



Christianity And The Arts

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Talk Outline

"Why, if you are interested in the country only for the sake of painting it, you'll never learn to see the country." "But that's just how a real artist *is* interested in the country." "No, You're forgetting," said the Spirit. "That was not how you began. Light itself was your first love: you loved paint only as a means of telling about light." "Oh, that was ages ago," said the Ghost. "One grows out of that. Of course, you haven't seen my later works. One becomes more and more interested in paint for its own sake." "One does, indeed. I also have had to recover from that. It was all a snare. Ink and catgut and paint were necessary down there, but they are also dangerous stimulants. Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from love of the thing he tells, to love of the telling till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they say about Him. For it doesn't stop at being interested in paint, you know. They sink lower – become interested in their own personalities and then in nothing but their own reputations." C. S. Lewis. *The Great Divorce* (78-79)

I. Foundational concerns to clarify the discussion

A.

This seminar approaches the arts as a means of communication. And communication is about ideas and ideas have consequences. Let me say that my field is philosophy so we will consider the philosophy of art as that is where I am most qualified to speak. We will look at Architecture, Literature, Art, Music and Film. The last three categories will undoubtedly draw more attention because they tend to generate the most sustained controversies, especially among

Christians.

B.

Our beliefs serve as both creators and critics of the arts as we are either delivering a message or being influenced by a message.

1. Whereas art is a means of communication, consider two things:

a) The medium should fit the message. There is a relationship between the medium and the message, and to varying degrees, each affects the other.

(1) What is the appropriate medium for the message?

(2) Example: preaching instead of a play or skit

b) Possibilities within the medium must be considered. Example: If art is the primary medium, then maybe water colors as opposed to oils

C. Christians are commanded to:

1. Bring every thought into captivity (II Cor. 10:5)

2. To renew the mind (Ro. 12:1-2; II Cor. 3:18)

3. We are told to be godly, to think godly. This means to see the world as God sees it.

4. Attention must be given to:

a) Interpreting art in light of the worldview expressed

b) Discerning what falls within the boundaries of acceptable expression through the arts

c) Judging what is within the boundaries in terms of using the arts as an expression of the Christian worldview.

d) Discerning proper use of the arts in Christian worship

e) Discerning how different art forms may be used in different contexts (worship vs. evangelism).

f) Knowing the difference between an opinion of preference and a judgment of belief in the discussion of the arts

The Question Box

I. What is meant by the statement “there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular.”

- A. Do we mean that Christ is Lord of all?
- B. Do we mean that everything secular has some theological value?
- C. Do we mean that everything secular can be used for Truth?
- D. Do we mean that it all has its source in God?

II. Christianity and the Arts

A. The arts and culture in general

1. The importance of the arts to culture in general – Plato thought that the arts were means of promoting the good, the moral, the beautiful and the state was improved by such.[1]

2. The physiological aesthetic factor where the primary goal of the artist is to create a particular emotional response

- a) The focus is on the response of the viewer/hearer
- b) This very often leads to poor art

B. Architecture

1. “Christians throughout history, therefore, have wisely paid attention to the erection of structures that would convey a particular message to the community”[2]

2. Example: During Middle Ages Christianity influenced architecture

3. Architecture as other art forms reveal commitments to ideas and values.

4. Buildings, when intentionally designed for church use, can say something about our worldview. Consider the architecture of a recent Catholic Cathedral built in Los Angeles (at a price of \$165 million) which was finished this September (2002). Architecture critic, Michael Rose writes of this postmodern architecture, “The cathedral is devoid of any sign value both in its form and in its details. It

signifies nothing beyond itself. ... in a word, no sense of transcendence.”[3]

The Question Box

I. How might architecture be used apologetically by Christians?

II. What concerns might be in order when a congregation thinks about building a church building with limited funds?

C. Literature

1. Literature requires imagination both in the writing and reading: “The art of reading, in short, includes all the same skills that are involved in the art of unaided discovery: keenness of observation, readily available memory, range of imagination, and, of course, an intellect trained in analysis and reflection.”[4]

2. Literature can be:

a) Overtly Christian

(1) C. S. Lewis – *Mere Christianity*

(a) Benefits

(b) Concerns

b) Tacitly Christian

(1) Tolstoy’s *Confessions*

(a) Benefits

(b) Concerns

c) Non-Christian

(1) Voltaire – *Candide*

(a) Benefits

(b) Concerns

3. Literary Genre may include:

a) Fantasy

(1) C. S. Lewis – *Chronicles of Narnia*

(a) Benefits

(b) Concerns

b) Historical fiction

(1) Alexander Solzhenitsyn – *The First Circle*

(a) Benefits

(b) Concerns

c) Fiction

(1) Jan Karon – *Mitford Series*

(a) Benefits

(b) Concerns

The Question Box

I. How might a Christian use literature in apologetics?

II. How might a Christian produce literature that presents a Christian worldview?

III. What about the physiological aesthetic factor?

IV. What about literature for shock value?

D. Art

1. "Art, like morality, consists of drawing the line somewhere." (G. K. Chesterton)

