

## Biblical Philosophy of Art (Aesthetics)

Written by Calvin Fox

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There are many books about Art and Aesthetics. This Paper is about only what we can derive directly from the Bible about these topics. Non

-Biblical material and insights may be very helpful, but they are not my concern here.

In fact, by beginning with the Bible, we will analyze and judge the non-Biblical material from its perspective (not the other way around).

Contrary to popular belief, deciding what makes Art truly good is not a matter of personal taste or feelings, nor it is determined by “community standards” and absolutely not by what the Art dealers or Critics say it is.

It is common for Christians who write on this subject to derive standards for good art from Phil. 4:8- “...*whatever is true, ...honorable, ...just, ...pure, ...lovely, ...commendable, (has) excellence, ...worthy of praise ...*”. These are admirable, desirable qualities for anything, but what do they mean exactly? How and by what other

standards are these qualities defined?

Ambiguity undermines this yardstick.

### The Starting Point: God as Artist

A Biblical Aesthetics begins with what we learn from God’s work as an artist. Extrapolating from Genesis 1-2, we have the following basics:

### The Purpose of Art

Being created in the Image of God, it is in every humans being’s DNA to be artistic or creative. Being an artist is part of being human.

Human beings are artists by nature and that faculty must not be separated or treated differently than the faculties for spirituality, rationality, morality and communality.

In fact, a person who is fully human will combine and develop all these faculties together.

In this [he] is like God. Art is any endeavor to shape, form, fashion or create anything (including architecture, furniture and crafts, music, dance, painting and sculpture). The finished work is to

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be judged by whether it glorifies God and gives Him pleasure.

Art will do that if it is good.

This then is the purpose of Art: to be good and thus please God. And to the Christian, this is the ultimate standard for good Art.

This means that Art does not exist for the sake of Art, let alone for mere decoration or as a status symbol or an investment. It is good in itself, but that “goodness” is inseparable from its God-given, God-serving function.

### **Good Art**

Art is good when it is very well done with technical excellence (unity and balance of composition, content, form, materials, etc) and reveals or reflects the nature or character or the work of God. The natural world as He made it reveals or reflects God, so Art is good when it represents that natural world. Art is good when it

benefits human life and does not harm or destroy it.

Such Art is to be valued and enjoyed.

This means that good art is also moral art.

It will have moral or ethical content and purpose. It must also be faithful to reality, not deceptive, misleading or false or phony.

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Biblically speaking, Art which does not accomplish these very basic functions is not good Art. We reject views of Art that deny or reject all of this.

### **Art as Self-expression for God alone**

The Model God gives is Art as a means of self-expression- literally. God's work manifested, revealed, reflected Himself, His Mind and Heart.

An artist today can use [his] work to intentionally reveal himself to himself or to the world.

That would be following God's Model, but doing that is not the highest function of Art.

True Art is definitely not about the irresponsible freedom of the self-absorbed Artist to do whatever [he] wants by whatever means [he] wants, without regard to any meaning or purpose other than that.

On the contrary, the highest function of [his] art work is to set aside [himself] and faithfully represent God.

With the one exception of God, Art is not about the artist.

A Christian artist will gladly agree and lose [himself] in his art work for the sake of God

### **Art as Representation of God**

By representing God, we mean representing His attributes: His triune personality, eternity and spirituality; His omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience; His transcendence and immanence; His love and compassion, His mercy and His wrath. None of these attributes are physical or dimensional and therefore Art that represents them will not be literal, but will need to be abstract or symbolic. Word

s can never capture God nor the attributes of God.

They are far from adequate to express eternal and spiritual realities and mysteries and thus word pictures, figures of speech and symbols or symbolic actions, as well as different kinds of stories including parables, allegories, fantasy and drama are required.

None of these will ever "capture" God either, but they are necessary means to help express truth about Him.

The Bible itself is God's own example of using literary and visual means to communicate to us.

No Art, no matter how well intentioned, can ever be an exact copy or perfect representation of anything about God (or of anything else for that matter). We are talking of revealing what is inner, spiritual and essential, not external and accidental.

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Abstract Art by definition is non-representative, non-figurative, non-objective. Therefore, this type of Art can not reveal or reflect God Himself as it is usually devoid of life and feelings, nor can it represent the work of God or the natural world as He created it.

However, the argument is made that Abstract Art, by using lines and color combinations in an abstract way can capture the inner, intrinsic qualities of its subject better than representative realism.

If so, this kind of Art may serve to communicate particular aspects of the Biblical World View (below).

All attempts at representational realism in Art (including photography) expresses the artist's interpretation of what [he] sees and [his] choices of focus, point of view or perspective and composition, as well as materials, medium, colors, technique and style. Doing this, the artist invariably is revealing something of himself as well as [his] subject.

Therefore, the success of a work of art will always be variable, never perfect, since the measure of good art is the degree to which it is a faithful representation of God alone.

The material, form, style and technique used will change over time and place (or culture). There is no God-given, Biblical form, style and technique for any Art (including music). For the art to be representative in a meaningful way, to effectively communicate what it is "saying", the "language" used must be both faithful to the subject and meaningful to the viewer, listener or reader. The work of art must be interpreted as the artist intended.

Therefore, the "language" used must be intentionally chosen to effectively communicate the meaning of the attribute of God [or Reality] in the artist's mind.

If it does not, it has failed as a work of Art.

