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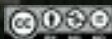
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THE ATTITUDE OF THE CHRISTIAN TOWARD ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

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THE ATTITUDE OF THE CHRISTIAN TOWARD ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

A ATITUDE DO CRISTÃO EM RELAÇÃO À EXPRESSÃO ARTÍSTICA

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ABSTRACT

All the stories that we find in Scripture of prophetic visions including God and those gathered around Him give us a picture of extreme beauty. The glory of God is surrounded by colors, choirs, sounds, and incredible dramatic scenes. Unfortunately, because of the fall of man -early in the beginning of the human race- our senses as well as our mental and emotional faculties were affected as well as our appreciation of realities and beauty. God is an artist, God made us in His image and likeness, but sin corrupted the likeness of the Image of God (*imago Dei*) in us. For this reason, as Christians who receive from God the capacity to make and enjoy art and beauty, we must be willing to fulfill the purpose of this gift: 'to show His Glory'. It is what these short papers are about.

Keywords: Art. Beauty. *Imago Dei*. Christian life. Fall of man.

RESUMO

Todas as histórias que encontramos nas Escrituras de visões proféticas, incluindo Deus e aqueles reunidos ao Seu redor, nos dão uma imagem de extrema beleza. A glória de Deus está cercada de cores, sons e cenas dramáticas incríveis. Infelizmente, por causa da queda do homem – no início da raça humana – os nossos sentidos, bem como as nossas faculdades mentais e emocionais foram afetadas, bem como a nossa apreciação das realidades e da beleza. Deus é um artista, Deus nos fez à Sua imagem e semelhança, mas o pecado corrompeu a semelhança da Imagem de Deus (*imago Dei*) em nós. Por esta razão, como cristãos que recebem de Deus a capacidade de fazer e desfrutar da arte e da beleza, devemos estar dispostos a cumprir

o propósito deste dom: ‘mostrar a Sua Glória’. É disso que trata este breve artigo.

Palavras-chave: Arte. Beleza. Imago Dei. Vida cristã. Queda do homem.

INTRODUCTION

“What place should art occupy in the Christian life? What role does art have in the church, in worship, in the Christian liturgy?”

In the introduction of his book, *Art and the Bible*, Francis Schaeffer asks the following questions: “What place should art occupy in the Christian life? Have we considered art, particularly the fine arts such paintings and music, simply as a way of introducing worldliness through the back door?” (SCHAEFFER, 1974, p. 9).

Since we live in a world full of artistic expressions, these are wise questions that Schaeffer attempts to answer in his book cited above.

It should be emphasized that studying such questions as these that Schaeffer asks leads to other questions such as: What role does art have in the church, in worship, in the Christian liturgy? But before continuing, we must pause and define the word *art*.

1. ART

The dictionary defines art as “the manifestation of the human activity through which reality is interpreted or the imagination is expressed with tactile, linguistic, or audible resources” (*Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 2001, p. 219), and defines the fine arts as “a body of arts grouped together with the purpose of expressing beauty” (*Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 2001, p. 219).

Given these definitions, we understand that art seeks to express, communicate, and transmit the work of the artist in such a way that our senses perceive it as something beautiful and pleasant, filled with delight for the senses.

Theologian and well-known writer John Piper says:

Art is any effort to make something –and that could be an object or an dancing action or an action in a play or an object like a carving or a painting or a sculpture or a poem– any action to make something that takes a special skill, resulting in something that is not merely utilitarian or pragmatic but moves us more deeply with beauty or wonder or touching our soul with a sense that life is more than food and drink (PIPER, 2013, episode 29).

2. SACRED ART

The late Dr. R.C. Sproul, Reformed Church theologian, pastor, and author of over 100 books including *How Then Shall We Worship?*, makes several important observations on this subject:

I've always found it interesting that the Bible often makes references to the beautiful. In fact, if you took the time to look up every reference to "beauty" or every reference to "the beautiful" in a concordance, you would see that the word *beauty* in one form or another occurs frequently in the pages of sacred Scripture...

I'm afraid that the idea of the beauty of God has been all but eclipsed in our contemporary culture, both in the secular community and in the church as well. I've said many times that there are three dimensions of the Christian life that the Scriptures are concerned about –the good, the true, and the beautiful. Yet we tend to cut off the third from the other two. Some Christians reduce their concern for the things of God purely to the ethical realm, to a discussion of righteousness or of goodness with respect to

our behavior. Others are so concerned about purity of doctrine that they're preoccupied with truth at the expense of behavior or at the expense of the holy. Rarely, at least in many Protestant circles, do we find a focus on the beautiful (SPROUL, 2014, p. 1).

