education in a New Era*, ed. R. S. Brandt (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2000), 21-41.

There is a second important dimension of development, however, and this involves a progression from low to high culture, from mass preference to a more refined taste.[12] Popular culture exists primarily to serve the social and psychological needs of the masses. Its art forms are often sentimental, filled with clichés, and they depict the obvious. Hence, these expressions do not require significant thought; lacking the intellectual dimension, they fall short of a true aesthetic experience. This is not to say that the forms of popular culture are necessarily evil, but rather that they frequently lack aesthetic maturity. Paul observed, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Cor 13:11 NIV). A goal of education is to help students to develop and mature, both intellectually and socially. Consequently, we must nurture our students in their growth from that which is merely good toward that which is better.

Having encouraged cultural maturation, we should, however, hasten to add that not everything considered to be high culture is acceptable for the Christian. Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," for example, depicts the orgies of a pagan festival that culminates in human sacrifice. In literature, Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" graphically portrays human torture in dark, gripping detail. The Christian's imperative is to move away from the evil in culture and affirm that which is good. Within that which is good, however, there should also be growth toward cultural refinement.

4. The Issue of the Sacred and the Common

As we have noted, all aspects of life must be viewed from a spiritual perspective. While the Christian worldview is thus holistic, there does seem to be strong scriptural support for differentiating between the sacred and the common. By "sacred," we mean that which especially belongs to God—either because of His direct presence, His express command, or because it has been specifically dedicated to God.

At the burning bush; Moses was commanded by God to remove his sandals, "for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exod 3:5 NIV). It is apparent that Moses commonly wore sandals, and this was not contrary to God's plan (Exod 12:11). However, at Mount Horeb, Moses was standing on "holy ground" and he must, by actions signifying reverence, distinguish between the sacred and the common. A few years later, Aaron's inebriated sons, Nadab and Abihu, failed to make this differentiation. These young men presumed to use common fire for a sacred purpose, and suffered swift and fatal consequences (Lev 10:1-2).

[12]Morris Taylor has developed this concept more fully in his essay "Choosing Music in a Christian College," *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integration of Faith and Learning*, vol. 1, comp. Humberto M. Rasi (Silver Spring, MD: Institute for Christian Teaching, 1991), 285-306.

Similarly, Uzza, the son of Abinadab of the tribe of Judah, perished when he reached out and touched the sacred ark (1 Chr 13:9-10). The Kohathites of the tribe of Levi were the only ones expressly commanded to carry the ark. "The sons of Kohath shall come to bear it: but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die" (Num 4:15). On the sides of the ark were rings, and gold-gilded staves were to be inserted through these rings in order to carry the ark on the shoulders of the Kohathites. In Uzza's case, divine commands regarding the sacred were ignored.

Even the kings of Israel were not exempt from this divine demarcation. Saul offered a burnt sacrifice at Gilgal and, although the circumstances seemed to personally justify his actions, he received God's disapproval and lost his kingdom (1 Sam 13:9-14). Likewise, King Uzziah arrogantly entered the temple and attempted to officiate as a priest. Terminal leprosy was the tragic consequence (2 Chr 26:16-21).

In the NT (Acts 5:1-11), Ananias and his wife Sapphira made a covenant to dedicate to God the proceeds from the sale of a piece of property. Possibly it was sold for a higher price than they had expected, or perhaps they had a change of heart. In any case, they agreed to present only a part of the proceeds but represent it as the entire amount. They had disregarded the word of God that enjoins, "Pay thy vows unto the Most High" (Ps 50:14), and further admonishes, "It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows" (Prov 20:25 NIV).

What are the implications for Christian education? First of all, we must help our students to realize the difference between the sacred and the common. This is particularly important in aesthetic realms such as the arts. Second, the students must come to understand that as Christians we must be very careful not to mix the sacred and the common in our worship of God. This might occur, for example, in an attempt to blend sacred lyrics with a musical style strongly associated with that which is common.

Students should also be led to recognize that not everything that we presume to dedicate to God is good and acceptable to God. This is especially the case when a divine principle or directive is disregarded. Cain, for example, consulted personal preference and taste, and, rationalizing, ventured to offer to God a form of worship that was at variance with God's instruction. Consequently, his offering could not be accepted (Gen 4:3-7).

Finally, students should be encouraged to experience in their lives both the sacred and the common, within the parameters of God's will. To cloister one's life away in an ascetic cocoon, avoiding all contact with the common affairs of life, is to ignore the divine invitation to become "the salt of the earth" (Matt 5:13). Conversely, to limit one's life only to that which is common deprives one of experiencing the fullness of joy and the abundant life that results from a personal encounter with God.

Conclusion

Together we have examined certain core concepts in aesthetics and have attempted to formulate a Christian perspective regarding the aesthetic experiences in our lives. We have looked closely at the arena of the arts in an attempt to delineate Scriptural principles for aesthetic production and evaluation. Finally, we have explored certain key aesthetic issues, especially as these relate to Christian education.

Perhaps some concluding thoughts are pertinent. From our journey through the aesthetic landscape, it seems quite clear that aesthetics is not an isolated element of life. Rather, it must be congruent with a Christian understanding of God and man, of truth and reality, of origin and destiny, of principles and values. It also appears evident that while he or she remains actively involved *in* the world, the Christian must avoid anything which is *of* the world, anything which makes the transitory pleasures of this world more attractive than the enduring joy of a life with Christ.

Aesthetic experiences are life changing. Consequently, aesthetic domains, particularly the arts, have become focal points of the great controversy between good and evil, between Christ and Satan. "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph 6:12-13 NEB). As Christians, we must thus think deeply and spiritually. We must observe carefully and discriminate wisely. We must make our choices and live our lives to the glory of God.

In the final analysis, it seems that the Christian's life must be an expression of joy and beauty in the midst of a dark, despairing world. Perhaps the Christian life itself should be our supreme work of art, our greatest aesthetic masterpiece.