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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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Reformation
& Revival



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Just as we make known and signify the thoughts of the soul through the words we express, so too the Lord wished the melody of the words to be a sign of the spiritual harmony of the soul, and ordained that the canticles be sung with melody and the psalms read with song.

Athanasius

The apostles of the Lord, who wanted to put an end to idle talk in the churches, and who were our instructors in good behavior, wisely permitted women to sing psalms there. But as every divine teaching has been turned into its opposite, so this, too, has become an occasion of sin and laxity for the majority of the people. They do not feel compunction in hearing the divine hymns, but rather misuse the sweetness of melody to arouse passion, thinking that it is no better than the songs of the stage.

Isidore of Pelusium

Nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wing, sets it free from the earth, releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom, and to condemn all things of this life, as concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm.

John Chrysostom

Relativism is the general malaise of our time. It has influenced the world to the extent that an increasing percentage of our best-educated populace is willing to hold that there are no absolutes. The evangelical church has been influenced by the relativism of our age as well. While the church has fought against relativism in the area of morals, we have neglected the same fight in the area of aesthetics: we have come to accept the modernist position that beauty is purely a matter of personal preference. The result is a failure to fully understand what it means to be human, and a poverty in our souls. Without recourse to past thinkers and old books, we might forget that there ever was a time that Christians held to objective standards of beauty.

This lack of understanding inhibits our witness of the richness of God, leaving Christians open to charges that we are iconoclasts, philistines, lacking in refinement. Some Christians proudly wear these names as badges of honor, but while we rightly should not care what the world thinks of us, there is a grain of truth to be discerned from this critique. The unbeliever instinctively knows that the present Christian picture of man is too shallow. Men know that beauty is a force to be reckoned with, and Christians should know that to make our perspective compelling to a dying world, our theology must account for the full body of good experiences God has ordained. The Reformed tradition, of course, has the necessary foundations, but could it be that we have lost sight of how to properly apply them? Could it be that we are so swayed by the prevailing winds of popular culture that we are not doing our own thinking?

Leaving beauty out of our worldview equation also limits our souls. I am not arguing here that we should give up evangelism and missions in order to become opera lovers, but I am arguing that the unbelieving opera lover may unconsciously know something of the profundity of God that the Christian has yet to understand: namely, that beauty is a

significant element of God's creation, and that without a proper understanding of it man may indeed be less than man.

I would like to lay out an argument for the reacceptance of the idea that beauty is a reflection of the character and ways of God, and as such can be evaluated objectively as well as subjectively; and we believers should rethink our perspectives on beauty through the consideration of the place beauty has held in pre-modern thought.

Beauty and the Nature of God

Jonathan Edwards argues that the source of beauty is God Himself, and that this beauty can be understood in two areas: first, the beauty of moral virtue, that is, the benevolence of God toward being in general and specially toward other benevolent beings; and second, beauty as seen in the agreement or unity of purpose of the Godhead in the Trinity, as well as in the union of purpose of spiritual beings in what Edwards calls "a mutual propensity and affection of heart."

This order and mutual propensity is reflected in a secondary or inferior beauty, a beauty formed not only in the relation of spiritual beings, but seen in even inanimate things. Examples of this secondary beauty (consisting in, Edwards says, "mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design; called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, etc.") include the "mutual agreement of the various sides of a square, the beautiful proportion of the various parts of the human body, and . . . the sweet mutual consent and agreement of the various notes in a melodious tune."²

This most important connection between the nature of God's virtuous character and the secondary beauty of created things forges a significance for the beauty of objects in this world. The external physical world is formed in analogy to the spiritual world. God seems to take delight in analogy, Edwards

says. He makes created things reflect something of the invisible qualities of His nature and the nature of the agreement among His spiritual creatures.