Sproul continues with his analysis and gives us some idea of his concerns about the value that we give beauty and art in the Christian community:

I hear all the time from **Christian artists** –musicians, sculptors, painters, architects, writers, dramatists, and others– that they feel cut off from the Christian community. They tell me that they are treated as pariahs because their vocation is considered worldly and unworthy of Christian devotion. That's a sad commentary on our state of affairs, particularly when we look at the history of the church and we see that the Christian church has produced some of the greatest giants in music, in art, and in literature. **Where else but in Christian history do you find a Milton, a Handel, a Bach, or a Shakespeare –men who have been pioneers of greatness in the arts?**

If you were to go to the Louvre in Paris or to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and peruse the history of art, you would see that it's dominated by a religious orientation, and specifically, a Christian orientation. Ever since the people of God have existed in community, art has been a significant concern. When we go to the Old Testament, for example, we see there that the first people filled with the Holy Ghost were the artisans and craftsmen that God selected to prepare the objects for the tabernacle. That's divine inspiration –these artists were inspired by God the Holy Spirit. He inspired them for their craftsmanship of the tabernacle and its furniture, for the metalworking in the tent, and for the making of the gowns and robes for Aaron –which were to be made for glory and for beau-

ty. God was concerned not only to use artists in the building of His sanctuary in the Old Testament, but also to endow those very artists with the power of His Holy Spirit to ensure that what they were doing met with the standards of beauty He set (SPROUL, 2014, p. 2).

Incredibly, all of the stories that we find in Scripture of prophetic visions including God and those gathered around Him give us a picture of exquisite beauty. The glory of God is surrounded by colors, choirs, sounds, and incredible dramatic scenes. In Isaiah's vision of God he saw the Lord on a high throne; notice the words "high" and "exalted" (Isaiah 6, NIV). Here we can imagine a throne of precious stones, crowns of gold, gates of precious stones, etc. as mentioned in the book of Revelation.

If we were to ask any biblical scholar about what God had meant to say when He referred to His exalted dwelling place in heaven, I am sure that He would respond as did the Apostle Paul when he was caught up in paradise and said that he heard indescribable and "unspeakable things" (2 Corinthians 12:4, my paraphrase).

I believe that the following description of the throne of the Mughal Emperor **Shah Jahan** would be a vulgar and profane imitation of the glory and beauty of God's throne.

The glory of the Mughal Emperor **Shah Jahan** of the 17th century is difficult to surpass. He had 5,000 concubines, a half million trained horses in his cavalry, and his soldiers were the best archers of that day. It was he who constructed the **Taj Mahal**, often called the most famous and beautiful building in the world. Some 20,000 men were involved in its construction. To build his throne, **Shah Jahan** used a ton of gold decorated with every kind of precious gem (emeralds, pearls, rubies, etc.). The cost in today's American dollars would be one thousand million dollars.³

3 "Cómo era y qué pasó con el fabuloso Trono del Pavo Real del imperio mogol de India." In BBC News Mundo.

In my opinion, not even Solomon in all his majesty and glory surpassed the throne of Shah Jahan. Think of the glory and majesty of that kingdom and that throne. Now imagine the beauty and the glory of the throne of our Lord Jesus Christ and that of His Father.

This comparison shows how God is concerned with order and the beautiful. I believe that this is evident when observing and contemplating outer space. The organization, shape, color, and other manifestations of the planets and constellations illustrate divine artistic taste. Have you been to a garden or to the countryside and seen the extraordinary beauty of certain creatures? A few days ago I was stung on the nose by a wasp when I approached a roofed cage in a zoo while admiring a toucan. I couldn't resist the majesty and amazing beauty of this strange bird's shape and colors. I was trying to photograph it when the wasp stung me.

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I am passionate about beauty. I always thank and glorify God for it. It is almost indescribable taking a day trip through the Blue Ridge Mountains between North and South Carolina. It is equally amazing to observe orchids and hydrangeas in the spring. This is the same sensation as hearing a symphony or a jazz band perform impeccably. I am equally absorbed when contemplating the now mutilated statue of David, sculpted in white marble by Michelangelo or reading the scenes of the birth of Jesus in the first two chapters of Luke that are so exquisitely crafted. It is so moving. And what about the small decorative ornamentation shaped from different metals exhibited in the Ancestral Cultures area (Egyptian, Greek and Roman) of the Museum of Art in New York. In August of 2018, I was quite impressed by an exhibit of clothes of the classic Spanish royalty. Contemplating such extraordinary beauty simply left me breathless.

3. IMPRESSIVE BEAUTY!

Observe the abundance of beauty and majesty transmitted in the following text. Even though it is not an impeccably performed string concert, nor the abundance of colored feathers of a parrot, macaw, or cardinal, the text speaks of forming an army under the direction of the sovereign Jesus.

