

Worldview and Aesthetics in God-Centered Worship

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The historic Christian worldview reserves the highest regard for God and thus has similar regard for His two means of revelation—the creation (general revelation) and especially the Scriptures (special revelation). Historically, Christians have looked to these two means to know truth, including truth about God Himself (see Romans 1 and Psalm 19). Interestingly, creation and Scripture resonate with one another in the truth they proclaim. Herein echoes the ancient connection between truth and beauty.

In contrast, the modern secular worldview that arose from the Enlightenment holds man in the highest regard, relying only upon man's rational understanding (gained via science and experience in the natural world) to know truth. It would seem that disregard for the revelation of God's Word via Scripture has led to modern man's dismissal of the connection between truth and beauty as seen in creation.

Related to this, as Nancy Pearcey teaches, the Enlightenment changed the nature of beauty and aesthetics in the arts. Today, beauty and meaning in the arts are now seen by many as "subjective," relative to personal preference.² It is this type of thinking that makes qualitative judgements regarding the arts off-limits. Yet, as Philip Ryken, President of Wheaton College teaches, Scripture speaks to God's high standards for the arts.³ It is this clash of worldviews putting the nature and significance of beauty in question that has captured this author's attention. As evangelical Christians seek Scriptural integrity in all things, my aim in this paper is to discuss core issues of aesthetics. If the evangelical Church is to worship according to biblical principles it must recover an understanding of the true nature of beauty—as beauty is rooted in the very nature and character of God.

The popular idea today about beauty is that it is "in the eye of the beholder." However, I want to take a closer look at what this phrase is saying, and then we will compare this with both the classical view and the Scriptural view of beauty. When philosophers talk about beauty being "*in the eye of the beholder*," what they mean is that there is nothing in the world that actually possesses beauty. Instead, when someone judges an object as beautiful, what is happening is a

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² Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, & Meaning* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2010), 26-7.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Art for God's Sake: A Call to Recover the Arts* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 17-8.

pleasurable feeling that the viewer gets, but this feeling is subjective—irrespective of real or measurable qualities (excellence) that the object may possess.⁴

If the modern secular view of beauty centers around the subjective experience of the beholder, then the classical view is the direct opposite. The classical understanding of beauty centers around rationally appraised qualities inherent in an object. These qualities relate to number, ratio, and mathematical proportions dealing with symmetry and balance. Such ideas were established by Pythagoreans and Plato, and influenced theologians including Augustine and Luther.⁵

A study of the Scriptural view of beauty reveals God's own view of beauty. We can learn much about God's perspective on beauty in the arts through the account of the building of the tabernacle in the book of Exodus. In Exodus 31, we are told about God's chief artisans and builders for his wondrous replica of the heavenly tabernacle. Bezalel and Oholiab were in charge of the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings. To Bezalel, the chief artisan, God gave the gifts of the Holy Spirit, ability, knowledge, intelligence, and all craftsmanship—necessary qualities to fulfill His designs. When we consider the requirement of such traits to create the splendor of the tabernacle and the detailed mathematical account of the designs recorded in Exodus 25 -39, to which view of beauty does it seem that God has greater resonance with, the classical view or the modern secular view?

Without a doubt God's own view of beauty in the arts as recorded here resonates with the objective, measurable nature of beauty in the classical view. How do we know this? God left nothing to chance in his designs for the tabernacle, much less a subjective response from his chosen people: 1.) He ensured that the finest materials were procured for the task; 2.) He gave scrupulous architectural designs for the building, including, as Daniel block writes, perfect, cosmic, proportions.⁶ 3.) He called and gifted the very best artisans to complete the designs, ensuring that their artistic knowledge, competencies and judgement guided by the Holy Spirit would perfectly complement his instructions; 4.) The artistic result evoked specific responses from the nation of

⁴ Crispin Sartwell, "Beauty: 1. Objectivity and Subjectivity," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.); accessed on July 13, 2020; available from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/beauty/>; Internet. Note particularly Sartwell's citations of Hume and Kant, Enlightenment philosophers who supported the idea that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