2. "Painting is just another way of keeping a diary." (Pablo Picasso)

3. Art is an essential element in any definition of culture. In each society the arts not only help define and contribute to culture, they are the means through which culture uniquely shares something of itself – its values, ideals, and philosophies. One might say that the arts are the window to the soul of culture and/or to the soul of the individual artist. That is, to a lesser or greater degree, depending on the artist, the arts either express the prevailing worldview of the culture, or a variant worldview of the artist.

4. Furthermore, and most importantly, one must recognize that humanness is essential to the existence of art. Art, by definition, entails the idea of both imagination and purposeful creation.

5. A Christian approach to art:

a) Rookmaaker says, "Here I must say emphatically: art must never be used to show the validity of Christianity [later he qualifies and says that it is not its primary function, 230]. Rather the validity of art should be shown through Christianity. ... what is Christian in art does not lie in the theme, but in the spirit of it, in its wisdom and understanding of reality it reflects. Just as being a Christian does not mean going around singing hallelujah all day, but showing the renewal of one's life by Christ through true creativity, so a Christian painting is not one in which all figures have haloes and (if we put our ears to the canvas) can be heard singing hallelujahs." [5]

6. Definition of Art

a) Rookmaaker suggests, "Art is a complex structure, it exists in its realization in concrete works of reality, a being, a meaning, composed of these elements, and even if it can exist without some of these elements, and sometimes does, yet it is more often than not poorer without them." [6]

b) However, it is not necessary to have an exact definition of art because it is not what something is called that makes it acceptable to or permissible for Christians. There is no principle that if something is called "art" it must necessarily have a privileged place in culture. It is not calling something art that legitimizes it in the eyes of the Christian, but rather if it conforms to ideas of truth and reality. We are not making a judgment based upon one's definition of art, but on other grounds in terms of acceptance. Too often Christians argue that because something is called art it should automatically be received or accepted.

7. Historically, art begins with the notion of Imitation, then Representationalism, Neo-Representationalism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Surrealism.

a) Willam Dyrness points out that even by the late 19th century there was a "thinning out of that reality, a gradual elimination of depth and ground of reality – since these images were no longer 'symbolic' of any larger dimension of reality. This did not happen immediately, not all at once." [7]

b) This is precisely the point of what happens with the loss of the universal (transcendent). Any form of art that promotes the particular without the universal fails as Christian art.

8. It leaves man as only a particular which is counter-intuitive to life

a) Van Gogh failed as a missionary/preacher

(1) Looking for that which leads to God

b) Fontana slits his canvas to show the void beyond and called it the *End of God*

(1) ultimately commits suicide

c) Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* – the world passing the time in the absence of meaning

d) We cannot live without meaning; either we attempt to craft meaning from particulars or find it in God. The problem with the particulars is that they are always so meaningless in the end (Nietzsche)

9. Suzi Gablik has pointed to the problem of both modernism and postmodernism

a) "Once art no longer lays claim to the dignity of the absolute, it loses its charismatic 'meaning-giving' function. Subsequently, she worried that Postmodernism, for all its openness, was empty at the center; it had no integrative vision. For her part, she wanted to reconnect art with its visionary function of healing and integration." [8]

10. There have been many varied reactions to postmodernism and other 20th century philosophical ideologies. I would, however, suggest that if the artist is right in his/her portrayal of the loss of the universal/transcendent, then what it really means is the death of man – humanness. Therefore, we must not curse the messenger, but we should pay heed to the message – not as a matter of like or dislike, but in terms of truth and reality and the direction it points humanity.

The Question Box

I. Can the form of a medium that has been shaped by pop culture, be redeemed and baptized

as a vehicle for the Christian message?

II. What about overtly Christian art? (Kinkade)

III. What about pop art within Christian context?

A. Shirts, coffee cups, trinkets of all sorts, billboards, signs at athletic events.

IV. What about Christian *kitsch* (Ger. Gaudy trash) art, writing, etc, of pretentious but shallow kind, calculated to have popular appeal?