Then I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and **on his head are many crowns**. He has a name written on him that no one knows but He himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. **The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen**, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. **On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS** (Revelation 19:11-16, NIV).

4. OUR LIMITATIONS FOR APPRECIATING BEAUTY

In a document like this one, if we overlook the effects of the fall of man and to what degree the faculties of aesthetic appreciation were affected by it, it will lack a comprehensive presentation on the subject. The truth is that modern society, with little knowledge of biblical theology, tends to assume that human faculties are flawless. The modern reign of humanistic psychology over soteriology leads us to this paganized thought. So are our artistic, emotional, sensory, mental, and aesthetic faculties actually flawless, optimal, and impartial?

Unfortunately, with the fall of man our senses as well as our mental and emotional faculties were affected as well as our appreciation of beauty. Can we demonstrate this? I'll use a little sarcasm here. We believe that some contemporary artistic expressions in all of their manifestations (theater, art, music – perhaps reggaeton– as a supposed musical style, for example), are proof of the degeneration of artistic or aesthetic appreciation. Also, the moral degeneration of the film industry shows how far it has lowered itself from even minimum aesthetic standards.

Modern society tends to think that the ancient is coarse and crude. Perhaps the theory of evolution has corroborated this tendency because it considers human beings and all their faculties to be cruder and more savage the further back in the history of civilization one goes. But archeological finds in the great museums (such as the Louvre and the Museum of Art in New York, for example) as well as ancient monuments still standing (the Egyptian pyramids and others), prove otherwise. The perfection of the art and craftsmanship of ancient Egypt, particularly their jewelry and later that of the Greeks, is impressive. In fact, the quality of detail is similar to that of modern jewelry. This is easily noted when visiting one of these museums.

What then about our mental, sensory, emotional, and aesthetic faculties? Both the expression and appreciation of the beautiful depends on the interaction of the intellect, abilities, and emotions. Unfortunately, after the fall of man all human faculties were affected. The early church fathers were so concerned about this that they were convicted to condemn Pelagius for proposing that man is born without sin; but this is exactly what today's schools of psychology teach and modern humanistic educational theories propose. To adopt Pelagius' thinking is to: (1) contradict Scripture, (2) act against evidence, and (3) show ignorance on the subject of human development. Clearly, the biggest problem with Pelagius' proposal is his denial of divine revelation in Scripture as well as an attempt to deny

the sovereignty of God, conceding at the same time that man has total, though a vague, free will, including topics related to the doctrine of salvation.

Even though Pelagius was condemned, the church has never been able to escape his tendencies. Sometimes they have been faint and at other times generally accepted, as in modern society and some contemporary Christianity. Following Pelagius, there have been four similar proposals with different names but still with Pelagian tendencies.

1. Thomas Aquino understood and correctly accepted the condemnation of Pelagianism except that he thought that although sin negatively affected the soul, that the fall left the intellect intact. Like it or not, this is still diluted Pelagianism.
2. There was another Catholic theologian who wanted to resolve the Lutheran and Calvinist controversy, even if it caused a fierce attack on the Lutherans and Calvinists. Luis de Molina's proposition was different from semi-Pelagianism but was equally humanistic.

Molina “is situated in this atmosphere of a strong reaction to the doctrine of predestination of Luther and Calvin that characterizes post Tridentine theology. He is particularly concerned with **underlining the reality of human liberty**. This leads him to affirm that ‘grace is not effective *ab intrinseco*, but is *ab extrinseco*, when the will cooperates freely and give its consent” (AREVALO, 2013, p. 1).

To summarize, Molinism “sustains that the fall did not affect the innate faculties of man; that man can in some way refuse grace, that the effectiveness of grace depends on the cooperation of the will, and that God saves or condemns according to how He foresees what each person is going to do” (LACUEVA, 1975, p. 44).

Therefore, Molinism “is a system that proposes to reconcile grace with free will.” And the main purpose of this theology was to “combat the Reformed Church’s position of justification by faith alone, predestination, and the total depravation of man” (AREVALO, 2013, p. 1) that Lutheranism and Calvinism proposed.

3. Another renowned theologian who adopted a diluted Pelagianism, that is sometimes called semi-Pelagianism, was the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius who proposed Arminianism, if it were well consolidated and systemized in *Remonstrance*. Generally, the *Remonstrant* believed that human dignity requires an impartial free will (AREVALO, 2013, p. 1). That is to say that Arminianism proposes that even though sin affects human faculties, it is not absolute; not “...there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God” (Romans 3:10-11, NIV), but “all understand and all can seek God,” as humanism states. They attempted to accept divine grace, but refused to accept total depravation. For them, the psyche is free in spite of the fall of man. It is a complicated and difficult system to support in Scripture.
4. After Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch priest by the name of Menno Simons converted to Anabaptism; he arrived at the same conclusions as those of the *Remonstrants* (Arminians). Later, John Wesley would propose a similar vision less humanistic, which is generally found in the Methodist theology of salvation.

