

Christian Worship and the Arts

Personal Reflections on Christian Art

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A recent faculty discussion regarding the need for a new and more adequate pipe organ for our seminary chapel ended with the suggestion that someone write an essay on the use of the arts in Christian worship. This essay is the result of that suggestion. The writer has not done any extensive reading on the subject. Rather, the purpose of this essay is to express some personal reflections which may stimulate more thought and action with regard to the use of the arts among us.

Christian Art and Secular Art

Much of art is an effort to bring material things or sounds or language together in such a way as to express harmony and beauty. Art involves the senses of sight, hearing, possibly also the sense of smell, and at times perhaps even the sense of taste. It involves the intellect, our sense of beauty and harmony. Art also involves, perhaps especially involves, the emotions, such as pleasure, discomfort, peace, regret and the like. Art calls forth responses for which God has equipped human beings by giving us so many and such a variety of senses and abilities. It is with these God-given senses and abilities that we participate in and respond to art.

Christian art, however, has an inner dimension which gives it life and relevance that go beyond anything secular art can capture. Christian art, although it uses the same materials and forms, is really something set apart from secular art.

Christian art is an attempt not only to express or create harmony and beauty; Christian art is above all an attempt to express harmony with the Lord our God and to achieve beauty for the glory of him who created and sustains all things (1 Cor 10:31). Christian art is an attempt to express our response to our Redeemer's atoning love, much as the people of Israel responded in song at the Red Sea after the Lord had rescued them from the threat of Pharaoh's cavalry. Christian art is something we produce by the power of the Holy Spirit, who has brought us to know the living God as our Lord, who is full of grace and truth. Think, for example, of how the Holy Spirit led Simeon to speak the *Nunc Dimittis*. Through Christian art we as penitent, believing creatures can give expression to our restored relationship with our Savior God.

Because the believer's personal relationship to the Lord is a part of it all, Christian art does many things which secular art can never do. Let me mention a few: Christian art teaches about our Savior God. I have a copy of Gruenewald's Crucifixion hanging in my study. There is much that this work of art teaches us about the Savior and our relationship to him. The fact that the crucified Savior is larger than any of the other figures in the picture shows us that he is more than mere man. John the Baptist is in the foreground with his extended finger pointing to the Crucified. John is constantly calling us to repentance and directing us to Jesus. Mary is there. She appears overwhelmed by the brutal punishment her Son is enduring. The Apostle John, in Christian love and in accord with his Master's will, is supporting Mary in his arms. Mary Magdalene kneels before the cross in anguished adoration of the One who is bearing the weight of her sin. By means of this picture the artist speaks eloquently about our Savior and our relationship to him.

For another example of Christian art that teaches, think of Luther's hymn, "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come." It appears that Luther saw in the Christian hymn a means to teach not only the elite, but especially children, as well as the uneducated and the illiterate. In simple words that anyone can understand this beautiful work of art teaches us the facts of Christ's incarnation and what it means to us sinful mortals.

Christian art not only teaches us about our Lord but also praises him, our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Many of the Psalms, many of our hymns and much Christian poetry have this distinctive characteristic.

The most significant thing of all is, perhaps, the fact that truly Christian art pleases our Savior. Christian art is something which we create not only for ourselves, but above all for him who sees every brick that we lay and hears every chord that we sing or play. We are doing it, creating it, not only for ourselves, not only for our own pleasure, but for our Lord, our Redeemer. We create works of art for his pleasure. In the measure that our art becomes an expression of personal discipleship, personal living by faith in Christ Jesus alone, in that measure our art becomes an offering that is pleasing to our Lord just as the sacrifice of Abel was. A living faith in our Savior, the Lamb who was slain for us, is what makes our art pleasing to our God here and now. No matter how magnificent a pipe organ may be, if the music is produced without such faith, it is as displeasing to him as the offering of Cain. On the other hand, the believing homemaker's simple hymn, sung while she carries out her menial tasks, is a work of art that finds favor in his sight. The same can be said of a church which is an architectural monument or the church made of mud brick walls and a corrugated metal roof in the African bush. Both are works of art. Living faith or lack of it is the factor which determines whether these works of art are pleasing to our Lord or not.

