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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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The Christian and the Arts

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Introduction

Is there a legitimate place for the appreciation of art and beauty in our lives? What is the relationship of culture to our spiritual life? Are not art and the development of aesthetic tastes really a waste of time in the light of eternity? These are questions Christians often ask about the fine arts.

Unfortunately, the answers we often hear to such questions imply that Christianity can function quite nicely without an aesthetic dimension. At the heart of this mentality is Tertullian's (A.D. 160--220) classic statement, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? The Academy with the Church? We have no need for curiosity since Jesus Christ, nor inquiry since the evangel."

This bold assertion has led many to argue that the spiritual life is essential, but the cultural inconsequential. And today much of the Christian community seems inclined to approach aesthetics in the same hurried and superficial manner as we live most of our lives. This attitude was vividly expressed in a cartoon portraying an American rushing into the Louvre in Paris. The caption read, "Where's the Mona Lisa? I'm double parked!"

I. Art and Aesthetics

What is aesthetics? Let us begin with a definition. Aesthetics is "the philosophy of beauty and art. It studies the nature of beauty and laws governing its expression, as in the fine arts, as well as principles of art criticism." { 1 } Formally, aesthetics is thus included in the study of philosophy. Ethical considerations to determine "good" and "bad" include the aesthetic dimension.

Thus, beauty can be contemplated, defined, and understood for itself. This critical process results in explaining why some artists, authors, and composers are great, some merely good, and others not worthwhile.

Aesthetics therefore "aims to solve the problem of beauty on a universal basis. If

successful, it would presently furnish us with an explanation of the quality common to Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance paintings, and all good art from whatever place or time." {2}

At the heart of aesthetics, then, is *human creativity* and its diverse cultural expressions. H. Richard Neibuhr has defined it as "the work of men's minds and hands." {3} While nature (as God's gift) provides the raw materials for human expression, culture is that which man produces in his earthly setting.

It includes the totality and the life pattern--language, religion, literature (if any), machines and inventions, arts and crafts, architecture and decor, dress, laws, customs, marriage and family structures, government and institutions, plus the peculiar and characteristic ways of thinking and acting. {4}

Aesthetic taste is interwoven all through the cultural fabric of a society and thus cannot be ignored. It is therefore inescapable--for society and for the individual. Human creativity will inevitably express itself and the results (works of art) will tell us something about its creators and the society from which they came. "Through art, we can know another's view of the universe." {5}

As such, works of art are often more accurate than any other indication about the state of affairs at some remote but crucial juncture in the progress of humanity. . . By studying the visual arts from any society, we can usually tell what the people lived for and for what they might be willing to die. {6}

The term "art" can mean many different things. In the broadest sense, everything created by man is art and everything else is nature, created by God. However, art usually denotes *good* and *beautiful* things created by mankind (Note: A major point of debate in the field of aesthetics centers around the definition of these two terms). Even crafts and skills, such as carpentry or metal working have been considered by many as "arts."

While the works of artisans of earlier eras have come to be viewed like fine art, the term "the arts," however, has a narrower focus in this outline. We are here particularly concerned with those activities of mankind which are motivated by the creative urge, which go beyond immediate material usefulness in their purpose, and which express the uniqueness of being human. This more limited use of the term "art" includes music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, drama and literature. The "fine arts" is the study of those human activities and acts which produce and are considered works of art.

Aesthetics then is the study of human responses to things considered beautiful and meaningful. The arts is the study of human actions which attempt to arouse an aesthetic experience in others. A sunset over the mountains may evoke aesthetic response, but it is not considered a piece of art, because it is nature. A row of telephone poles with connecting power lines may have a beautiful appearance, but they are not art because they were not created with an artistic purpose in mind. It must be noted, however, that even those things originally

made for non-artistic purposes can and have later come to be viewed as art objects (i.e., antiques).

While art may have the secondary result of earning a living for the artist, it always has the primary purpose of creative expression for describable and indescribable human experiences and urges. The artist's purpose is to create a special kind of honesty and openness which springs from the soul and is hopefully understood by others in their inner being.

2. Aesthetics and the Bible

What does the Bible have to say about the arts? Happily, the Bible does not call upon Christians to stultify or look down upon the arts. In fact, the arts are *imperative* when considered from the biblical perspective. At the heart of this is the general mandate that whatever we do should be done to the glory of God. We are to offer Him the best that we have--intellectually, artistically, and spiritually.

Further, at the very center of Christianity stands the *Incarnation* ("the Word made flesh"), an event which identified God with the physical world and gave dignity to it. A real man died on a real cross and was laid in a real, rock-hard tomb. The Greek ideas of "other- worldly-ness" that fostered a tainted and debased view of nature (and hence aesthetics) find no place in biblical Christianity. The dichotomy between sacred and secular is thus an alien one to biblical faith. Paul's statement, "Unto the pure, all things are pure" (Titus 1:15) includes the arts. While we may recognize that human creativity, like all other gifts bestowed upon us by God, may be misused, there is nothing inherently or more sinful about the arts than other areas of human activity.