It has pleased [God] to establish a law of nature by virtue of which the uniformity and mutual correspondence of a beautiful plant, the respect which the various parts of a regular building seem to have to one another, and their agreement and union, and the consent or concord of the various notes of a melodious tune, should appear beautiful because therein is some image of the consent of mind, the different members of a society or system of intelligent beings, sweetly united in a benevolent agreement of heart. . . . And here I should further observe . . . that God has so constituted nature, that the presenting of this inferior beauty, especially in those kinds of it which have the greatest resemblance of the primary beauty, as the harmony of sounds, and the beauties of nature, have a tendency to assist those whose hearts are under the influence of a truly virtuous temper, to dispose them to the exercises of divine love, and enliven in them a sense of spiritual beauty.³

The point is that beauty is seen not only as a pleasant diversion, but as one of the ways God reveals Himself in His creation. This is not to say (as the Romantics did) that the artist is a prophet, or that what he reveals should in any way overshadow specific revelation, but beauty cannot come from anyone other than God Himself, and it is a window into heaven for those who have ears and eyes to see and hear.⁴ If this is the case, then what Christians call beautiful says a great deal to the watching world about **who** we call beautiful.

Objective and Subjective Beauty

Down through the centuries there has been disagreement over the definition of beauty. The main disagreement has been over whether beauty is objective or subjective. The objective definition assesses beauty on the basis of excellence of craft, or as Mortimer Adler puts it, the admirability of the object (in

our case the piece of music). The latter is considered the subjective definition of beauty, and judges a work beautiful on the basis of our response or our experience, which Adler calls enjoyment. This means that when one says “this music is beautiful” he may be saying something about the piece: that the piece of music has properties that are admirable (its line, its harmony, its form, etc., are worthy of the judgment beautiful), or, he may be saying something about himself: describing his feelings when he hears that music. The former is called “objective beauty,” since it deals with the beauty inherent in the object (the music); the second is called “subjective beauty,” meaning that it refers to the preference and experience of the hearer, or the subject.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) put forth the idea that beauty was solely subjective. An object could be considered beautiful only if it produced the right feelings in the subject (audience). Two hundred years later, this subjective perspective has set deep roots in our culture, finding a home in the hearts of believers and unbelievers alike. But prior to Kant, beauty was generally associated with the harmonious parts of a whole, the “harmony” of elements in natural and man-made objects. Edwards was not in any way out of step with his time to write, as he did in the previous quotes, that beauty was to be associated with the attributes of God. The object itself is to be judged, rather than the feelings of the listener. It was assumed that man’s sensibilities ought to mature as he grew, so that he learned to “enjoy” that which was “admirable.” Confrontation with a piece of music may stir feelings in the listener, but those feelings were not considered the criteria by which beauty was assessed. Rather, judgments were based on the way the work itself was crafted and how it expressed its message.

How do we evaluate music today? Do we define beauty in music on the basis of form and content, or on the basis of the response of the audience? Today, in our present age of

darkness, we have forgotten that art can be judged on its content and composition. Instead, we have chosen to make judgments based almost exclusively on how we feel when we hear the piece in question. Does it entertain me? Do I feel good hearing it? There is little question about whether I in any way “should” or “shouldn’t” like the music based on the music’s intrinsic worth. We no longer have categories for this sort of thinking. The piece of music is not considered an object of beauty itself; rather it is a means to the further end of emotional experience. In a proper view of beauty, the music itself and the response of the listener would each play a part. Thomas Aquinas has written that the beautiful is that which “pleases us upon being seen” or perceived. But the same Thomas Aquinas has written that the beautiful object is one that has “unity, proportion and clarity,” or in other words, that the work has intrinsic elements that are either beautiful or not when compared with the ideal or with others of its kind. Aquinas understood that both the objective and the subjective sides play a role in the understanding of beauty.

Relativism encourages us to make choices based for the most part on what we are used to and comfortable with, or makes us feel good, rather than on the basis of any awareness of excellence or admirability in the music itself. This causes problems on the most practical of levels in the life of a church. How do we choose music for a worship service, and how do we settle the battles many churches face over whether to sing high church anthems, or sing arrangements of contemporary songs? Arguments for high and low music styles may each be founded on nothing more than purely subjective criteria. Each side says something like, “I don’t feel like I have worshipped unless I hear [blank].” Groups favor that style that offers the most familiarity, comfort, “worshipful feeling,” etc., and as long as each side bases its argument this way, there can be no solution. This borders on idolatry of the self, and apart from the grace of God can come only to struggles for power. Instead

shouldn't we aim to offer God what He wants instead of offering ourselves what we want?