V. What about the physiological aesthetic factor?

VI. What about art for shock value?

E. Music

1. "Music is a discipline, and a mistress of order and good manners, she makes the people milder and gentler, more moral and more reasonable." Martin Luther

2. The performing arts have a dimension the others do not, namely the performer. The performer can detract from the message because he/she becomes a part of the form.

a) The performer becomes part of the medium

3. Augustine "However when I recall the tears which I shed at the song of the Church in the first days of my recovered faith, and even now as I am moved not by the song but by the things which are sung, when sung with fluent voice and music that is most appropriate, I acknowledge again the great benefit of this practice. Thus, I vacillate between the peril of pleasure and the value of the experience, and I am led more – while advocating not irrevocable position – to endorse the custom of singing in church so that by the pleasure of hearing the weaker soul might be elevated to an attitude of devotion. Yet when it happens to me that the song moves me more than the thing which is sung, I confess that I have sinned blamefully and then prefer not to hear the singer." [9]

4. Thomas Aquinas "[Furthermore] praise originating in the mind is higher than praise from the mouth. But mental praise is impeded by singing [for two reasons]: first, because the singer's intention is distracted from the content of the song, since they are concentrating on the

singing; second, because what they sing is less understandable to others than if it were spoken without song. Therefore, [it seems] songs should not be used in prayer (of praise)." (*Summa Theologica*, II II, q. 91 art. 2, 5). And while he agrees with Augustine, Aquinas says that if someone sings out of devotion, then "likewise for those who hear the singing: even if they sometimes do not understand what is being sung, they nevertheless understand the reason for the singing, namely, the praise of God; and this suffices to excite their devotion." (*Summa Theologica* II II q. 91 art. 2, ad 5)[10]

5. Martin Luther says of music, "It is music alone, according to God's word, that should rightfully be prized as the queen and ruler over every stirring of the human heart. ... What can be more powerful than music to raise the spirits of the sad, to frighten the happy, to make the despondent valiant, to calm those who are enraged, to reconcile those filled with hatred?"[11]

6. John Calvin: "And certainly if singing is tempered to a gravity befitting the presence of God and angels, it both gives dignity and grace to sacred actions, and has a very powerful tendency to stir up the mind to true zeal and ardor in prayer. We must, however, carefully beware, lest our ears be more intent on the music than our minds on the spiritual meaning of the words. Augustine confesses (*Confess. Lib. 10 cap. 33*) that the fear of this danger sometimes made him wish for the introduction of a practice observed by Athanasius, who ordered the reader to use only a gentle inflection of the voice, more akin to recitation than singing. But on again considering how many advantages were derived from singing, he inclined to the other side. If this moderation is used, there cannot be a doubt that the practice is most sacred and salutary. On the other hand, songs composed merely to tickle and delight the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the Church, and cannot but be most displeasing to God."[12]

7. Toward a philosophy of music: See Addendum A

The Question Box

I. Can Christian lyrics be successfully attached to pop cultural forms of music?

II. How does the performer influence the message and should the Christian be concerned?

III. If volume enhancement is used to enable everybody to hear, what is the purpose of increasing the volume beyond that level?

IV. Should the context determine the type of music, that is, is some music more suited for one thing but not another?

V. What about the physiological aesthetic factor?

VI. What about music for shock value?

F. Film

1. Different purposes of film

a) Educational

b) Entertainment

c) See Cinema Matrix

2. Elements of Film – it is about a story (as painting has elements, so does film)

a) Theme

b) Hero

c) Hero's Goal

d) The Adversary

e) Character Flaw

f) Apparent Defeat

g) Self-Revelation

h) Resolution[13] (redemption — many think that all film has this element)

3. Watching film (theater)

(1) Nothing in film is accidental, it all has a purpose

(2) Importance of the director

b) Film that speaks to a piece of history, like a history book, always reflects the views of the

director.

(1) Consider "Saving Private Ryan"

(2) It is the many saving the one or the one saving the many. Is this a justification for the sacrifice?

c) Elements and Worldview questions

4. The Christian and film watching

a) Avoidance -> Caution -> Dialogue -> Appropriation -> Divine Encounter.[14]

b) How should our theology inform and influence the Christian in viewing film?

The Question Box

I. Do we begin with our theology?

II. Does our theology limit what we watch?

III. Does our theology inform our viewing?

IV. Do we begin with the film?

V. Do we leave our theology at the door until after we have viewed the film so that we can view the film for what it has to say in and of itself?

VI. Does technical/aesthetic value determine what we watch?

VII. If the purpose is education, it may be entertaining, realistic or fantasy in varying degrees. Is there anything that would make this unacceptable to the Christian?

III. General observations and comments

A.

Imitating (mimicking) one's culture to reach that culture and understanding one's culture to reach that culture are two distinct operations.

1. **Imitating** (Mimicking) one's culture involves trying to give a positive thrust to the Christian message to a culturally deaf or indifferent audience by giving Christian content to the world's organization of life. It attempts to attract the world, by using that which is common to the culturally developed person, but it does not challenge the basic assumptions of the world.