The controversy has been fierce. In short, orthodox Christianity believes that the fall of man affected all of his physical and spiritual faculties including mental, emotional, and aesthetic faculties as well as his skills.

In a few words, it is beyond the faculties of man in his fallen state to think without prejudice and without sin, or to show

godly emotions. He cannot appreciate the aesthetic dimension of anything accurately. That is to say that the human free will is held captive to sin. Only regeneration by faith in Jesus Christ rids the evil of sin with its disastrous consequences. This is not to say that at the moment of regeneration that the person becomes a godly person; but when that person receives Jesus Christ by faith, since his soul is regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit, that is when the process that theologians call progressive sanctification begins. This implies that from that very moment faculties fallen and damaged by the sin of mankind begin to be restored one step at a time. God begins then and there to build up again the “fallen building,” in the words of Calvin (1960, p. 337); since the ruins of the fall were great, total depravation.

5. IMPLIED LESSONS IN THIS ESSAY

Here are some truths that set the foundation for a better understanding of the arts in the Christian life, in the church, and in congregational worship.

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5.1 GOD IS AN ARTIST, THE MOST SUBLIME OF ALL

The heavens declare His glory, the birds harmonize with Him, the majesty of His oceans dazzle us, and the complexity and beauty of His creatures amaze us. Piper says: “...God is an artist. He made the heavens that are telling something about His glory. In other words, He didn’t just make the heavens to protect us from solar rays. They are not just utilitarian –they are beautiful. They say something about His glory” (PIPER, 2013, p. 2).

He not only created the heavens and the earth with all their majesty and grandeur but when He finished His work He declared that it pleased Him to express in words that what He had created, His magnificent work of art, was “very good” (Genesis 1:31 NIV).

5.2 GOD MADE US IN HIS IMAGE AND LIKENESS (*IMAGO DEI*)

Read Chapters 1 and 2 in the book of Genesis. God gives us the capacity to be able to produce art, but not only that. He provided us with senses to, among other things, be able to appreciate beauty, appreciate the art in the majesty of a musical composition, in a landscape painting, etc. That is part of His reflection in us. As Christians, we have been enlightened and are no longer in darkness. Now we can appreciate beauty as well as use our faculties more efficiently in spite of the remnant of sin that remains in us.

The unregenerated are in darkness. We expect them to initiate the fallen arts, fallen rhythms, and any other fallen artistic expression. As believers, we can choose to emulate worldly works or we can choose to produce and present godly artistic expressions as well as appreciate the true beauty of creation and other artistic expressions. We have a lot of work to do!

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5.3 SIN CORRUPTED THE LIKENESS OF THE IMAGE OF GOD IN US

Nothing in our lives escapes the reality of our sin. In our unredeemed nature we cannot claim God's glory. Only redemption by the Holy Spirit allows us to regain the likeness of the image of God (*Imago Deo*), and show God's glory in everything we do.

We only need to evaluate the artistic productions of our time to see that many of them not only disrespect God, but also lack the elements of beauty and majesty that should characterize them. Instead, they praise and admire that which should grieve and embarrass us.

This truth led Dr. Don Hustad to affirm this view of church

music: “Music in the church is not free art nor an end within itself. It is art brought to the cross: art dedicated to the service of God and to the edification of the church” (HUSTAD, 1998).

Without a doubt, the Lord shows us that He is the one who gifts people to produce works of art, and this same art should point back to the beauty and majesty of that same God who enabled the artist to produce or present it. Given this truth, there is no doubt that the arts, these expressions of beauty, can and should have a place in our churches, our liturgy, and our worship.

In view of these truths, as Christians we should be interested in knowing how a gift given by God – the capacity to produce art and to enjoy it – can be redeemed to fulfill the purpose for which it was given: to show the glory of God (Romans 11:36 and 1 Corinthians 10:31).

R. C. Sproul reminds us: “Beauty is important to God because He is beautiful, and so what is beautiful music must be of importance to His people as well. Christian artists should be encouraged to create beautiful art, and Christian people should be encouraged to appreciate the beautiful alongside the true and the good, for the Lord Himself is beautiful” (SPROUL, 2014, p. 3).

May the Lord help us to give our best to this endeavor, and may it be FOR HIS GLORY.

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