Let us consider further the details of each of the two sides of beauty. The subjective side deals with the experience of the listener, and that experience is quite difficult to put into words. Music can move us to experiences that we cannot explain, and I have neither the ability nor the desire to demystify it. In fact, real aesthetic experience is the experience of the numinous, that is, the mystery of God: the marvelous facets of His character, the almost infinite diversity of His creation, even the mysteries of human life, love, and death. Music is intangible and thus even more difficult to comprehend than even a painting or a novel, as there is nothing to hold in our hands and ponder. There is only abstract, crafted sound, and this sound is completely intangible. It is there for as long as the music plays, and then it is gone.

If I can be allowed a digression at this point, it would be to say that if there is anything we need in our world gone mad with materialism, it is something that we can enjoy but cannot possess. Music is beauty in form without a body, and thus is impossible to retain. Like manna, there is no way to collect it and hold on to it for the future, unless it is recorded and played back. It is interesting that there is such an enormous industry in place today to capture this intangible music and control it. It is another example of how we are materialists, discontent unless we can have what we want when we want it. The beauty of music is powerful enough to make entire populations don headsets and buy stereo equipment in order to have it.

The first goal of enjoying music is to hear what is going on in the work. Most of us are more interested in unconsciously deciding to like or dislike the work in question, but the better goal is to find out what the work is communicating. To assist this *conscious* enjoyment of music, I make three suggestions. No one can make another enjoy anything, but we can encourage patience and attempt to clear away some of the brambles

that block the road to greater musical enjoyment.

First, listen humbly, that is, without your own agenda of finding a melody to hum or a rhythm to tap your foot to. I say this not because doing so is bad, but because it keeps you from your first goal which is to hear what is actually going on in the piece.

Second, it is natural to allow your imagination to invent stories about what the music is about, especially instrumental music, but resist the temptation. Doing this only allows your imagination to use music to generate your own stories or feelings in your mind, and then you enjoy those stories and feelings instead of the music itself. When listening to music remember that a composer and a performer are attempting to speak to you in this strange language of music. Hear what they have to say.

Third, realize, as C. S. Lewis wrote (in *An Experiment in Criticism*), that the first demand art makes on us is to surrender, and it is no good asking whether some work is worth our surrender until after we have done it. Surrender is a powerful word, but Lewis means by it that art is communication, and it is no good trying to make sense of what a composer is trying to say if we are not first willing to listen carefully to what that is.

If we allow music to take us where it will before judging it, we will receive it as it is, for better or worse. Then we can intelligently discuss its merits, and argue with its conclusions. However, if we see music as a commodity that either pleases us or doesn't, then we are evaluating it as a means to a further end rather than an end in itself. Music can be used for some noble purposes, as in a service for the further end of worshipping God. But music has the ability to glorify God by way of its beauty as well; that is, its beauty can be an end in itself. Our present culture generally seems to view music as a means to a further end. Some of the most popular of these further ends are: relaxation (music gives us rest after a long day), back-

ground or atmosphere under another activity (shopping, dining, and waiting: in elevators, lines, doctors' offices, on telephones, etc.), transitional material to fill in space between two "important" events, as between the two halves of a football game, or between the missions prayer and the sermon.

As a result, we can fall into the habit of assessing art based on how it can be used, and this misses the profundity of real art. Music can be properly used as a means to a further end, such as a march or a dirge, or to give opportunity for the people of God to offer praise and thanksgiving, but music (like art in general) is first for contemplation. Art offers ideas for contemplation: verbal ideas through words, abstract ideas by instrumental music. The greatness of art and music lies in the window it gives to "the unexplored territory": the numinous, the awesome, the mystery of life, and it gives you these through the eyes, gifts, and experiences of another, the composer. You may have to surrender to get the full picture, but that's the only way; that's how you can truly hear music (or view a painting or a film or a play, for that matter).

This admonition to pay attention not to ourselves but to the music itself leads to a discussion of the objective side. What is it that is there? What properties are to be studied? Aquinas wrote that for an object to be beautiful it must have unity, proportion, and clarity. Can we judge the admirability of a composer's music by his employment of these elements to convey his message to us? We should consider the ramifications of the definition of beauty in these objective terms.

First, it must be made clear that these three (unity, proportion, clarity) describe the object, not the listener. This may seem an obvious point, but they are qualities of the piece of music, and either they are there or not there; they have nothing to do with how they are perceived, or how we feel about the music in question.