2. **Understanding** one's culture involves understanding the questions of culture, how it attempts to answer those questions and using that as a point of contact to introduce the message of God as a message that addresses precisely the questions being asked by culture. It is understanding how the culturally-shaped person thinks and then challenging him at the point his answers fail.

B. The arts as used by Christians

1. Art to promote corporate worship which requires the content to be non-individualistic

a) Here the individual acts as a priest in the leading others in the act of worship

b) This is intended to focus on God and His corporate works among His people

2. Arts in corporate worship. Here the guidelines are (1) edification of the saint, and (2) focus on God.

a) Furthermore, however or whatever art form is used it must not (1) be a distraction (Ex. 20:26); (2) be a substitute; (3) cause confusion for unbelievers especially should they be present; (4) create idols or graven images which draw focus away from God; (5) must not be entertainment.

b) In all times, one must ask the purpose, not just is this permissible, but why is it being done? What does it accomplish in terms of God's directives for the Church in session?

c) Furthermore, it is necessary to remember that when one leads in worship (singing, praying, teaching, Lord's Table) he functions in a priestly fashion---one who leads others in worship. This requires personal cleansing, proper heart attitude (it is possible to begin with the best of intentions, and in the process be swept away by our own emotions). Therefore, one must be deliberate in what he/she does. In corporate worship, the believer is to be edified, not emotionally charge.

d) Is it possible that some abilities (not gifts) are best employed outside the gathering of the people of God. Consider how well-ordered the Levitical system was and not everybody was involved in the leading of worship.

3. Arts to present a Christian World View to the world.

a) Here the individual acts as an evangelist in showing the Christian view of life.

b) Raises questions that can lead to speaking about Christianity

4. Both are legitimate, but require something a little different

a) In the Church there is a context , so certain things are understood.

b) In the world, often there is no context, so one must be careful not to be misunderstood.

C. Consider the arts in the service of the church.

1. Edification

a) Truth declared (Eph. 4:11-16)

b) Gifts exercised

2. Evangelism

a) There is art that is directly evangelistic. It carries with it the clear message of the Gospel.

b) There is the use of the arts to provoke questions

c) Furthermore, whatever we do in the name of evangelism must not conflict with what we would expect of them should they become a saint. That is, if our evangelism method reaches them where they are, would there be anything that would encourage them to move away from those things should they trust Christ or would they think that whereas it was acceptable for evangelism, therefore, it must be acceptable for godliness.

3. Memorial

a) This might be something like a coffee cup with a Scripture verse or a plaque on the wall. Or stained glass windows with a story. It does not need a context because it is for the Christian. This would be true of other art as well, it is an overtly Christian theme, but does not necessarily require

the context, however, it should be good art.

4. In all cases:

a) There must be a context. For example, billboards that make certain statements intended to be amusing, but with a serious message.

b) The artist must know what he/she has as a purpose and then ask if this is the appropriate place or time for this. Are we just displaying our wares, or are we serving Jesus? This goes to intent. Is the artist only seeking to create a predictable emotional response or convey truth.

Addendum A

A proposed statement: A Christian worldview maintains that the existence of music flows from universal sound patterns created by God which are an expression of His character and, as such, is possible because of natural revelation (Is. 44:23; 49:13). As part of God's created order, music is never to be the object of worship (Is. 44:18-23), but rather an aid in and/or means of worship (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and as with all legitimate human activity intentionally focused for God's glory (11 Cor. 10:31). Therefore, any individual arrangement of the sound patterns must be consistent with God's created unity, and employed in a fashion consistent with the character of the Creator. The universal sound patterns provide the form within which man, who is in the image of God, can create diversity in music. The diversity, however, must never compromise the universal forms, which include the notion of harmony and wholeness thus avoiding dissonance and fragmentation. Dissonance may be used as part, but not as a whole of the piece – as in keeping with a Christian worldview there must be resolution. Furthermore, text must present a message consistent with a biblical view of reality and orthodox theology. Also, the intent (either tacit or explicit) of music whether in content, form, style and/or delivery must aim at awakening or encouraging only the best in man's thoughts (Phil. 4:8; Heb. 4:12). The Christian is to bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (11 Cor. 10:5). Furthermore, excessive emotional stimulation that circumvents the renewed mind – which is to inform the will (Ro. 12:1-2) – is contrary to God's created order. Therefore, if the content, form, style or delivery of

any particular musical piece (with or without text) appeals directly and solely to the hearer's emotions in disregard for the cognitive process of judgment it is in defiance of God's created order. In this case, one's response or behavior will flow from the emotions, instead of from renewed mind with a correct understanding and it is primarily with the mind that man loves and glorifies God (Deut. 6:5,6). Understanding music as predicated upon God's natural revelation helps establish a philosophy of music within the context of a Christian worldview.

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Disclaimer Listing, does not imply agreement with content

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