As was mentioned above, both Christian and secular art may attempt to express harmony. They may have this in common. Christian art, however, expresses harmony in a way that distinguishes it from secular art. In Christian art we express our restored harmony with our Creator. This harmony was restored through the atoning sacrifice of God's Son on the cross. It becomes ours by faith in Jesus. Complete harmony between creature and Creator was present in the garden of Eden. If we remain faithful to him, we shall experience this harmony perfectly again in heaven. For this reason Christian art involves a reaching back to that perfect harmony and beauty which existed in the garden of Eden for our first parents and our Lord to enjoy. Christian art involves also a reaching forward to that perfect harmony and beauty in all things which we shall enjoy together with our Lord in the new heavens and the new earth.

Christian art also provides us followers of the Savior with a unique kind of pleasure. It is a kind of pleasure that the impenitent, that unbelievers, cannot possibly experience. In the measure that our relationship to our Lord is one of love, that which is pleasing to him is also pleasure for us. This is true in our human relations with one another. It is true also in our relationship to our Savior. We find no greater pleasure perhaps than that which comes from pleasing a person we love. That is what makes Christian art, art which pleases our Savior, such a special joy.

To understand Christian art we also need to see that there is in this world a unique, a one-of-a-kind, example of art. One might call it "divine art." I am referring especially to the poetical portions of the Bible. Here the Holy Spirit himself is the artist. If he chose to use an art form to convey his message, then certainly we do well to follow his lead and strive to use art forms for the same purpose. This again is a characteristic of Christian art which distinguishes it from secular art. Christian art follows the example which the Holy Spirit himself gives us in his inspired Word.

Christian Art in Relation to Redemption and Personal Forgiveness

When the Holy Spirit brings a sinner to repentance and faith, this is not only a washing away of all guilt. The change that takes place is not only a matter of standing before God as one who was dirty and guilty and now is washed clean. Conversion, contrition and faith, involves much more than that. For the individual disciple of Jesus it involves not only more; it involves everything he is and does. By the same token Christian art can involve more and more of our entire way of life.

The fact that simple, everyday things or activities can be works of art is something that we can learn even from non-Christian cultures. By means of the tea ceremony the Japanese make the everyday matter of preparing and receiving food and drink an exquisite artistic experience.

I remember one of our college professors telling us that an essential characteristic of all art is the "*So haett' ich's auch getan*" factor. He was saying that if something is really a work of art, the listener or observer will respond by feeling that he would have done it the same way if he had been the artist. Our professor went on to say that according to this criterion a furrow that is plowed beautifully straight can be a work of art. We might

also say that if the farmer plowed that furrow as a redeemed child of his Creator, then that plowed furrow becomes a work of Christian art.

Paul speaks of eating and drinking, doing all that we do, to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Zechariah speaks of such common things as kettles, pots and pans being holy to the Lord (Zch 14:20, 21). In the measure that the Holy Spirit guides, directs and gives meaning and purpose to the things we do, in that measure our daily life can become a succession of works of art that are an offering well-pleasing to our Lord. They become an expression of our restored harmony with our Creator.

In Christian art we strive to please our Lord with the very best in beauty that we are able to produce. The tabernacle and the temple can certainly serve as examples of this. The Israelites were to use the best of materials and engage the best available craftsmen so as to produce the best works of art possible. This was to be done in such varied areas as the enclosure itself, the incense and the clothing of the priests. In producing Christian art we are really reaching for an impossible ideal, striving to create perfect beauty, which expresses perfect harmony with our Savior God.

The measure in which we approach that goal of beauty will vary. We are limited in ability. Those of us with lesser ability in the arts look to those with greater gifts to express for us what we have in our hearts. Thus many of us, most of us, are not the artists, but rather the children of God who by listening make a concert our own expression of faith in the Savior, or who by meditating on a Christian painting make it our own expression of praise to him, or by worshiping in the atmosphere created by a church building make that architecture our own expression of harmony with our Creator and our own expression of joy in him.