A. *The Old Testament*

The Old Testament is rich with examples which confirm the aesthetic dimension. In Exodus 20:4--5 and Leviticus 26:1, God makes it clear that He does not forbid the *making* of art, only the *worshipping* of art. Consider the use of these vehicles of artistic expression found throughout:

1. *Architecture*. God is concerned with architecture. In fact, Exodus 25 shows that God commanded beautiful architecture, along with other forms of art (metalwork, clothing design, tapestry, etc.) in the building of the tabernacle. Similar instructions were given for the temple later constructed by King Solomon. Here we find something unique in history--art works designed and conceived by the infinite God, then transmitted to and executed by His human apprentices!

Apparently He delights in color, texture, and form. (We also see this vividly displayed in nature). The point is that God did not instruct men to build a purely *utilitarian* place where His chosen people could worship Him. As Francis Schaeffer said, "God simply wanted beauty in the temple. God is interested in beauty." {7} And in Exodus 31, God even names the artists He wants to create this beauty, *commissioning* them to their craft for His glory.

2. *Poetry* is another evidence of God's love for beauty. A large portion of the Old Testament is poetry, and since God inspired the very words of Scripture, it logically follows that He inspired the poetical form in such passages. David, the man after God's own heart, composed many poems of praise to God, while under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Among the most prominent poetical books are: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Poetry is also a significant element in the Prophets and Job.

The genre of poetry varies with each author's intent. For example, the Song of Solomon is first and foremost a love poem picturing the beauty and glory of romantic, human love between a man and his mate. It is written in the form of a lyric idyll, a popular literary device in the Ancient Near East. The fact that this story is often interpreted symbolically to reflect the love between Christ and His Church, or Jehovah and Israel, does not weaken the celebration of physical love recorded in the poem, nor destroy its literary form.

3. *Drama* was also used in scripture at God's command. The Lord told Ezekiel to get a brick and draw a representation of Jerusalem on it. Ezekiel "acted out" a siege of the city as a warning to the people. He had to prophesy against the house of Israel while lying on his left side. This went on for 390 days. Then he had to lie on his right side, and he carried out this drama by the express command of God to teach the people a lesson (Ezek. 4:1--6). The dramatic element is vivid in much of Christ's ministry as well. Cursing the fig tree, writing in the dirt with His finger, washing the feet of the disciples are dramatic actions which enhanced His spoken word.
4. *Music and dance* are often found in the Bible in the context of rejoicing before God. In Exodus 15, the children of Israel celebrated God's Red Sea victory over the Egyptians with singing, dancing, and the playing of instruments. In 1 Chronicles 23:5, we find musicians in the temple, their instruments *specifically made* by King David for praising God. In 2 Chronicles 29:25--26 we read that David's command to have music in the temple was from God, "for the command was from the Lord through His prophets." And we must not forget that all of the lyrical poetry of the Psalms was first intended to be sung.

2. *The New Testament*

The New Testament abounds as well with evidence underscoring artistic imperatives. The most obvious is the example of *Jesus Himself*. First of all, He was by trade a carpenter, a skilled craftsman (Mark 6:3). Secondly, we encounter in Jesus a person who loved to be outdoors and one who was extremely attentive to His surroundings. His teachings are full of examples which reveal His sensitivity to the beauty all around: the fox, the bird nest, the lily, the sparrow and dove, the glowering skies, a bruised reed, a vine, a mustard seed. Jesus was also a master story-teller. He readily made use of

his own cultural setting to impart his message, and sometimes quite dramatically. Many of the parables were fictional stories, but they were nevertheless used as vehicles of communication to teach spiritual truths. And certainly the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 includes the artistic gifts.

The apostle *Paul* also alludes to aesthetics in Philippians 4:8 when he exhorts believers to meditate and reflect upon pure, honest, lovely, good, virtuous and praiseworthy things. We are further told in Revelation 15:2--3 that art forms will even be present in heaven. So the arts have a place in both the earthly and heavenly spheres!

We should also remember that the *entire Bible* is not only revelation, it also is itself a work of art. In fact, it is many works of art--a veritable *library of great literature*. We have already mentioned poetry, but the Bible includes other literary forms as well. For example, large portions of it are narrative in style. Most of the Old Testament is either *historical narrative* or *prophetic narrative*. And the gospels, (which recount the birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ), are *biographical narrative*. Even the personal letters of Paul and the other New Testament authors can quite properly be considered *epistolary* literature.

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