We learn from the Genesis creation account, Art work is not instantaneous and simply by command. It is a process whereby order is made from disorder, in which form is given to the formless. This process will begin in the mind and imagination (both) of the would-be artist and executed with intelligence and honed skills. There are rules and norms to follow in the work of creating.

Secondary means will be used. The process will take time and go through much natural modification before achieving the planned purpose and finally pronounced to be "good".

Let it be noted that slapstick, shoddy work is not good Art, nor is ugly, chaotic, undisciplined or

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destructive work good Art.

### Art as Revelation of God

Inasmuch as all which God created reveals truths about Him, His Mind and His character, the primary function of Art is Representation which becomes Revelation. (This is how a Sacrament may be described: a visible or material sign or symbol of something spiritual and which communicates or makes that spiritual reality real for those who receive the sign.) True Art does this. Art is image making. I

t is iconic. It points beyond itself. Whatever the kind of Art (painting, sculpture, drama, literature, music), it is a means through which the attributes of God can be seen or known. God's Art was not representational of anything. Nothing existed for Him to represent.

We know what God

is from the Scripture. Scripture is written revelation, a work of Art made by God.

He is revealed through the words and language, the literature and many literary styles and genres of writing (poetry, historical narrative, Law, prophecy, apocalyptic, parables) found in the Book.

In all of that we find mythological descriptions, metaphorical and poetical language and symbols, as well as fabrics, colors, made objects, and even buildings with their furnishings- all works or art and craftsmanship. In themselves, all these things can ideally (when created Biblically) reveal or communicate something about God.

God is especially "seen" in the person of Jesus, the ultimate work of God's Art in Scripture (the best Art to be found within the Art). Jesus is The Image of God, The Icon, the Representation above all of what God is like. He is the ultimate Sacrament.

Ideally, the artist today will strive to faithfully represent something about God in [his] work.

The observer of that representational art will find it to be revelatory, a glass through which God is made known.

Looking at an artist's work, the observer should be able to see God through it (beyond the words on the page or the icon on the wall or the stained glass picture in the window.)

If that is not possible, the Art is not good.

To achieve this highest function of Art, the artist must know God. Art is not a search for God. It comes out of knowing Him.

This is why the greatest true artists are Biblically grounded Christians.

Their work will be motivated by devotion toward God, inspired and formed by the Spirit of God and conformed to the Truth about God.

### Art as Representation of Reality

It can be argued that all art is the artist's expression of what [he] believes the answers to life's questions to be (or his search for the answers). We must have a sense of how the world works in order for us to work in the world and art expresses what the artist's sense of that is. Art expresses some kind of world view.

The nature, character, will and purposes of God, that He has deigned to make known to human beings, have been revealed in Scripture. (This revelation is true and sufficient, but not exhaustive.)

We must never claim that our

understanding of it is.)

From the Biblical

revelation we learn what is God's answers to are to the World View Questions.

Collectively they describe Reality from God's perspective, Biblical Reality.

The knowledge of this reality is derived mostly from a meta-narrative that extends from cover to cover of the Bible, complete with didactic portions that annotate and explain the Narrative. A major historic principle of interpretation of the Bible is that the didactic portions supersede the narrative.

The latter are interpreted according to the former.

From all of this Biblical Christians extrapolate from the whole Bible, the answers to the 8 Big World View Questions: \*What is Prime Reality (the really real)? \*Who is Man (the nature and purpose of being Human)? \*W

hat happens to Man after death (is there life beyond the one we have here on earth.

\*

Where is it and what is it)?

\*

What is the basis of Morality (how do we determine what truly is just or fair.

\*

How do we judge whose "rights" are right)?

\*

What is Evil and what is the solution to the Problem that Evil is (what is sin and redemption all about)? and finally,

\*

What is the ultimate meaning of life (what does my personal life and the history of all Humankind add up to, what was it all for)?

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Everyone has answers to such questions or is searching for them, consciously or not. The Bible has answers. The Christian is convinced the Biblical World View is the measure of Reality. If true and truly good Art must be faithful to God, it must also must be faithful to this Biblical World View which comes from Him. Being faithful to God's Perspective on Reality is the best way of being faithful to Him.

A Biblically grounded artist will represent the world as it truly is. Put another way, the observer should be able to look at a work of Art (paintings, sculpture, dance, film, music, literature including fiction and poetry, film and theatre, architecture, fashions and accessories) and "see" the world as God says it really is.

This means that the Artist who would fulfill the highest function of Art must be grounded in the Bible's Word View and that must control the content of what he creates.

Biblical art does not have to be overtly "Christian" or evangelistic. But it will be realistic about sin and must make clear that there is such a thing and it has negative, destructive consequences.

It could depict evil, evil doing or evil doers but never gratuitously or in a way that would glorify them. True art could include suffering, pain and death, but always also include forgiveness, mercy and redemption.

It could portray oppression, injustice, poverty and violence, but never with the message that these are acceptable or inevitable.

The Biblical World view teaches that there is Light in the Darkness and the Darkness shall never quench the light.

There is always hope.

Human beings may be portrayed as depraved, but never beyond the pale of mercy or forgiveness.

True Art will never favor, endorse, advocate or provoke violence, greed, materialism, hedonism, atheism, idolatry, false Religions or unscriptural ideologies or any form of immorality or unethical behavior. Such Art is never good art.

This is an outline of Biblical Aesthetics

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