Second, in order to appreciate what unity, proportion, and clarity mean, the listener must have some understanding of music, not a degree in music, but some exposure and study. How can music display unity, proportion and clarity? Most do not see why studying to appreciate music is worthwhile. Don't we just turn on the radio and enjoy? We are so steeped in popular music that requires nothing of us that we may soon come to forget that there is anything else to be known. If we understand that it takes a musician years to learn to play the cello well, shouldn't we be willing to work a bit to learn to listen well? This requires that we learn about the basic building blocks of music: melody, harmony, rhythm, form, color, etc. Then will we begin to understand how a work is composed, and begin to grasp its subtleties.

Third, an objective definition of beauty helps us see what is good even when it doesn't please us, giving great works the chance to speak to us over time. Once in practice, an objective definition protects our sensibilities from lethargy and impatience. Which of us enjoyed Shakespeare's plays at first exposure? It takes very little patience or work to enjoy the things on which we spend most of our time. Television, popular music, movies, fast food, sports and advertising are all designed to be easily digested by the general public. They don't require much of us, and as a result, we become lethargic, and our attention spans get shorter. And the result is that we lose the ability to see, hear, and perceive.⁵

Problems Joining the Two Parts

To begin the work of forging an aesthetic, we must bring the objective and subjective sides into proper relationship, since we are convinced that each has a place in the right appreciation of beauty. This right relationship is to be found in a proper definition of the word taste. Taste has come to mean "personal preference" or "social aplomb," but the Miriam-Webster dictionary defines taste as "the power or practice of discerning or enjoying whatever constitutes excellence, especially in the fine arts." And J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard wrote that

“taste is a facet of wisdom; it is the ability to distinguish what has value from what does not.”⁶ While we do enjoy things that are not always admirable, to learn to enjoy what is admirable is to improve our tastes. And to give fitting appreciation to what is admirable is surely a way of glorifying God for the gifts He has given our artists, as well as for the gift He has given us to be able to appreciate beauty. Remember, animals do not appreciate beauty; it is a gift to men alone, made in His image.

There is a problem regarding the combination of the two sides. It comes up when we make the mistake of confusing one for the other. Objective excellence and subjective enjoyment do not have a one-to-one relationship. Sometimes our enjoyment of a piece leads us to claim for it intrinsic excellence; that is, sometimes we raise to the position of admirable that which is not, only because it pleases us personally. This is mistaking the subjective for the objective. We make the opposite mistake when we insist that everyone enjoy a work that has many admirable qualities. That would be mistaking the objective for the subjective.

Also, and most profoundly, there is a problem when we embrace only the subjective side without the objective, and this is the problem we see the most often in modern culture. The difficulty with the subjective side is not in its enjoyment. The subjective personal enjoyment side of the artistic experience is valid and important, as has already been stated. (Apart from sin all enjoyment is a good thing, and something the Devil would love to deny us at every level.) The problem comes when we reject the admirable as worth pursuing, and erect in its place that enjoyment is worth pursuing.

Aesthetics becomes relativistic when the concept of objective beauty is discarded in favor of pure subjectivity, that is, judging by only that which makes us feel good. And it happens that for some reason, we seem more susceptible to this error in the area of music. Now, if the admirable were all we ever found enjoyable there would be no problem; we would always

choose the admirable even if our only criteria was the subjective. But there is such a thing as a counterfeit aesthetic experience, that is, the feeling that you have experienced something profound when all you have really experienced is a fake. One can usually find a telephone company commercial on TV to bring a tear to the eye, or hear a popular song that seems so sincere, when each is simply manipulating our emotions. In music it is possible to manipulate the listener to feel enjoyment when there is nothing admirable about the piece. There are ways to compose that whip the listener into an emotional experience by way of a cheat, and this emotional experience can be easily mistaken for a spiritual experience, and so we see this sort of thing happen often in churches. This manipulation is the artistic equivalent of fast food—all the fun of real food with none of the nutrition. Much of pop culture manipulates feelings out of us and can even manipulate us to action. For example, there is a thrill of emotion that comes from singing the last verse of a song one step higher and a hair slower, but it can be nothing more than a cliché and a trick. Or there are certain chord progressions that make us want to really believe the words sung; they seem so *sincere*. Pop culture gives us what we already know, to quote Ken Myers. And this pop culture has become the basis of much of what is offered in evangelical church services on the basis that it is relevant to the unchurched.⁷ As a result, we may (with sincere hearts) be offering to God that which is cheap, sensational, superficial, and as far as the unbelieving world can see, nothing beyond what they already have on their radios and CD players, except with words that are perceived by the unbeliever to be smarmy and “feel-good.”