The measure in which we approach that goal of beauty will vary also because of our varied resources. Not every congregation can afford the services of the best of organ builders, the best architect or the best of choir directors. We all have limits to our financial resources, and these limits vary from one congregation to another as well as from one country to another. They also vary from one time to another.

Variety in cultural background and preference will also cause variations in our works of Christian art. Our North-European culture tends to respond to the gospel with works of art that express the certainty of our salvation. Black culture may tend to respond to that same gospel with works of art that express exuberant joy.

The Spirit of God in us leads us to use everything we have and are in harmony with the will of our Savior God. This involves all the gifts he has given us as human beings. It involves finally all created things that he has made and sustains for our use in this universe.

Because we are what we are, because God has made us human beings the creatures that can control, use and put into form the rest of creation, we have the potential to put created things to this use. We are able to express by means of created things the harmony that our Savior has restored. We are able to express our renewed relationship to our Creator in works of art. In doing so, we are using the created things of this earth for the purpose for which they were first brought into being. We are using them to glorify our Creator.

Christian Art and Priorities

How much of our limited time, effort and money shall we spend on specific Christian art? How much, for example, should a congregation spend on a new church? Shall we buy a new pipe organ or not? How can we spend money on the arts at all when we have had to “hold the line” on missions?

Are we really on the right track when we try to find purely logical answers to questions such as those mentioned above? Should a homemaker say, “I can’t sing now because I have just begun doing the wash?” Would it not be better to do the wash and sing at the same time?

If we become purely logical in our choice of priorities, I wonder whether we are really reflecting the will of our Savior. Think of Mary as she anointed Jesus at Bethany. To those who were critical of her beautiful but extravagant offering he said, “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” All of the logical, efficient, “best use of funds” arguments were on the other side. Remember that Mary’s work of art was inherently connected with her faith in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice. That is what made it beautiful in his eyes.

That is finally what made it an expression of harmony with his will. It was an affirmation of his will to go to the cross to rescue also Mary so that she could be one of his own eternally.

The analogy of the church as the bride of the Savior certainly teaches us something about priorities. This analogy occurs not only in the Song of Songs, but again and again in both the Old and New Testaments. Revelation chapter 21 describes the new Jerusalem as “a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.” Does Scripture picture the church as a dutiful, faithful wife and no more? How dull a marriage that would be! As a bride goes to great lengths to make herself beautiful for her husband’s sake, so the church cultivates beauty for her Savior’s sake. True, her “beauty” consists primarily in the robes of righteousness in which her Savior clothes her and the works of love toward others which are the fruits of her faith. But certainly her works of art are a part of that beauty by which she strives to give pleasure to him.

Christian art belongs in the area of our feelings toward our Savior and in the area of beauty that gives pleasure to our Savior. To measure these things only according to logical or financial standards is to annihilate their essential character.

The Seminary Anniversary Pipe Organ

Here at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary we have recognized the need for a new pipe organ in our chapel. It is the chapel where our student body and faculty meet daily for devotions. It is our hope that the new organ might be built as a part of the celebration of the 125th anniversary of our school.

We cannot escape the fact that priorities are involved. Is this the time to gather funds for a pipe organ? It is a time when because of budget stringencies we are limiting our mission outreach and providing inadequately perhaps for many of our called servants. Isn’t this a time to do something about our stalled mission program and the well-being of those people who serve us rather than a time to build a new pipe organ?

Certainly there is room for differences of opinion in this area. Is it not a time for both, however—a time to be concerned about our mission thrust and our called servants, but also a time to sing praises to the Lord with the very best we have to offer? When we consider the blessings he has showered upon our seminary in the last 125 years and the blessings he continues to shower upon us today, how can we do otherwise? A new pipe organ for our seminary chapel could well be a fitting expression of our thanks and praise.

I am confident that there are many in our fellowship who would gladly share in this artistic expression of praise by contributing to our seminary anniversary organ fund above and beyond their usual contributions for the work of our synod. I am confident also that there are many who will want to provide the very best that we can afford as we strive to praise our Lord with the organ builder’s art and with the art of music itself.