

Biblical Theology and the Arts: Visual Arts and the Bible

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Pop Quiz: Who is the first person that Scripture tells us was filled with the Spirit? (The answer appears below.)

A Trip to the Museum

My wife and I recently visited New York City. While there we decided to go to the Guggenheim, a museum dedicated to modern art. The building was put up by Frank Lloyd Wright and is a large spiral ramp. My mother, who grew up in New York and was quite a personality, said that when she was a girl, she always wanted to roller skate down the Guggenheim.

When we got to the museum, we took the elevator up and began walking down. One of the first exhibits was a shopping cart made of fluorescent tubes. A video that accompanied it said that it was a statement about the inability of the homeless to get free electricity. Another was an exhibit that was supposed to imitate moonlight. It was a darkened room with a lit light bulb suspended from the ceiling. Others were abstract or random jumbles of different kinds of objects and materials.

At the risk of sounding like a cretin, after making the first loop of the spiral, my wife asked me what I thought. I told her I was ready to put on roller skates.

I am sure that someone who understood modern art would have appreciated the exhibits far more than I did. But I am equally sure that the majority of people in the country would have responded to the art in much the same way that I did. And I strongly suspect this is one of the reasons why Christians avoid the world of visual arts.

A Trip to Church

I was invited to speak at a large church that had just put up a new building. My wife was with me, and we were given a tour of the facilities. It was very well designed, with plenty of space for classrooms and family activities, a cafe, and all the amenities contemporary churches often have to make people feel welcome and at home.

Then we went into the auditorium, where services are held. It was a large space with stadium seating, cup holders on the seats, and a stage in front where the worship band would play and the pastor preach. It had audio-visual equipment to project words to songs and videos on screens. It was modern, cleanly designed, and looked like a lot of new theaters I've been in.

My wife hated it, demonstrating that I'm not the only curmudgeon in the family.

The problem was that for her, it screamed "performance space" rather than "worship space." It had a cross, but other than that there was nothing about it that marked it as a place to worship God.

The Death of Aesthetics

What do both of these incidents have in common? A failure to understand beauty.

Both ancient Greek philosophers and many Christian theologians considered the Transcendent (i.e. God, for Christians) to be characterized by the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. This means that beauty is objective and is anchored in God's very nature. God not only creates beauty, but the beauty of the world is a reflection of the beauty of God himself.

In other words, the modern idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, that beauty is purely subjective, is false. The problem is, this idea has permeated the culture and the church.

In the Guggenheim, art, which is intended to be a non-verbal exploration of truth, no longer has any connection to beauty. This may be because beauty is seen as subjective and therefore not "true" in any hard sense of the word, or because both truth and beauty have been relativized to such a degree that the artist sees no point in trying to create beauty. But one way or another, the connection between art and beauty has been severed.

And in churches, utilitarianism has replaced aesthetics as the foundation for design. The goal is far more to create a pleasant environment in which the service can take place rather than to create a space that displays the beauty and grandeur of God.

The Beauty of the Holy

God not only is beautiful; he cares about beauty.

For example, in the description of the Garden of Eden, the very first thing we are told about the trees is not that they provided food, but that they were a delight to the eyes (Gen. 2:9).

Or consider the instructions for building the Tabernacle in Exodus. God gave Moses a pattern that he was to follow exactly (Ex. 25:9), and God expected people to contribute precious materials to the building of the Tabernacle. The furniture was made of high-quality wood and covered in gold. The tent itself was made out of multicolored woven fabric with cherubim embroidered on it. The frames were made of the same high-quality wood and their bases of solid silver. On and on the description goes, including even the robes worn by the priests. It is hard to escape the conclusion that God wanted his people to worship in a place filled with color and beauty. (Exodus 25-28, 30)

The Answer to the Quiz

But God went further than this. The Tabernacle was a large and complex project that required tremendous artistic and craft skills to produce. And God provided them in the person of Bezalel, the first person in Scripture who is described as being filled with the Spirit:

The LORD said to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do." (Exod. 31:1-11)

Beauty is so important to God that the very first person he names as being filled with the Spirit was not Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, or Aaron; it was an artist.

But What About

All of this suggests that as Christians, we need to rethink our approach to the arts and to sacred architecture. We need to pay much more attention to beauty as an important component of our relationship with God and our presentation of him to the world.

There are, of course, objections that can be raised to this conclusion.

- In the Reformed tradition going all the way back to Zwingli, churches were intentionally plain to avoid distracting people from the preaching of the Word. This was tied in the Reformers' writings to the Catholic Church's argument that the statues and stained glass windows were "books for the unlearned," an idea that the Reformers rejected in favor of the preached Word. There may be some merit to their argument, but the question is whether we want to follow Zwingli's example or Scripture when it comes to creating a worship space.
- It can be argued that this was the Old Testament and so the example doesn't apply to the church. This argument is connected to a long and tangled history of theological debate surrounding the relationship of the Old Testament and the New. Without going into that, consider Rev. 4-5, where the throne room of Heaven is shown as being full of light, color, and beauty. If we want our worship to be based on the worship of Heaven, we would do well to pay attention to beauty.
- Another objection is that we'd be better off spending our money feeding the poor or spreading the Gospel rather than beautifying our churches. There's a balance here: we do need to feed the poor and preach the Gospel, but God did not think it inappropriate to ask for generous contributions from the people of Israel for both the Tabernacle and the Temple. While I would agree that advancing the Kingdom through social action and preaching is our primary responsibility, it is not our only responsibility. Cultivating beauty is also a part of our calling going all the way back to Eden.¹
- Moving from questions about worship spaces, it can be argued that not all art must be or even should be beautiful. Art is intended to convey truth about the world, and that includes ugliness. True enough. My objection, though, is that art today typically conveys none of the beauty of the world and revels in ugliness, chaos, and shock. I have no objections to conveying the evil in the world through ugliness in art, but we also need to show the goodness and beauty of God and the Creation.

The bottom line here is that for Christians, being an artist is a high and sacred calling and can be a means of honoring and glorifying God in profound and powerful ways. And for those of us who are not artists, we should be learning to appreciate beauty ourselves, recognizing it as a reflection of the beauty of our Creator, and should do what we can to bring beauty into the world. It is a delight to God, and is meant by him to be a delight to us as well.

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¹ God gave Adam two jobs in the Garden of Eden. First, Adam was "to work and keep" the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). The first thing God tells us about the Garden is that it was a place of beauty and delight (Gen. 2:9); working and keeping the Garden must therefore have involved not simply food production but cultivating beauty as well. In other words, the arts have been part of God's mandate to humanity from the very beginning.