⁵ Scott Aniol, *Worship in Song: A Biblical Approach to Music and Worship* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2009), 104. The Pythagorean understanding of mathematical order and harmony in the universe as demonstrated in music was developed into the classical understanding of objective beauty. As Scott Aniol writes, "Pythagoras (6th century B.C.), arguably the earliest aesthetician, discovered numerical relationships governing the basic intervals of music and attributed the craft and beauty of music to its underpinning universal principles. Pythagorean thought established absolute standards for aesthetics and had significant influence over later philosophers, including Plato, Augustine, and Boethius, and theologians including Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. According to these philosophers and theologians, music that corresponds to these universals will, by these standards, be beautiful and will give pleasure to the observer."

⁶ Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Baker Academic, 2014), 303. Regarding the furnishings, see footnote 17 on page 304.

Israel, namely reverence and awe and delight in God as the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty.

The importance of understanding the true nature of beauty cannot be overestimated. As Scott Aniol writes, “Beauty is directly linked to the glory of God.” Aniol grounds this claim in Scripture and in the writing of theologians from Aquinas to Edwards, and C.S. Lewis to John Piper.⁷ Job 40:9-10 clearly establishes this connection, “Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like His? Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity, and array yourself with glory and splendor.” And Zechariah 9:17 proclaims, “For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!”

Piper defines God’s glory in terms of beauty:

God’s glory is the beauty of his manifold perfections. It can refer to the bright and awesome radiance that sometimes breaks forth in visible manifestations. Or it can refer to the infinite moral excellence of His character. In either case it signifies a reality of infinite greatness and worth.⁸

To summarize and draw conclusions, while the modern secular worldview holds beauty in the arts as a matter of individual preference, Christians need to understand that the account of Scripture teaches very different ideas—beauty is an objective reality, knowable and rooted in God’s nature and character. This is why David said in Psalm 27 that He longed to look upon the beauty of the Lord in His temple. And in Phil 4:8 we are commanded to think on the things that are “true. . . honorable. . . just. . . pure. . . lovely. . . commendable. . . excellent. . . [and] worthy of praise.” When modern man looks only to man’s thoughts about beauty, in our own selfishness it is easy to dismiss the objective claims held in the classical view, because it was developed by mere men. But when we consult the Scriptures, we understand that the incredible designs of beauty in creation, which the Greeks studied and emulated and were employed in God’s designs for the tabernacle, are intended to teach us of the realities of God. The classic understanding of this truth is given to us in Romans 1 and Psalm 19.

Finally, it is the combined studies of the creation (general revelation) and the Scriptures (special revelation) that confirm as Ryken teaches, that God has real, objective and knowable standards for the arts—aesthetic standards that relate to his standards for truth and goodness.⁹

⁷ Aniol, *Worship in Song*, 99. Also, see pages 100-110.

⁸ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 2nd Ed. (Sisters, OR: Multomah Books, 1996), 43.

⁹ Ryken, *Art for God’s Sake*, 37-45. Ryken writes, “This is not to say that the Bible provides any specific information about the skills required for any particular form of art. Rather the standards for artistic goodness come from creation itself. They are intrinsic to the physical materials—to the sights and the sounds—of any artistic craft. ‘What can an artist use but materials, such as they are?’ wrote Annie Dillard So the photographer learns the properties of light and shadow, as well as the technical aspects of taking and developing photographs. Or the vocalist learns to sing by experimenting with resonance, articulation, and other factors in the production of sound, and then by listening to the results. What constitutes excellence in these and other art forms is inherent in the art forms themselves, and thus it comes from God as part of his general revelation. The difference between good art and bad art

Therefore, in the pursuit of God-centered worship, Christians have a responsibility to pursue such standards that we may worship the Lord through artistic forms honoring these realities.

is not something we learn from the Bible, primarily, but from the world that God has made. But what the Bible does tell us is that God knows the difference, and that he has a taste for excellence.”