Now, I do not mean that music ministers or Christian pop musicians who modulate up a step at the end of a hymn or write light-weight lyrics are consciously trying to manipulate their congregations. It is done quite innocently, but there is a creeping banality in our choices for music in the church

service, and in our lives. And, if the main requirement for beauty is popularity without admirability, that is, if the most important thing is that we feel good when we hear it, what is to stop us from following our appetites for their own sake? When left to ourselves our sensibilities always tend toward the low, debased, superficial, trendy, and, eventually, depraved.

Conclusion

In aesthetics, the modernist position is spelled out by Kant: There is nothing that is absolute, but we can yet know beauty based on our subjective responses. Most people in our day hold this position, whether they are Christians or not. The pre-modern position described by Edwards has been all but forgotten in our relativistic age: the source of beauty is the nature of God. In any other area of thought we would be the first to hold to absolutes. Why not here?

Rethinking our position on beauty may seem abstract or theoretical and without practical use, but I argue that doing so will give new insight to many areas: man's nature, general revelation, common grace, creativity, worship, art, and the gifts God has given His people to be salt and light in the culture. One way to live faithfully in but not of our culture is to lead the way regarding the nature of beauty. We must put examples of this proper definition into practice before men. Why should we design another shapeless building in which to proclaim the eternal truths of God? Why should we borrow the music of a vapid popular culture to offer our God in our worship services, or to proclaim His truth to the watching world? We need to consider seriously the question, does the musical style also convey a message? And the question, why should we be willing to mold our sensibilities (not to mention those of our children) to popular culture?

C. S. Lewis has said that we will not read nothing. If we do not read good books, we will read bad ones. If we do not find

delight in refined things, we will find delight in debased ones.⁸ We can say the same about music. We will not listen to nothing; if we do not listen to good music we will listen to bad music. If we do not have an appreciation of the beautiful we will settle for the mediocre. Find those who are gifted in our churches and set them to work composing, painting, designing. Let's hear new music composed by our own congregations for the glory of God and the edification of our souls, guided by spiritual leaders who are serious about working out aesthetics from a Christian worldview. In doing so, one day we may find an envious world hungry again for the rich life we have in the church. If we do not establish a new aesthetic for the church before a watching world we will have squandered much of our spiritual inheritance, and missed something of what our God has revealed to us. In past centuries, the church set the cultural pace for the culture. Will we regain that place? One way to do so would be to rethink our approach to aesthetics, based on the knowledge that beauty is more than just in the eye of the beholder; it is in the heart of God.

Endnotes

- 1 *An Essay Concerning the Nature of True Value*, chapter 2.
- 2 *Ibid.*, chapter 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Edwards goes on to say that while there is an analogy to spiritual things, men do not approve of beautiful objects because they perceive this analogy. Nor does the appreciation of beauty stem from a virtuous heart. It has no connection with virtue. The appreciation of the beautiful is a portion of common grace God has lavished on His created man. As the created speaks of God, so does beauty both in creation, and in art. Many live without seeing the spiritual works to which the beauty of the physical world points.
- 5 In fact, many in the evangelical churches actively work against anything in the service that would smack of "pro-

found” as it is not “seeker-friendly.” As a result, we are devaluing the very gospel that the seeker is desperate for. This is, of course, a question of how to present the truth we hold out to a lost world in such a way that the “packaging” reflects the depth of the content. Is it possible we wrap life itself in cardboard when we sing profound truths to superficial music?

6 Packer, J. I. and Howard, Thomas. *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Word, Inc.: Dallas, Texas, 1985), 163-85.

7 I refer you to Ken Myers’ book, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, which deals with the characteristics of the popular culture that are invading the church.

8 Cf. “Learn in War Time” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 23ff. quoted in Kenneth A. Myers, *ibid.*, 26.

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